

The King's other career

Phnom Penh will host the first South-East Asian Biennial Film Festival from March 1-8, 1997. *Angkor* magazine is honoured to publish this exclusive interview with His Majesty Preah Bat Samdech Preah Norodom Sihanouk Varman concerning his lifelong involvement in film-making.



Q The Cambodian royal family has always been a patron of the arts. Is Your Majesty's passion for cinema born of this tradition?

A My father, HRH Prince Norodom Suramarit, was an excellent musician and composer. My mother successfully led the classical Royal Ballet Corps of King Sisowath Monivong, who was her father.

Apart from music and classical dance, my family was greatly interested in cinema. When I was a pupil at the Franco-Cambodian François Baudoin primary school in Phnom Penh and of an age when I could begin to appreciate films from France, my parents regularly took me to the cinema in town during the holidays.

By dint of watching films from France, America and so on every weekend in Phnom Penh, then in Saigon (where I was a boarder at the French

Lycée Chasseloup Laubat in the 1930s), I ended up wanting to become a filmmaker and actor myself.

When I was elected King of Cambodia in 1941, I had the means to produce 16mm films, with myself and my friends as actors and actresses. From 1966 onwards, I decided to make 35mm colour films with the aim of introducing and portraying my Cambodia in a dignified manner.



Working the camera (above): His Majesty Preah Bat Samdech Preah Norodom Sihanouk Varman; **Princess Buppha Devi (right)** has acted in His Majesty's films.

INTERVIEW BY
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PHOTOS COURTESY OF
ROYAL PALACE CABINET,
PHNOM PENH

Q Which works left their mark on Your Majesty's childhood?

A As a child, I wasn't aware of being attached to any particular work. My father, King Suramarit, very much liked the films of Marlene Dietrich. When I was at secondary school in Saigon, I very much liked Greta Garbo, Jean Gabin and Clark Gable. My favourite film was *Gone With The Wind*, starring Clark Gable and Vivian Leigh.

Q On reading the titles of Your Majesty's films we constantly encounter the same themes—Cambodia, love, women, Angkor, Buddhism and tragedy. What messages does Your Majesty wish his films to convey?

A All my films concern Cambodia and the Cambodian people. I do not feel fully satisfied if, over and above artistic considerations, I am unable to add a dose of patriotism and a strong dose of love for my Cambodia and its people. It is with infinite affection and tenderness that I refer to them as "the little people", who deserve to be shown with all their innate qualities. I often do not spare the privileged classes in my films. I am hard on them, but objectively, without exaggeration, hatred or prejudice.

I wish to show my country's natural beauty as it is, without resorting to artifice. It is in the area around Angkor that I had and have the most inspiration to write scenarios and to shoot my films. Angkor—with its temples, sculptures, rich forests, landscapes, history, people, kings and princes—has always fascinated me, as it has other Cambodians and many foreigners.

Who are the characters in my films and what stories do I relate? They are rarely the fruits of my imagination. The past and present realities of Cambodia furnish me with the subject matter I need to make my films. You have to make known the habits and customs, traditions, beliefs, the way of life and the way of thinking of the Cambodians. But, for all that, these are not propaganda films, like those made in totalitarian countries.

As far as love and women are concerned, you find them in nearly all the films of the five continents. Love is a

part of life. Some French women have told me that I am a misogynist as, according to them, the women in my films are spiteful, cruel and unfaithful. This view is unjust. In the overwhelming majority of my films, you will find heroines worthy of admiration and esteem and also women from the "little people" who possess great qualities.

My scenarios simply reflect that which is Cambodian in all its diversity. Among our people there are the good, the bad, the honest, the dishonest, the brave and the cowardly. Cambodia's past and present are, sadly, full of tragedy, and this exerts a great influence on me. But among my films, there is also an appreciable number of comedies which reflect the *joie de vivre* and the impulsive, playful character of the

Un Paysan Et Une Paysanne En Détresse



Cambodians, who are as capable of gentleness and kindness as they are of violence and intolerance.

Without being a scholar of Buddhism, I more or less openly champion the teachings of Buddha in my films.

Q Your Majesty is currently working on the production of a documentary. Is this a new direction? What other projects are forthcoming?

A Besides fiction films, I have been making documentaries since the 1960s; *Cambodge 1965* and *La Femme Khmère* for example. In April this year, the film *Cambodge 1995* had its world première at UNESCO in Paris.

I am in the process of planning another fiction film—*Un Apôtre De*

La Non-Violence (An Apostle of Non-Violence). In this next film—I do not know when I will be able to shoot it—Cambodia becomes an imaginary state called Banarath. Banarath is composed of two words: *Bana*, meaning banana, and *roath*, state. The facts (acts of violence and the death of a Buddhist monk, a disciple of non-violence) to be recounted in this film really happened in my country in 1994. However, I must avoid embarrassing or even displeasing certain countrymen. That is why I will speak of an imaginary 'banana republic' and, through film, tell a story of pure fiction.

