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# Listening to Cambodian Rock Band: An Interview with Lauren Yee and Chay Yew

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

An interview with playwright Lauren Yee and director Chay Yew about Cambodian Rock Band, a memory play that uses music to call back to traumatic memories of the Khmer Rouge.

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### Listening to *Cambodian Rock Band*: An Interview with Lauren Yee and Chay Yew

Donatella Galella

“Cyclo!” Lauren Yee’s play *Cambodian Rock Band* opens with a rousing concert, tuning audiences into the sounds and stories of Cambodians and Cambodian Americans. When Neary seeks justice for the crimes of the Khmer Rouge, she discovers the complicated past of her father, Chum. A musician, Chum had become a target of Pol Pot’s regime. Yet his songs save him. As Chum and his captor Duch wrestle for narrative control, *Cambodian Rock Band* not only gives resonance to the genocide of a people and cultural genocide of their music but also underscores their survival.

In addition to resurrecting 1960s and ‘70s Cambodian rock, the play uses music to offer loose narrative commentary, set dramatic tone, and ultimately inspire theatregoers to turn into music fans. For example, Neary performs her favourite karaoke song, [“Family Business,”](#) after she finds out that her father was a survivor of Duch’s infamous prison. The biting lyrics gloss selling military weapons as “just a family business,” and in the context of the play, they gesture toward the United States’ wars in Asia, Neary’s job putting Duch on trial, and Neary’s emotional state. But this number does not exactly fit the dramatic situation, propel the action, or construct an assimilated community, as American musicals often do.

*Cambodian Rock Band*’s catalogue comprises songs by the Los Angeles-based group Dengue Fever and Cambodian artists such as Sinn Sisamouth and Ros Serey Sothea. Dengue Fever has covered songs by the latter, and the Cambodian artists originally drew from traditional Cambodian music, California surfer rock, and French cabaret, challenging presumed separations between “East” and “West” by pointing to the transnational circulation of cultural productions from imperialism to immigration. Performance studies scholar Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson has argued, “By performing the repurposed scraps of a forgotten past, Dengue Fever subtly invites its audiences to engage with, interrogate, and even challenge the politics of amnesia that have affected Cambodia and Cambodian America from the Vietnam War era to the present” (2011, 260–61). When the play’s fictional band, the Cyclos, performs these songs, and Chum revisits his traumatic past, the human toll of the Khmer Rouge having decimated this music registers loudly. Further, Chum and Neary’s journey and their collaborative rock performance enact a history of Asian American diaspora and return, especially as co-created by a pan-Asian/Asian American cast and creative team.

*Cambodian Rock Band*, a memory play, not only replays Chum’s life in Cambodia but also serves as an aesthetic-political project of remembering for multiple audiences, from Cambodian refugees to the white Americans more typical of US regional theatre patrons. Some spectators may know Cambodian rock, Dengue Fever, and the Khmer language, while others may have Bob Dylan’s “The Times They Are A-Changin’” as their only touchstone. These songs can conjure up personal, coming-of-age reminiscences associated with those songs and reconfigure who feels at home in these theatre spaces. Because [“Jeas Cyclo”](#) begins the play, the audience already has familiarity with

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it during the reprise, evoking the pleasures of both memory and this rock music. At the finale, the cast encourages spectators to clap, dance, and sing along, joining in embodied ways to refuse the erasures of Cambodian people and culture.

In July 2020, when COVID-19, anti-Asian xenophobia, and systemic anti-Blackness continued to imperil Americans, Lauren Yee led a major fundraising, fan-based initiative. The [CRB Challenge](#) asked *Cambodian Rock Band* fans to record themselves covering songs from the play, or other songs by Dengue Fever and Cambodian artists, and to donate money to causes including the United Cambodian Community of Long Beach’s Cambodia Town Business Relief Fund and the Movement for Black Lives. Cast members, their families, and fans used social media to lend their voices to amplify Cambodian rock, connect with Cambodian musicians across the diaspora, and rediscover long forgotten lyrics. Mostly Asian and Asian American, some performers even wore Cyclos t-shirts. By performing these songs, they remember and revivify Cambodian rock.

