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Televising history at the trials

An award-winning British TV producer is helping Cambodians stay abreast of developments at the Khmer Rouge tribunal by airing a weekly programme featuring highlights and analysis

BY JOEL QUENBY

HORRENDOUS images of the babies being smashed against the trees: "I didn't recognise it at first," says Pol Pot's former chief torturer from the witness dock.

The television camera cuts to a shot of the dual row of Cambodian and foreign judges. Some frown; others remain impassive.

The footage then flips back to the accused, capturing the reptilian pride emanating from 66-year-old Kaing Guek Eav, better known as "Duch", as he continues in a measured tone: "It was done by my subordinates. I do not blame them because this was under my responsibility."

We cut back to a well-lit TV studio, where a pair of handsome, businesslike co-presenters promptly begins quizzing a Cambodian legal expert on intricacies of the case.

Male presenter: "Some of Duch's evidence seems carefully calculated rather than spontaneous. Is that a fair statement?"

"The way he answers each question cautiously may make the judges and observers sceptical about what he says..." begins the guest in response.

Hoping for closure

The aforementioned represents a sample minute of the 24 minutes allotted weekly (excepting repeats) to covering the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia – the long-awaited Khmer Rouge genocide trials – by



Co-presenters Neth Pheaktra and Ung Chan Sophea get down to the serious business of reporting the Khmer Rouge tribunal. PHOTO SUPPLIED

Cambodian Television Network (CTN).

It is hoped that the trials will bring closure to survivors' grief, and that the process will also educate young Cambodians about an era they know little about.

THE FILM REMINDED ME OF WHAT POL POT DID. MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS ALL DIED."

The show, *Duch On Trial*, summarises the weekly developments with a deft blend of courtroom 'action', explanation and analysis. It's slicker than typical local media output – though a company called

Khmer Mekong Films (KMF) is credited with the production.

It turns out that a 64-year-old Cambridge-educated BAFTA-winning former BBC producer, who helped shape primetime pop culture for millions of British telly addicts for three decades, is the man behind KMF.

Award-winning

Having won awards for his contribution to iconic British television shows such as *Eastenders* (he cast characters like 'Dirty Den' and Nick Cotton) and *Crossroads*, and founded the kids' soap opera *Byker Grove* in the process, Matthew Robinson came to Cambodia six years ago on a contract



KMF founder Matthew Robinson in directorial mode. PHOTO SUPPLIED

from BBC World Service Trust to make a health-promoting drama.

"A hundred episodes; that's

finished," he says, briskly.

Robinson founded the film and television production company in 2006 – and has run it from Phnom Penh ever since.

The company's involvement in the landmark tribunals started when it won a bid to produce some pre-trial short films, funded by the British government.

"It was part of their funding for developing countries," says Robinson, who came up with a semi-dramatized treatment to explain a complex, convoluted trial system – that has had international legal experts scratching their heads – "in simple terms to ordinary, uneducated Cambodians".

The resulting series of six films, titled *Time For Justice*, was screened to thousands of villagers as part of a nationwide outreach programme. This jolted horrific memories in its older viewers, evident from the filmed post-screening debates.

"This film reminded me of what Pol Pot did," exclaims an old, bespectacled man. "It was the same as in the story. My brothers and sisters all died."

Painful generation gap

He begins to cry. "I cannot speak because I am overcome," he eventually sobs.

His testimony stands in sharp contrast to that of the jeans-clad teenage girl who subsequently says: "Now I believe that this regime really did exist. It's shocking to hear older people talk about what happened to their families.

"When I was first told that so many people were killed, I didn't believe it."

Such footage exposes the painful generation gap between those who survived the brutal Khmer Rouge regime and their children and grandchildren, who are often left in the dark when it comes to their country's recent history.

Despite the education campaign, a pre-trial survey found 85 percent of respondents "had little or no knowledge" of the tribunal, although court officials disputed its findings.

A subsequent study conducted by the Human Rights Centre at the University of California in the fall of 2008 found that as much as 70 percent of

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