

One Evening After the War

A classically proportioned tragedy about the aftermath of Cambodia's two decades of war, "One Evening After the War" follows helmer Rithy Panh's "The Rice People" in bringing handsome French production values to a Southeast Asian milieu of stark poverty and social turmoil.

By Godfrey Cheshire

With: Srey Poeuv - Chea Lyda Chan Savannah - Narith Roeun Maly - Ratha Keo Le Meut - Sra N'Gath Kheav
Phal - Mol Sovanna Srey Poeuv's Mother - Peng Phan

A classically proportioned tragedy about the aftermath of Cambodia's two decades of war, "One Evening After the War" follows helmer Rithy Panh's "The Rice People" in bringing handsome French production values to a Southeast Asian milieu of stark poverty and social turmoil. Well-acted and very assured in its narrative handling and visual mounting, pic offers both insight and emotional payoff. Its neo-realist-tinged dramatic arc and poised style, however, are perhaps too familiar to generate a sense of excitement or discovery in general auds, leaving pic best suited to upscale Euro arthouses and Asia-oriented tests.

Panh's sophomore dramatic outing concerns the difficulties faced by soldiers returning from far-flung war zones to newly pacified Phnom Penh in the early '90s. Though pic commendably doesn't try to score glib polemical points, the cruel irony of Cambodia's switch from Communist tyranny to nominal freedom is evident throughout: Rid of the Khmer Rouge, the country now abounds in gangsters and prostitutes.

Tale starts out viewing the return to civilian life of three soldiers, then focuses in on one. Savannah (Narith Roeun) has at least survived the conflict with his limbs intact, but, suddenly thrown back into the bustling city, he's at loose ends. Rejecting the lure of petty crime, he tries to make his way as a kickboxer, while living with an uncle who's the only one of his large family left after Pol Pot's genocidal reign.

In a dance hall, he meets Srey Poeuv (Chea Lyda Chan), a 19-year-old bar girl who has occasional assignations with some of the city's nouveau riche. She resists his hungry advances, but after a while is moved by the strength of his love, and returns it.

Their efforts to make a life together are frustrated by the near-impossibility of escaping their tough economic straits. When Srey Poeuv tries to break away from the bar, she's threatened with death. Her large debt to the bar owner makes Savannah decide to join one of his soldier buddies in a crime, which propels the story toward its tragic climax.

Thesping is top-notch across the board, and leads Roeun and Chan have great screen presence and memorable chemistry.

Though tale's outcome can be seen coming from a long way off, Panh keeps his material fresh and engrossing, with a rich weave of incidents and characters illustrating the paradoxes of life in a country trying desperately to renew itself. Pic also benefits from his deliberate and elegant visual approach, abetted by the lush lensing of Christophe Pollock.

One Evening After the War