

Silences, and the Staging of History
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In 2009, *Breaking the Silence*, a play about the Khmers Rouges years, premiered in Phnom Penh. Directed by Annemarie Prins of the Netherlands and performed in Khmer, the production features actors who take on the personas of both victims and perpetrators, providing glimpses of regret, guilt, confusion, anger and forgiveness. The world press has lavished attention on the play, often representing it as the first-ever opportunity for Cambodians to publicly confront aspects of their painful history as experienced under the KR. What has gone unmentioned are the folk operas, popular songs, modern dramas and classical and contemporary dances dealing with KR-era trauma and its lingering impact that Cambodians, under their own initiative, have created and performed over the course of the past thirty years. For three decades, through songs and theatrical productions, Cambodia's performing artists have been offering laments (some of which are autobiographical) about the suffering of individuals and communities during the late 1970s, and about the societal ills and crises of leadership that followed that period of revolution and genocide. This paper will correct the record by bringing attention to what is, indeed, a decades-old phenomenon, and situating select works in their political and socio-cultural contexts, including *Breaking the Silence*, given the dramatic shifts in political leadership and in the positioning of the arts in Cambodia over the years. It will explore how that era has been represented theatrically, and how some contemporary pieces are exploring alternative visions for Cambodia's future while reflecting on the Khmers Rouges' legacy.