Family's Journey from War-torn Laos to the Streets of New York Reveals Story of Survival, Forgiveness in “The Betrayal (Nerakhoon)”
Tuesday, July 21, 2009, on PBS's POV Series

Oscar®-nominated Film Is Culmination of 23-Year Collaboration Between Acclaimed Cinematographer and Tenacious Laotian Refugee

A Diverse Voices Project Co-production; Funded in Part by CAAM


The costs of contemporary war have rarely been captured with as much intimacy, poetry and sense of history as they are in The Betrayal (Nerakhoon). Nominated this year for the Academy Award® for Best Documentary, the film marks the directorial debut of Ellen Kuras, an award-winning cinematographer whose credits include Michel Gondry’s “Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind,” Ted Demme’s “Blow,” Spike Lee’s “4 Little Girls” and “Summer of Sam” and Harold Ramis’s “Analyze That.”

At the heart of the making of The Betrayal is a unique, 23-year collaboration with Thavisouk (“Thavi”) Phrasavath, a young Laotian refugee the director met when seeking language lessons while filming another project in 1984. The lessons soon turned into long conversations about Lao culture and philosophy, the country’s recent tragic history and the story of Thavi’s own tortured trip from Laos to Brooklyn — from being a 12-year-old hero-worshipping son of a Royal Lao officer to a beleaguered son and brother trying to keep his fatherless family together on America’s gang-ridden streets. It’s a story rich in ancient Lao lore and sensibility, seen through the fractured glass of geopolitical violence and scrambled again by the realities of America’s poor inner city.

Ellen Kuras and Thavisouk Phrasavath's The Betrayal (Nerakhoon) has its American broadcast premiere Tuesday, July 21, 2009, at 10 p.m. as part of the 22nd season of POV (Point of View) on PBS. (Check local listings.) American television’s longest-running independent documentary series, POV is the recipient of a Special News & Documentary Emmy Award for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking. The series continues on Tuesdays at 10 p.m. through Sept. 22, and returns with two specials in November and December.

The Betrayal begins chillingly with a 5,000-year-old Lao prophecy, as related by Thavi’s grandmother, about a time when “the universe will break. It will break piece-by-piece, country-by-country and religion-by-religion. Husband and wife will break into two. The children will escape into the wind. . .”

As a boy in the ’60s and ’70s, Thavi, by his own account, idolized his father, an officer in the Royal Army of Laos. War then seemed a normal, if somewhat distant condition to the boy, though he
understood little about the politics behind it. His mother proudly followed her husband on tours of
duty while bearing him 10 children. (Thavi was the second child and the oldest son in the family.)
Then came a day when the patriarch disappeared, but not before warning the family to stay close to
home until they heard from him again. Thavi’s father had joined a clandestine army formed by the
CIA. Like many Lao officers in the Royal Army, he believed American patronage would lead to a
greater future for the army and the country.

The United States, meanwhile, was primarily interested in disrupting the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the main
route by which the North Vietnamese supplied the Viet Cong, and later their own units, in South
Vietnam. Along with thousands of his countrymen, Thavi’s father engaged in a clandestine war
against the Communists and gathered intelligence for the CIA. Most importantly, he helped guide
massive U.S. carpet-bombing by B-52s of his own country — a fact he ruefully recalls in The
Betrayal when thinking of all that later befell his country and family.

By 1973, the United States had dropped almost three million tons of bombs on Laos, more than
were dropped during all of World Wars I and II combined. Besides churning up massive amounts of
Laotian ground and killing unknown thousands, the bombings and clandestine operations had the
effect of heating up the simmering conflict between native Royalists and Communists (the Pathet
Lao), further destabilizing the country. Thavi recalls the day the rockets and bombs started falling
around the family’s home. The war then came to an end when the Americans pulled out of Vietnam
and abandoned their Laotian allies to the Pathet Lao who had taken over the country.

Thavi’s father came home, but not for long. Declared an enemy of the state, he was taken away,
either to a hard-labor re-education camp or to be executed — the family didn’t know. Shunned by
neighbors and harassed by the government, Thavi and his mother made plans to escape to Thailand
along with his nine brothers and sisters. Thavi, then 12, was thought to have the best chance to
make it alone, so he went first ahead of the others, swimming across the Mekong River at night on
two inflated plastic bags. Two years later, his mother and most of his siblings fled across the river.
Given only an hour’s notice, Thavi’s mother had to leave behind two of her daughters, the oldest and
youngest, as they were visiting their grandmother. Later, after reuniting in a Thai refugee
camp, Thavi, his mother and the rest of his family sought asylum in the United States, because, as Thavi
explains, most Laotians thought of America as “one step from heaven.”

