

## Document heritage or risk losing your history, reminds Qumra Master Rithy Panh

**Doha, Qatar; March 6, 2017:** Cambodian-French filmmaker and Qumra Master Rithy Panh had a word of advice for emerging filmmakers in Qatar. “This place has changed a lot in the past 20 years. It is going very fast. But if you do not document your story (your past and heritage), you will have no history,” he told audiences, taking them on a sublime journey into his own tryst with filmmaking.

Panh, the director of *The Missing Picture* (Cambodia, France/2013), nominated for the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, is acclaimed for his compelling documentaries that probe into the dark annals of Cambodia’s history under the Khmer Rouge.

At once personal and yet detached, his works including *The Rice People* (1994), *S21: The Khmer Rouge Death Machine* (2004) and *Duch, Master of the Forges of Hell* (2012), set the framework for the Qumra Masterclass led by Richard Peña, former programme director of the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the director of the New York Film Festival.

For Panh, each film has been intense excursions into his own life and soul. But for a filmmaker who sought catharsis in documenting the evil that men did, he believes that ‘cinema cannot heal anything. Cinema cannot change life or the world but it gives you the possibility that you can change something. That is why cinema is relevant.’

He has opened the Bophana Centre in Phnom Penh to help rebuild the Cambodian film industry. It had a number of young Cambodians working in *First They Killed My Father*, Angelina Jolie’s recent film adaptation of Loung Ung’s memoir, with Bophana Productions as co-producer.

“I don’t ask my students to make films of the genocide,” says Panh. “We train them and give possibility to making images and sounds.” This is part of his mission to document his nation, which he says is relevant to the region too “because documenting memory is important. So use the digital tools to express your feelings and sensitivity.”

His approach to filming is not to pan the camera on the subjects “but to be with them.” That is why in making *S21*, which has one of the powerful single-shot sequences of a ‘perpetuator’ describing his deeds inside the prison, Panh refuses to take his camera into the cell.

“My camera stops at the door; if I enter it would be to step on the bodies of the prisoners who were there.” Five falcons appeared out of nowhere during the shoot, an enigma, he says is often part of honest documentary making.

Documentary is difficult than feature; there are a lot of forbidden things, and moral and ethical considerations, he adds. “But for me, documentary is important because it is a way to show people that you cannot destroy me. I am here, and I am capable of making poetry, and creating more than fiction.”

Making film is not easy, he told the young filmmakers. “You do not have to sacrifice life for films; life is more precious. But if you ask too many questions (on how and what to film) you will be paralysed. Just go do it, and do it well.”

Panh took audiences through his early days in France, when he received a camera as a gift and shot his first ‘film,’ – “it made people laugh and I realized it was a powerful tool.” He learnt the art of cinema, as much by attending film school, as by watching countless films.

He went to Mali, worked with Souleymane Cissé, was arrested for filming, and the experience gave him “hope that cinema is not just entertainment but also memory, dignity, love, poetry and point of view.”

His first film *The Rice People* was a tribute to his grandparents, which is underlined by his intense spirituality that “everything has a soul; the house, the kitchen.”

He also learnt during its making that in directing children it is best left to ‘express feelings by themselves,’ and which formed the foundation of his cinematic philosophy – ‘you do not make film of people but with people.’

And from his own experiences – through life and cinema – he has learnt that there is nothing called the ‘banality of evil. There is only the choice you make – in anything.”

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#### **Note to Editors:**

##### **About Qumra**

Directors and Producers attached to thirty-four projects in development and post-production are selected to participate in the event. They will include a number of emerging filmmakers from Qatar, as well as recipients of funding from the Institute’s Grants Programme. The robust programme will feature industry meetings designed to assist with propelling projects to their next stages of development, including master classes, work-in-progress screenings, bespoke matchmaking sessions and tailored workshops with industry experts. This creative exchange will take place alongside a programme of public screenings curated with input from the Qumra Masters.

The event is organised in three main sections: The **Qumra Master Classes** are daily sessions; each led by one of the Masters. The participating filmmakers have full access to these sessions, which are also open to accredited industry guests to attend in an observational capacity.

The **Qumra Meetings** are a series of one-on-one meetings, workshops and tailored mentoring sessions between representatives from the selected projects and seasoned industry experts.

The **Qumra Screenings** are open to the public and feature projects funded by the Institute through its grants and co-financing initiatives, as well as a series of films chosen by the Qumra Masters accompanied by Q&A sessions.

The Arabic term ‘qumra’ is popularly said to be the origin of the word ‘camera’, and to have been used by the scientist, astronomer and mathematician Alhazen (Ibn al-Haytham, 965-c.1040 CE), whose work in optics laid out the principles of the camera obscura.

##### **About Doha Film Institute:**

Doha Film Institute is an independent, not-for-profit cultural organisation. It supports the growth of the local film community through cultivating film appreciation, enhancing industry knowledge and contributing to the development of sustainable creative industries in Qatar. The Institute’s platforms include funding and production of local, regional and international films; skills-sharing and mentorship programmes; film screenings; the Ajyal Youth Film Festival; and Qumra. With culture, community, learning and entertainment at its foundation, the Institute is committed to supporting Qatar’s 2030 vision for the development of a knowledge-based economy.

Doha Film Institute

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