Originally directed by Chay Yew, *Cambodian Rock Band* premiered at South Coast Repertory in Southern California in 2015. Yew led Victory Gardens Theater for nearly a decade, directed an array of productions regionally and internationally, and authored plays including *A Language of Their Own*, *A Beautiful Country*, and *Question 27, Question 28*. In addition to *Cambodian Rock Band*, award-winning playwright Lauren Yee wrote *The Great Leap*, *King of the Yees*, and *Ching Chong Chinaman*. These interviews took place on December 4, 2019. Thanks to Ishwanzya Rivers for transcribing.

**D. G.** How did you originally envision the role of music in *Cambodian Rock Band*? To what extent did that change over the course of developing it and staging it?

**L. Y.** This initially was supposed to be a play about music. It came about because I became deeply obsessed with the music of Dengue Fever, and then also the world of Cambodian oldies. I was much less ambitious in what this play was going to be like, like during intermission or curtain call, or in the lobby, you’ll hear some of this music and that’s how you’ll get into the world. Basically, what happened was I kept casting people who could play these instruments already. And so, it was one of those things where I was like, oh, I didn’t even think to realize this could be possible, but it’s completely possible. And we should do it. And the more I got into it, the more I heard the music in conjunction with the play, the more I became convinced how essential and doable the music was. Because if it’s a piece about the attempted eradication of this whole chunk of musical history and these artists by an oppressive regime, the most radical thing you can do is to play that music live and really give it another life. So that’s the thing that I realized in the writing process that I really had no idea was so important when I first started.

**C. Y.** It was helpful that I’ve had a music background of more than ten years, playing the piano, being in a high school band, and leading a choir. I was able to help shape some of the music towards theatricality. I grew up in Singapore, so I happen to know some of the songs, especially the old ones. I knew the significance of those songs and what they meant in the Southeast Asian region. For example, [“Champa Battambang”](#) at the top of act 2 is the one that I suggested to Lauren and the band, because it was a lullaby about home. I wanted Chum to come [to] see his country under a new regime at the top of act 2, and to sing “Champa Battambang” once he realizes his home is now a very different place. Together with Lauren, I was able to help ensure the music is woven organically into the play. There were also songs we took out; we changed the order, arranged a few sections of the songs. In the end, try to make sure that the music is holding hands with Lauren’s play. Not that

the music should tell the story all the time, but it is a part of the world that Lauren intended. Otherwise, the play becomes a musical.

**D. G.** Chay, as a director, how do you make that music effective and embodied?

**C. Y.** I work in close collaboration with music director Matt MacNelly and with the band, since the music in *Cambodian Rock Band* does not necessarily propel the narrative, like a musical, and the music must not overwhelm the storytelling. Sometimes, a song is just a song in the play, and sometimes the song reinforces or gives a window to the emotions Lauren's characters are undergoing at the moment. Sometimes the songs are played during transitions, and the songs have to set up the tone of the next scene. Throughout this process, I often ask myself: How does music function in act 1, in act 2, the entire show? I need to see the overall shape of how the music works throughout the entire play. Aside from ensuring the music is setting up the emotional tone of scenes and characters, we have to be mindful of the variation of music styles so that the audience's ears are not hearing the same thing musically—for example, three ballads in a row or a set of hard rock songs in one act. This helps the flow and rhythm of the play and storytelling as well. Who knew the painful ten years of playing Bach and Debussy actually helped me appreciate musicality in theatre works and then using that knowledge in a new play?

**D. G.** I'm mindful that we hear Khmer lyrics first, and that orients the audience, establishes the plot of the play.

**L. Y.** We're presenting the music basically the same way that the songs are written and performed generally. Some of these songs are oldies; some of these are Dengue Fever songs. The Dengue Fever songs that are in English we're presenting in English; the Dengue Fever songs that are in Khmer, we're presenting in Khmer. It kind of mirrors a Dengue Fever set in many ways. The song lyrics themselves may not always push you forward dramaturgically, but I think the songs in the feel of them and the way they're arranged always give you a sense of the emotion in the moment. Presenting all the songs as they were written kind of gives you this wonderfully uncompromising presentation of this music in its original form.

