



MEMBER PICKS

The Killing Fields

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away the film's ending.

'An important piece of history, which should be kept alive'

Michael Diver, BFI Member

Roland Joffé's remarkable depiction of the Khmer Rouge in 1970s Cambodia follows the real-life story of a Cambodian journalist and an American journalist who find themselves in serious danger as events in Phnom Penh spiral out of control. Ngor was a real-life survivor of Khmer Rouge prison camps and won an Oscar® for his role as photojournalist Dith Pran. The film also features an outstanding musical score by Mike Oldfield.

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The starting point for producer David Puttnam's film *The Killing Fields* was quite lowkey: a picture in *Time* magazine of a passionate embrace that entwined *New York Times* journalist Sydney Schanberg and Cambodian Dith Pran at a refugee camp on the Thai border, the positive ending to four harrowing years of separation. Filmed three years later by director Roland Joffé and cameraman Chris Menges, the neat resolution offered by that image was to be deflected to pictures of stunned refugees and a textual note to the effect that the country's agony continues. John Lennon's 'Imagine' plays on the soundtrack: loosely ironic, naggingly inappropriate and somewhat vulgar. 'The images,' says Joffé, 'are the summation of what the film is about – broken families and broken individuals.'

The basic discourses of *The Killing Fields* concern people and politics rather than journalism. Reporters are shown, in fact, to be wholly impotent. Power failures and transmitter breakdowns dog their efforts to get news out to the world, and what comes back on the radio is often whitewash and misinterpretation. In the second half of the film, Pran, Schanberg's interpreter and a fellow journalist, watches passively as those who have not learnt the rule that only the silent survive are led off to execution. Meanwhile, back in the United States, Schanberg is stuck with his guilt and frustration at not being able to do anything for his friend. The powerlessness mirrors, on the larger plane, the inability of the American regime to achieve its policy objectives in South East Asia, and the despair of French embassy officials unable to do anything for the Cambodians who have sought refuge behind their walls.

The Killing Fields is sharply distinguished from films about Vietnam made by American directors. It does not share the exclusively American orientation of such films as *The Deer Hunter* or *Apocalypse Now*, nor does it ever lose the human message in orgies of hardware or distracting allegory. The opening images of *The Killing Fields* hint at this style of filmmaking: a tranquil landscape is disrupted by helicopters and then napalm. But Schanberg promptly intervenes in voice-over to speak of his relationship with Pran, the constant centre of the film thereafter. 'Although it is a film about war,' Joffé said before shooting began, 'containing a lot of complex issues, it is actually about people. I would hate it if the tanks took over from the eyes or the machine guns from people's hands and feet.'

‘The idea was not to go in for masses of shocking imagery,’ Joffé says. ‘I wanted it to be a film of consequences. Any time there was a killing, it was specifically used as part of the film’s emotional charge.’ Later, when a military outpost falls to the Khmer Rouge, the camera focuses twice on a screaming girl. This human scale is evident even in more lurid scenes, as when hospital cleaners sweep up the blood around rotting corpses or Pran ambles through damp fields lined with skeletons as he escapes from village death squads.

Joffé not only denies the audience the let out that objective images of bomb devastation would provide, he also refuses to provide a demonology that could salve the liberal conscience. The American embassy officials are sensitive, if somewhat blind, people trying to do their jobs within the limitations laid down from above. The Khmer Rouge murderers in Pran’s community are misguided children. Even the prospective executioners of Schanberg, Pran and their fellow journalists are depicted as innocents, picking over the appurtenances of the reporting trade like savages at their first meeting with western civilisation. And cadre member Phat speaks to Pran with concern, shortly before his own execution, of the extent to which the revolution has lost faith in its people. ‘We cared little,’ said the real Schanberg, ‘about local or international politics or about military strategy. What propelled both of us was the human impact.’ Whereas in *Under Fire* and *The Year of Living Dangerously* the political leaders Somoza and Suharto enter the story, the superpowers responsible for the human tragedy of *The Killing Fields* are only indicated in glancing asides – a radio broadcast about Sihanouk in Peking, a smashed picture of Brezhnev, the lowering of the Stars and Stripes, a video of Nixon’s attempt to justify dropping several billion dollars worth of bombs on Cambodia.

Like *Under Fire* and *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *The Killing Fields* was made by a non-American director with finance raised largely outside Hollywood (it would not, however, have been made without the commitment of a British company, Goldcrest Films). *The Killing Fields* is unique in the way it combines a foreground story of two individuals with the wider political landscape, but it shares the problems inherent in making an American film on the evils of the American way of international politics. The concessions that had to be made to sensitivities at Warner Brothers could have disembowelled the film of meaning. Instead, by treating the pressures to take the film away from its agitprop beginnings as problems requiring solution, its makers have deepened the political and historical analysis. The studio pressure to produce a picture that would be acceptable to American audiences functioned as only one element in a dialectical process that also involved documented reality and the different perspectives offered by screenwriter, producer and director. The result is a film that diverts the audience from any facile analysis and only proposes conclusions without limiting interpretation. ‘The film was not there,’ Joffé says, ‘to hector people, neither was it meant to wrap everything up in a neat package of anger and discontent. What I wanted to do was to bring people close to the emotional colour of the events, from which they are free to draw off ideas.’