Q Your Majesty's works seem to have a limited distribution. Why is this?

A Firstly, since 1966 I have always shown my films to all my people in Cambodia, both in Phnom Penh and in the provinces—even those most remote from the capital. In the 1990s, my films continue to be shown to my people, who like them a great deal, on television (on TVK, Channel Fucinpec, and Channel FARK) as well as at public open-air screenings using video players and a large screen. Several thousand happy, enthusiastic compatriots including peasants attend each of these screenings in Cambodia's provinces.

Secondly, I have already sent, at my expense, thousands of videocassettes of my films to my friends and fellow countrymen in France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, the USA, Canada, Japan, Thailand, Australia etc (not to mention my friends in Cambodia itself).

Thirdly, and this is very important to me, my films are formally requested for screening at various international film festivals. In Russia, Thailand, the Philippines and Belgium, they have been highly successful. In Brussels, my six films were extremely popular, especially *Les Derniers Jours Du Colonel Savath* (The Last Days Of Colonel Savath). At the Festival of Pattaya in Thailand last year, my film *Un Paysan Et Une Paysanne En Détresse* (Peasants In Distress) achieved the greatest success.

Fourthly, the Hollywood-based

American-Argentinian company Meridian Video Corporation is interested in my films. Three of my recent fiction films are going to be distributed as videocassettes in certain countries. These three films are *Un Paysan Et Une Paysanne En Détresse*, *Une Ambition Réduite En Cendres* (An Ambition Reduced To Ashes), and *Les Derniers Jours Du Colonel Savath*.

In France, not much value is attached to my film-making.

Q Were Your Majesty's films spared in the upheavals which afflicted Cambodia in the 1970s?

and Korean friends in Beijing and in Pyongyang. The Khmer Rouge wanted to retrieve and destroy them, but the Governments of the People's Republic of China and of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea stood their ground and did not give my films to the Khmer Rouge during the 'reign' of Pol Pot in Phnom Penh from 1975 to 1978.

Some prints of my films were left in the storerooms of the Joinville Studios in France where they had been developed at my expense. They were quite happy to keep the prints of my films but, unfortunately, some of these prints

music, singing, dancing, theatre, cinema and . . . warfare.

By engaging males and females from my family, members of my entourage and the royal administration alongside professionals in my films, I am giving them a healthy occupation. It is better than playing cards or going to night clubs or discos.

As far as engaging professional actors and actresses in my films, you can observe their prominence by taking the trouble to view, for example, my recent films *Un Paysan Et Une Paysanne En Détresse*, *Une Ambition Réduite En Cendres*, *Les Derniers Jours Du Colonel Savath* and *Héritier D'un Sécessionniste Vaincu*.

His Excellency Mr Ieu Pannakar, General Manager of the Cambodian State Cinema, is at your disposal to show you the videos of the aforementioned films. After viewing them, you will be in a position to conclude objectively that I am far from choosing almost exclusively people from my entourage to act in my films.

Q Where does Your Majesty shoot his films?

A Between 1966 and 1969, my films were shot in Cambodia at Angkor, Phnom Penh, Mount Bokor, Mount Kirirom, Kèp and Sihanoukville (our 'Côte d'Azur'), in the countryside of the provinces of Kandal, Kompong Speu and other locations.

Between 1970 and 1986 I was very disheartened and did not have the strength to produce films.

In 1976-78, I was a prisoner of the Khmer Rouge.

From 1987 to 1991 (before the Paris Agreement on Peace in Cambodia in October 1991) my films were shot in North Korea.

In 1988, His Excellency the Prime Minister of France, Jacques Chirac, was kind enough to give me the residence of the Cambodian Embassy in Avenue Charles Floquet in Paris.

There, in the same year, I filmed some scenes of folk and classical Khmer dancing, including dances interpreted by French students of my son Norodom Sihamoni, who is a teacher of classical European ballet and a choreographer. These scenes are included in my 1988

Les Dernier Jours Du Colonel Savath



A The day after their *coup d'état* against the Cambodian monarchy on March 18, 1970, General Lon Nol and his junta decided to confiscate my goods, including all my 16mm and 35mm films, which they subsequently completely destroyed.

If I still have a certain number of documentary and fiction films from the 1960s in my film archives now, it is simply because copies of these films had remained in certain friendly countries where they had been shown. These countries were France, the People's Republic of China and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

During the 'reign' of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, the surviving films were kept for me by my close Chinese

were destroyed in a fire in one of their warehouses.