**C. Y.** This is my dramaturgical theory: the music is actually another character in Lauren's play. The way music functions in the beginning can seem decorative, exotic. It seemed far away. The audiences are introduced to a country called Cambodia, and this is their music. The music—as is the world of the play—is Otherized. I think it's very deft of Lauren to use music to start the play this way. As the play progresses, you get to see how intricately interwoven culture and music is to the characters and the world in which they live. The audience slowly empathizes with the characters. The music then makes a shift when we go back into the past in Phnom Penh. There, for the first time, we see young people like you and me, playing in a band with hopes and dreams of success and fame. The music here personifies this. They will always have friends, and they're doing what they love best, which is music. Technically, this scene establishes the characters in their finest moments, reaching their dreams and realizing their future. And in the very same day, everything was ripped apart when the Khmer Rouge [marched] into the city, destroying their world and dreams. At the end of the act, music functions as a defiance against incredible odds; it is only fitting that the sound of bombs, gunfire, and marching overwhelms, interrupting the final song in act 1. In act 2, we begin to witness how music and art are destroyed by a brutal regime. Chum enters at the top of the second act and sings "Champa"—initially a cappella and then joined by others in the band—a song about homesickness, pain, and loss. Once the interrogation scene begins, music functions very differently

with the introduction of the Bob Dylan song, “The Times They Are A-Changin’.” All of a sudden, music takes us to a whole new level. Music now transcends internationally, interculturally. The meaning for this song as an anthem of change may be the same in one place, but it is different when Chum sings, in a different context: is it hope for change, or is it hopeless knowing that change is impossible under the Pol Pot regime? It is an especially poignant moment in the play. When he was alone in a labour camp, Chum had no choice but to regurgitate Dylan’s lyrics, writing them down, sustaining him during dark times. Unfortunately, the written lyrics are assumed to be a spy code, and the Pol Pot regime used this as evidence against Chum. The next number, “Tooth and Nail,” is a song Chum wrote for himself. For the first time, he has agency to create his own music while incarcerated in S21 prison. He sings the song that he wrote, and it is profoundly personal as he is presumably going to be executed after singing this final song. At the very end, again, the music takes another shift when Chum plays the cassette recording of the band prior to the fall of Phnom Penh. He asks Neary, Chum’s daughter, if “you want to hear what your dad was like,” and plays the tape. We recognize that song, and we remember the end of act 1 when Chum and his band members were all young and hopeful. Now he’s an old man in the same room where he killed his friend and former bandmate and where all his dreams have died—all in the same country. But what is different is the young woman next to him, his daughter, who has not known much about Chum, finally understands for the first time her legacy and her father’s unrealized dream. When she says to Chum to show her what they sounded like, the band comes out on stage again. When Neary joins the band with her father Chum, the circle is complete. It’s as if Chum introduces his daughter to his bandmates who had died. And for the first time, the entirety of Cambodia is singing together: the Cambodian American, the Cambodian immigrant, and the Cambodians. That’s the trajectory of music in the play and how subtly and potently music functions in grabbing the audience’s heart. At the end, the audience doesn’t care about the language as much because the music has made an emotional and personal connection to each and every one of them.

**D. G.** That was such a beautiful, critical, dramaturgical analysis, Chay. What do you hope that the impact is on the audience with this music? How do you want them to hear *Cambodian Rock Band* and the Cyclos?

**L. Y.** I want them to fall in love with this music and become deeply obsessed in the way I was when I first heard it. I want you to kind of feel a sense of empathy and joy for this fictitious band but also the real musicians that this band is based on. If there’s one thing I can contribute, it’s that we’re able to shine a light on who these real-life musicians were and what kind of loss it was to the world when they were taken from us.

**D. G.** Yeah, that’s the experience I had coming out of seeing the South Coast Rep production. I immediately tried to find Dengue Fever’s music and “Jeas Cyclo.” And I love that there is that [Facebook Live performance](#) of the band. So, I definitely felt that that was very effective for me.