Puttnam has spoken of *The Killing Fields* as a new film genre: unpackaged political Hollywood. The claim may be exaggerated, but the film’s accomplishment does provide some vindication for the Goldcrest-style way of making British films. It shows that there is scope, given backing from a well-financed British company and a canny producer with a sophisticated approach to American sensitivities, to use the resources of Hollywood for

work that is authentic and carries messages that go against the grain of mainstream American filmmaking. ‘The company has to remain distinctive,’ says Goldcrest’s James Lee. ‘The only way that we are going to get any distribution support in America is if our films are sufficiently different.’

James Park, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1984-85

THE KILLING FIELDS

Director: Roland Joffé
©: Goldcrest Films and Television Ltd.
Production Company: Enigma production
Presented by: Goldcrest Films and Television, International Film Investors
Author: Enigma (First Casualty) Ltd.
Producer: David Puttnam
Associate Producer: Iain Smith
Production Executive (Thailand): Santa Pestonji
Unit Production Manager (Thailand): Charles Hubbard
Production Supervisor: Robin Douet
Production Co-ordinator (Thailand): Barbara Allen
Production Accountant: Brian Harris
1st Assistant Director: Bill Westley
Assistant Directors: Sompol Sungkawess, Gerry Toomey, David Barron, David Brown, Buranee Rachjaibun
Toronto Assistant Directors: Alan Goluboff, Howard Rothschild
2nd Unit Assistant Director: Charles Hubbard
Continuity Person: Penny Eyles
Casting Directors: Susie Figgis
Screenplay: Bruce Robinson
Based on the article by: Sydney Schanberg
Director of Photography: Chris Menges
2nd Cameraman: Ivan Strasburg
Camera Operator: Mike Roberts
Focus Puller: Jeremy Gee
Clapper/Loader: James Ainslie
Gaffer: Peter Bloor
Key Grip (Toronto): Robert Mcrae
Stillman: David Appleby
Special Effects Supervisor: Fred Cramer
Graphic Designers: John Gorham, Howard Brown
Editor: Jim Clark
1st Assistant Editor: Bryan Oates
2nd Assistant Editor: Anne Sopel
Cutting Room Trainee: Tony Tromp
Production Designer: Roy Walker
Art Directors: Ken Court, Roger Murray-Leach, Steve Spence
Set Dresser: Tessa Davies
Property Master: Terry Wells
Costume Designer: Judy Moorcroft
Wardrobe Supervisor: Keith Denny
Chief Make-up Supervisor/Prosthetics: Tommie Manderson
Make-up Artists: Yvonne Coppard, Kenneth Lintott, Freddie Williamson, Sophy Pradith
Chief Hairdresser: Ronnie Cogan
Hairdresser: Chris Taylor
Title Design: Richard Morrison
Opticals: Neil Sharp, Camera Effects, Optical Film Effects
Colour by: Eastmancolor

Music: Mike Oldfield
Additional Music: David Bedford
Conductor: Eberhard Schöner
Orchestrations: David Bedford
Music/Choral Arrangements: David Bedford
Sound Mixer: Clive Winter
Sound Mixer (2nd Camera): Bob Taylor
Boom Operator: Dushan Indjic
Dubbing Mixer: Bill Rowe
Dubbing Editor: Ian Fuller
Dialogue Editor: Eddy Joseph
Footsteps Editor: Peter Compton
Stunt Arranger: Terry Forrestal
Voice Coach: Kate Fitzmaurice
Armourers: Bapty & Co.
B&C Armourer: Simon Atherton

Cast

Sam Waterston (*Sydney Schanberg*)
Haing S. Ngor (*Dith Pran*)
John Malkovich (*Al Rockoff*)
Julian Sands (*John Swain*)
Craig T. Nelson (*Major Reeves, military attaché*)
Spalding Gray (*U.S. consul*)
Bill Paterson (*Doctor MacEntire*)
Athol Fugard (*Doctor Sudesval*)
Graham Kennedy (*Dougal*)
Katherine Kragum Chey (*Ser Moeun, Pran’s wife*)
Oliver Pierpaoli (*Titony, Pran’s son*)
Edward Entero Chey (*Sarun, Sydney’s driver*)
Tom Bird (*U.S. military adviser*)
Monirak Sisowath (*Phat, Khmer Rouge leader 2nd village*)
Lambool Dtangpaibool (*Phat’s son*)
Ira B. Wheeler (*Ambassador Wade*)
David Henry (*France*)
Patrick Malahide (*Morgan*)
Nell Cambell (*Beth*)
Joan Harris (*TV interviewer*)
Joanna Merlin (*Schanberg’s sister*)
Jay Barney (*Schanberg’s father*)
Mark Long (*Noaks*)
Sayo Inaba (*Mrs Noaks*)
Mow Leng (*Sirik Matak*)
Chinsaure Sar (*arresting officer*)
Hout Ming Tran (*Khmer Rouge cadre, 1st village*)
Thach Suon (*Sahn*)
Neevy Pal (*Rosa*)

UK 1984
142 mins

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