Upon arriving, the family’s expectations about America were tested when their sponsors deposited
them in a crowded two-room tenement apartment shared with other Cambodian and Vietnamese
refugees and located right next door to a crack house in the middle of multicultural urban life of
Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn. Disoriented by their jarring insertion into American culture and
desperate to find stability, Thavi and his mother tried to imprint their native cultural values on the
younger children, but they faced increasing resistance as the kids begin to assimilate more and
more into American culture.

Even more pressure mounted as Southeast Asian gangs began to form as a response to the
violence in their neighborhoods. And then, shocking news would reveal the true meaning of
nerakhoon — the acts of betrayal — both within and outside of the family.

Thavi continues to serve as the head of an increasingly fractured household and lend emotional
support to his heartbroken mother, even as he struggles to regain his own sense of order and
purpose — for peace and harmony promised by Laos’s dominant Buddhist culture — in a world
marked by borders, chaos and betrayal.

In a true labor of love, Ellen Kuras, with the increasing participation of Thavi Phrasavath as co-
director and editor, has crafted a lyrical and meditative film, weaving archival footage, cinéma vérité,
interviews and striking voiceovers into a powerfully poetic montage. The Betrayal (Nerakhoon) is a
film about exile, the far-reaching consequences of war and the bonds of family that can be betrayed
but never forgotten. It is also about strength and survival, and the human spirit’s capacity to adapt, forgive and rebuild.

“For me, working on The Betrayal has been an ongoing dialogue with Thavi about themes of life and death, of change in society and of philosophy,” says Ellen. “I’ve been intrigued by the loss of innocence in war, the loss of moral and ethical values in our society as adopted by newly landed immigrants and how this loss mirrors our own in America. The beauty of having filmed The Betrayal over so many years is that these themes of life are intimately played out in this family drama in a way that only time can reveal.”

Says Thavi, “Through the process of making The Betrayal, I’ve been given the opportunity to become a filmmaker and find my true self. I have learned a great deal about how to speak my mind, how to never fear speaking out and how to be myself.”

The Betrayal (Nerakhoon) is a co-production of Pandinlao Films, American Documentary | POV and POV’s Diverse Voices Project, with support from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). It is funded in part by the Center for Asian American Media (CAAM).

About the Filmmakers:

Ellen Kuras, Director
An unprecedented three-time recipient of the Sundance Film Festival’s Best Dramatic Cinematography Award, Director, Ellen Kuras was first widely recognized for her black and white cinematography on Tom Kalin’s 1991 independent feature, “Swoon.” She began her career in 1987, shooting Ellen Bruno’s internationally acclaimed “Samsara: Death and Rebirth in Cambodia” and winning the 1990 Eastman Kodak Best Cinematography Focus Award. In 1995, she was nominated for an Emmy for her work on “A Century of Women” and then nominated again for Spike Lee’s “4 Little Girls.” Kuras has been a recipient of the New York Women in Film and Television (NYWIFT) Muse Award, as well as the Los Angeles Women in Film Crystal Award.

Her other credits include Isaac Mizrahi’s “Unzipped,” Mary Harron’s “I Shot Andy Warhol,” Spike Lee’s Oscar-nominated documentary, “4 Little Girls,” and his feature films “Summer of Sam” and “Bamboozled.” Ellen shot Ted Demme’s “Blow,” starring Johnny Depp, and Rebecca Miller’s “Personal Velocity” (winner, Best Dramatic Cinematography and Grand Jury Award, Sundance Film Festival 2002) and “The Ballad of Jack and Rose.” One of the few women to shoot studio films, she was the cinematographer for “Analyze That,” starring Billy Crystal and Robert De Niro, and Michel Gondry’s “Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind.” Her latest work includes the Neil Young concert film “Heart of Gold,” “Lou Reed’s Berlin,” “Be Kind Rewind” and, most recently, Sam Mendes’s “Away We Go.”

A native of Cedar Grove, N.J., Ellen initially attended Brown University to study anthropology, but became interested in photography after taking a class at the Rhode Island School of Design. Although awarded a Fulbright Scholarship, she opted to stay in New York City to work in film.