**L. Y.** Yeah. Good.

**D. G.** Lauren, in *American Theatre* magazine, you describe the music as “raucous, LOUD, bubblegum, dissonant psychedelic surfer rock. We should hear in it the Jackson 5, Jefferson Airplane, and James Taylor, but also all their Cambodian counterparts. It should sound both familiar and foreign. Most of all, the music should be shit you want to get up and dance to. Music to get drunk and high to. The biggest, most epic, and possibly last concert of your life” (Yee 2018, 48).

**L. Y.** I think I put that note in because most American theatre audiences are probably going to be like me when I first started this, where you know nothing about Cambodian history in the twentieth century. Maybe you know that something bad happened there and there was a guy named Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge rings a bell, but so much of Cambodia's history that was happening right alongside America and its experience in the Vietnam War just is not part of the American consciousness. Being able to ground it in some reference points musically can help you to really relate and feel like you're a part of that world. The events that happened in the past for the play happened somewhere between like '75 and '78, and that, for a lot of the audience, is [a] time that they remember and lived through and means something to them especially musically. I think, through all periods of our lives, but especially traumatic and tumultuous ones, it's the music of the time that really helps to ground you, where the memories live for you. So, I kind of wanted to figure out what might be an analogous experience for the average American walking in.

**D. G.** When I taught this play in my Asian American Theatre class, a student raised the point that because the Cambodian music has these Western style elements . . . it kind of makes Cambodians seem more accessible for a presumed American audience. They can register the loss of a people and a culture when they feel similarities to them.

**L. Y.** I mean I do think it's definitely true that it's almost always easiest to relate to people who look like us, sound like us. I think that reminder that Cambodia had rock music, Cambodia had electric guitars, Cambodia knew who Elvis Presley or James Taylor was does help to bridge things for an audience or at least locate it time-wise.

**C. Y.** Music is universal and it defies borders. For me, food and art defy borders. It's our common unspoken language. When I was growing up in Singapore, we listened to ABBA, Donna Summer, and Queen. We also had Southeast Asians singing jazz and blues, forming country music and pop cover bands, and cutting records. We looked to the West, to the UK and the US for the coolest in film, fashion, and music. In some perverse way, it's also a form of cultural imperialism. What is really remarkable about Cambodian rock music is that it's a fusion of both the East and the West, making the music uniquely Cambodian. In a way, Cambodia's history is also a hybrid of many cultures, particularly from recent French and American colonialism. The music is a reflection of the history of the country.

**L. Y.** It's also a really helpful reminder that the genocide that Cambodia went through was not something that happened years and years ago. It's something that happened as late as the end of '78, beginning of '79. And that's something that is almost too close for comfort, like when we think about modern-day genocides and traumas that are being enacted all over today. That in a way we feel so far from. That they almost feel like they don't exist.

**C. Y.** Looking at Lauren's play, she too has created a thrilling theatrical hybrid. She has seamlessly melded a historical play to a genocide play, fused that into a father and daughter play and a rock and roll concert. So out of all these best genres, a new artwork has been created for the American theatre and that is *Cambodian Rock Band*. Isn't being Asian American one of the greatest fusion experiments of the American culture?

**D. G.** Speaking of how the music functions, I'm also interested in how Duch serves as a kind of antimusical force such as when he repeatedly interrupts the music performance.

**C. Y.** To some extent, he's not antagonistic to music, even though one can surmise that dramaturgically as you have. He actually loves music. For someone who cannot play nor create music, Duch finds profound joy in listening to music. It is the music that allows him to finally get the sleep he's been craving throughout the play, and to spare Chum's life. Music belongs to those who listen and those who make it. Lauren has created extremely morally complex characters in *Cambodian Rock Band*. Both Duch and Chum did what they were told. They were "just following orders." They had to make the most awful choices to survive in this world. If Duch didn't execute the political prisoners under his watch, he and his family would be killed. If Chum didn't kill his friend, he would not have lived to move to Boston to start a family and have a child. What is ironic, too, is that Chum the American immigrant/refugee has chosen never to listen to music after leaving Cambodia because it was just too painful for him. What Lauren has written, it's not a black and white play. It's actually a profoundly and morally ambiguous, complicated play. What would you do to survive? What will survive after everything has been destroyed? It's actually music and art. They will transcend any empire, any genocide, throughout the ages.