These days, fair-minded critics attach great value to my surviving films of the 1960s, as a valuable account of a Cambodia that disappeared in the upheavals between 1970 and 1990.

Q The cast of Your Majesty's films are generally non-professionals and family members. Why did you make this choice?

A To interpret the difficult roles, I have always called on professional artists. I only entrust amateurs with easy roles in keeping with their physique, temperament and appearance. Professionals or amateurs, Cambodians in general are very talented in



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film *Adieu, Mon Amour!* (Farewell, My Love!).

During the 1990s, I have shot two 35mm films in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, some video films in China and other 35mm films in Cambodia—at Angkor, Siem Reap, Sihanoukville, Phnom Penh and elsewhere.

Q From whom does Your Majesty receive assistance in his film-making?

A The films I produced in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea from 1987 did not cost me anything because His Excellency President Kim Il Sung of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and his son and successor, His Excellency Marshall Kim Jong Il, took care of everything.

I have been assisted financially by the Royal Budget of the Royal Cambodian Government from 1993 to 1996.

In technical and artistic matters I have been, and still am, helped by very competent fellow countrymen and by North Korean friends from the State Film Studios of Pyongyang (Democratic People's Republic of Korea).

I had a team from 1966 to 1969 that included Cambodians Ieu Pannakar, Roeum Sophon and Som Sam Al, all three of whom are graduates of IDHEC (Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques) in Paris, plus Mr Hang Thun Hak, a student of Dullin, and Louis Jouvét.

In the 1960s, my wife (Norodom Monique Sihanouk) was the most beautiful, talented and popular of my stars. Our son, Prince Norodom Sihamoni, despite his tender years in the 1960s, proved to be an excellent actor. My eldest daughter, Princess Buppha Devi, prima ballerina of the Royal Ballet Corps and a star of my films, was also in this team.

I had a second team from 1992 to 1996. Again, there was Ieu Pannakar, together with Mr Séng Sétha (director), educated in Eastern Europe, and Mr Prom Mésa, educated in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam; this is the new generation. In this team, Buppha Devi is no longer a film star, but the artistic

Une Ambition Réduite En Cendres



adviser. Now, Norodom Sihamoni is one of the stars of my films and, at the same time, a choreographer, director and film-maker—he has two 35mm colour ballet films to his credit.

It would be a mistake to classify Buppha Devi and Norodom Sihamoni as amateurs!

Q For a long time, Your Majesty composed music, which is still popular today. Has this artistic activity ceased?

A I have completely given up composing songs. Most of my compositions were born of my romances when I was still of an age to entice women! My source of inspiration as a musician and a composer dried up completely as advancing years no longer allowed me to charm beautiful young women.

However, my films spring from my love of Cambodia and the Cambodian 'little people'. As this love is endless and as the question of my age plays no part in this, I will be able to make films until the end of my days.

Q What can the Crown do to help the fledgling Cambodian film industry?

A In the 1960s, I organised annual Cambodian Film Festivals in Phnom Penh. I awarded major prizes to the winners.

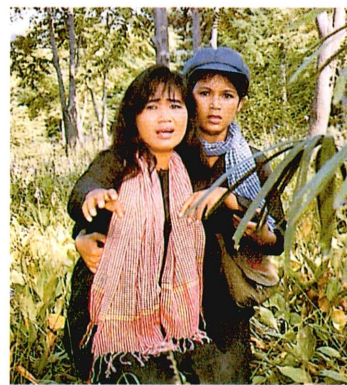
I also engaged the best local actors and actresses to interpret important roles in my films. Some of them were sent to developed countries to

attend international film festivals at my expense.

In the 1990s, I am still engaging many professional actors and actresses, who are pampered by my wife and I. Many went with us to China and North Korea to shoot films and exchange ideas with Chinese and Korean artists and technicians. Last year I also sent at my expense a delegation of professional Cambodian actors and actresses to the International Film Festival in Thailand.

His Excellency Ieu Pannakar and his crew are continuing to train and advise film people in my country. Mr Rithi Pan, whose film *Les Gens De La Rizière* (The People Of The Ricefield) achieved considerable success, particularly in France, is responsible for training and improving the artistic and technical performance of the new Cambo-

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dian film-makers. In this he has the help of the French.

However, the development of the Cambodian film industry will always be seriously checked by competition of dubious taste from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand etc—kung fu films, Chinese legends with intrigues, poisonings, treachery, cloak and dagger and others. The public's taste, especially in Phnom Penh, has changed a lot. It's reaching the point where classical films and films of good taste no longer have the place they deserve in my country. □

Corinne Rivoallan is a photojournalist in Cambodia; Ms Rivoallan's questions, and His Majesty's replies were translated from French by Singapore-based teacher Heidi Lee.