

Cambodia's film industry rebounds, but it's schlock vs. art

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Cambodia's film industry rebounds, but it's schlock vs. art

By KER MUNTHIT

AP

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia (AP) – When Cambodia recently staged a national film festival, serious drama was in gruesomely short supply: almost half the entries were low-budget horror flicks.

It wasn't always thus.

In the 1960s, now-retired King Norodom Sihanouk was not only the patron of a Cambodian film industry; he was one of its most active practitioners. He wrote, directed and even acted in his own high-minded if formulaic romances and tragedies.

More than 300 Cambodian films were made during that vibrant era, some well-received in other Asian countries.

But when the communist, puritanical Khmer Rouge regime came to power in the mid-1970s it banned all kinds of entertainment and smashed cameras and film-making equipment.

As the country's spirit began to recover from the Khmer Rouge era, and economic revival took hold in the early 1990s, the industry began to rebound. More than 100 production houses sprang up, mostly using video equipment to churn out movies on a shoestring.

But most of them collapsed because of their amateurism, and the industry is still struggling to recover its former glory.

These days, about five movie making companies have the expertise and strong finances to succeed, said Chheng Sovanna, head of the Culture Ministry's movie production office.

"Most of them are accidental producers, who just spent US\$3,000 (2,560) on a camera, bought some tapes, turned on the light and started shooting," said Chheng Sovanna, himself a director who graduated from Russia's State Institute of Cinematography. "We don't understand the way they make movies."

And the filmmakers lean more toward anarchy than artistry on screen.

At the recent festival, a typical movie featured a female vampire baring her canine teeth in a grin as she looked for prey. In "Nieng Arp," or "Lady Vampire," a flying female head with internal organs dangling beneath it chased a terrified couple in the dark.

Nine of the festival's 22 entries were in a similar vein.

"We make movies to suit the domestic market and the demand of our youths," said Korm Chanthy, the manager of FCI Productions, which made "Nieng Arp."

"They like to watch horror movies because they make them feel excited, thrilled and terrified," he said.

The government wasn't impressed. The filmmakers "injected too much hallucination and superstition" into their work, complained Culture Minister Prince Sisowath Panara Sirivuth.

"Their understanding of moviemaking is that it's just business," he said. "And they have this misperception that, without training, they can still make movies."

The government has touted the idea of establishing a film school, but in a country so poor and reliant on foreign aid as Cambodia the idea is unlikely to get off the ground anytime soon.

Korm Chanthy, 42, used to import medicine for the Health Ministry until five years ago, when he began writing scripts and directing movies on video after receiving some training in neighboring Thailand.

His small studio on the second floor of his Phnom Penh home – accessible by climbing a steep and narrow metal staircase from a beauty parlor on the ground floor – uses a mix of computer equipment for editing chores.

Another producer, 29-year-old Heng Tola, was looking to diversify his computer business when he founded Campro three years ago with several friends.

Making a movie takes Campro about three months and costs an average of US\$30,000 (25,600), including about US\$1,000 (853) for the lead actor, he said.

Despite the current taste for horror movies, Heng Tola believes a more serious trend is emerging, prompted in part by the resentment many Cambodians feel about its colonial past and toward domineering neighbors such as Thailand and Vietnam.

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One of the festival entries was a nationalistic epic about a peasant protest against high tax imposed by Cambodia's colonial rulers, the French.

"The Cambodian movie is being reborn after a long absence. Its existence has been up and down, and the question now is how we can make it really stand," Heng Tola said.

The best movie trophy went to "The Crocodile" – a tale of the heroism of a man who killed the beast responsible for the deaths of several people in his village.

It starred Cambodian pop singer Preap Sovath and cost more than US\$100,000 (85,338), making it perhaps the most expensive Cambodian production ever, said Eng Chhay Ngoun, whose Hang Meas Video Co. made it.

More than 100,000 people flocked to theaters in Phnom Pehn for its one month season in October.

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