**D. G.** That's very powerful. I agree with you about the ambiguity or multiplicity of how music is functioning for those characters. The music helps them survive, but it's also a kind of sacrifice for Chum to give up the music later in his life. But at the same time, we get the pleasure of seeing him perform.

**C. Y.** Chum didn't make a sacrifice to give up music. He had to forego music because of his guilt and the price of his deceit. He lied to his parents in order to delay departing Cambodia in order to record the album with the band. As a result, they were all killed. The band recording was everything that he ever wanted. It was his dream that killed his family. To me, at the end of the play, Chum plays music again only to pass on his history and heritage to Neary. This time, it's not a selfish motivation. In a way, it's redemption.

**D. G.** How has the play changed in the context of the current Republican administration deporting Cambodian refugees?

**L. Y.** Yeah, that's a good question, because I do feel like a play, if it's a good play, can kind of speak differently but also powerfully to whatever time period that we're in. Like the fact that it was a play that started in 2015 and is still getting productions in 2019, 2020 . . . may shift how certain characters and themes are being received. But it feels like it should stand on its own as a play. What's really interesting is that the Cambodian deportations are the direct result of American actions x number of years ago when we were bombing Cambodia.

**C. Y.** The play has not changed much and definitely not to directly address our current regime. The play, however, does shine a light on an American community that is often invisible and not given voice. I hope after people experience Lauren's play, the audiences will be able to put a face and a soul on each and every Cambodian refugee our divisive government has chosen to deport. That's the power of the theatre. The power of empathy. It's important for Americans to not perceive Cambodian refugees as numbers but full-bloodied human beings. If anything, *Cambodian Rock Band* comments most on how regimes can suddenly change overnight. The big question is: how can we actively prevent this from happening? Or are we just like Chum, selfishly and blindly pursuing our own desires, to devastating consequences? Any democracy could devolve into a regime like Pol Pot's if we are not mindful. I think *Cambodian Rock Band* can be perceived as a cautionary tale: We have to be watchful of our government and exercise our rights to resist and stop fascism and dictatorship if

they appear. It's silence and fear they feed on. If we do nothing, the consequences would be oppression, destruction, and death. We'll have another Cambodia.

**D. G.** That's an excellent point about making connections more widely. Lauren, I'd love for us to talk about musical embodiment, Asian American community building, and fandom for this exciting fictional band. Tell me about the Cyclos t-shirts!

**L. Y.** The t-shirts came out of the fact that one of our band members or actors, Jane Lui, just happens to be very, very crafty and talented—musically, acting-wise, but also in designing t-shirts. So it's a show that engenders such deep affection amongst audience members and also actors. I was like, Jane, you should make a t-shirt, in the beginning of the rehearsal process. And she came up with an incredible design that everyone loved. It became this phenomenon such that everyone wanted a t-shirt, everyone felt so connected with this show and Chay's various productions of it. And that's been such a gift.

**D. G.** That's really wonderful to hear about how that spread out. It really brings people together. I know you wrote on Facebook asking about who has seen the show multiple times.

**L. Y.** Isn't that nuts? Because the way that regional nonprofit theatre is set up is that it shows up for a month and you may get to see it like once or it may only have one production. But the fact that it's been up so many times—it's been up at Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF), which had a very long run. And then I think just in general, it's a show that does not necessarily diminish with having seen it before. It's like a musical in that it really benefits from multiple viewings, and it's like going to see your favourite bands. There's a relationship and affection you build towards these performances and this production. So, I think I'm pretty lucky and grateful for the fact that the production at South Coast for the most part has had a lot of life. A majority of the elements that we see at South Coast, that went to OSF, that's at La Jolla [Playhouse] now. That will be at Signature Theatre. So, I'm pretty delighted because that usually does not happen in that way.

**D. G.** I'm so excited that more people will be able to see and hear *Cambodian Rock Band*.

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