Thavisouk Phrasavath, Co-director
Active in the Laotian American community in the United States and Canada, Thavisouk Phrasavath is a creative consultant for developing Lao TV and other media. During his early years in Brooklyn, he served as the primary liaison and translator for Laotians living in New York City and surrounding areas. His background in community work includes assisting Gang Prevention for Youth and Family Crisis Intervention through the Church Avenue Merchants Block Association and working with the police department as a liaison and interpreter for the Lao community. Formerly an Area Policy Board member, Thavi has consulted for the New York City Board of Education.
His film work extends into writing, editing, directing and cinematography. His projects as editor include Mira Sorvino's directorial debut, “Making Famous,” as well as “Summer School,” “Cuba Libre,” “Americanos,” “Streaming with the Prez,” “Vietnam on the Cusp,” “Sound Painting” and, most recently, “Golden Venture.” Thavi has also directed and edited music videos for independent artists, published poetry and won awards for his paintings and illustrations. He graduated with honors from Pratt Institute with a degree in electrical engineering. The Betrayal is his first film as both subject and filmmaker.

Credits:

Director/Cinematographer: Ellen Kuras
Co-director/Editor: Thavisouk Phrasavath
Executive Producer, American Documentary | POV: Cara Mertes
Producers: Ellen Kuras, Flora Fernandez-Marengo
Co-Producers: Chiemi Karasawa, W. Wilder Knight, Gini Reticker
Original Music: Howard Shore

Running Time: 86:46

Awards & Festivals:

• Official Selection, Sundance Film Festival, 2008
• Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, 2008, Full Frame Spectrum Award
• Ann Arbor Film Festival, Michigan, 2008, Best of the Festival
• Berlin Film Festival, 2008
• Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival, Toronto, 2008
• Human Rights Watch International Film Festival, New York, 2008
• SILVERDOCS Documentary Film Festival, Silver Spring, Md., 2008
• International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, 2008
• Academy Award nomination, Best Documentary, 2009
• Film Independent's Spirit Award nomination, Best Documentary, 2008
• Cinema Eye Honors nomination, Cinematography, 2009

The Center for Asian American Media (CAAM) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to presenting stories that convey the richness and diversity of Asian American experiences to the broadest audience possible. We do this by funding, producing, distributing and exhibiting works in film, television and digital media. For more information, visit www.asianamericanmedia.org.

Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and beginning its 22nd season on PBS in 2009, the award-winning POV series is the longest-running showcase on American television to feature the work of today’s best independent documentary filmmakers. Airing June through September with primetime specials during the year, POV has brought more than 275 acclaimed documentaries to millions nationwide, and has a Webby Award-winning online series, POV’s Borders. Since 1988, POV has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. More information is available at www.pbs.org/pov.

POV Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)
POV's award-winning Web department produces special features for every POV presentation, extending the life of our films through filmmaker interviews, story updates, podcasts, streaming video and community-based and educational content that involves viewers in activities and feedback. POV Interactive also produces our Web-only showcase for interactive storytelling, POV's Borders, and the POV Blog, a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss and debate their favorite
films, get the latest news and link to further resources. The POV website, blog and film archives form a unique and extensive online resource for documentary storytelling.

POV Community Engagement and Education
American Documentary | POV works with local PBS stations, educators and community organizations to present free screenings and discussion events to inspire and engage communities in vital conversations about our world. As a leading provider of quality nonfiction programming for use in public life, POV offers an extensive menu of resources, including free discussion guides and curriculum-based lesson plans. In addition, POV’s Youth Views works with youth organizers and students to provide them with resources and training so they may use independent documentaries as a catalyst for social change.

Major funding for POV is provided by PBS, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, The Educational Foundation of America, JPMorgan Chase Foundation, New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, New York State Council on the Arts, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, The September 11th Fund and public television viewers. Funding for POV's Diverse Voices Project is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. Special support provided by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. POV is presented by a consortium of public television stations, including KCET Los Angeles, WGBH Boston and Thirteen/WNET New York.

American Documentary, Inc. (www.amdoc.org)
American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic-engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation. Simon Kilmurry is executive director of American Documentary | POV

DVD REQUESTS: Please note that a broadcast version of this film is available upon request, as the film may be edited to comply with new FCC regulations.

Media Sponsor: WNYC Hear It Now

Corporation for Public Broadcasting