



Nerakhoon (The Betrayal)

David D'Arcy in Park City

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Dir: Ellen Kuras and Thavisouk Phrasavath, US, 2008, 87mins.

Even by the standards of independent documentaries, Ellen Kuras's Nerakhoon is the ne plus ultra of ultra-marathons. For her directorial debut, the cinematographer spent 23 years with the family of her co-director, Thavisouk Phrasavath (Tavi), as Laotians settled in New York City and adjusted uncomfortably into a new culture after being ousted as pariahs from Laos.

Nerakhoon's often elegant, often harsh imagery and its poignant story should earn critical support and give it a place in the specialized art-house market after a run on the festival circuit. Television is its more likely destination (the film is already set to show on PBS in the US), and the documentary will test whether the public in the US, UK and Western Europe that is concerned about immigration will watch a rigorously researched account of one family's experience.

Kuras's film could also have a shelf life in the academic market for courses about immigration and the toll of the US war in Southeast Asia.

Nerakhoon examines a series of betrayals in Laos over the last 40 years. Archival footage shows us the US war in Vietnam, which bleeds across the border into Laos, as bombing by the US ravages the countryside and Laotian government soldiers fight alongside US troops. American officials like Richard Nixon deny any involvement in the warfare.

The family of co-director and narrator Thavisouk "Tavi" Phrasavath is in the midst of the war. His father is an army officer fighting in the Royal Army. When the US abandons the war, betraying Laotians who had supported the Americans, and the communist Pathet Lao, take power, Tavi's father is imprisoned and the new government betrays its own supporters, and turns vengeful and punitive. Tavi swims across the Mekong River to Thailand at the age of 12 to join his family in a refugee camp, and they finally reach the United States.

In Brooklyn, where they finally settle, a crack house is next door, and the family is victimized by local criminals, and then besieged by violent Laotian gangs. When Tavi's father finally rejoins them, another betrayal is in store – he has another family in Florida.

Kuras shoots the American Dream for one family as a collection of cases of survival and compromise, shifting from scenes of war, the stark sequences of Brooklyn squalor, to the Americanization of the younger generation. This is not Hoop Dreams, the documentary which followed two high school basketball players over two years, and, unlike Crumb, which followed an artist over seven years, this documentary tracks the many members of a family for more than two decades.

The family never stops struggling, whether it is through robberies, funerals, or infidelities. The sequences that provide relief are contemplative shots of the Laotian countryside and reflective soliloquies from the narrator, Tavi, whose composure and understated observations make him the antithesis of the wise-cracking Morgan Spurlock or Michael Moore.

Kuras has assembled a remarkably thorough account of a family's ordeal, edited to compelling effect by Tavi, who became a film editor in New York. Nerakhoon is a powerful work of anthropology. That should not be a reason to avoid seeing it.

Production Companies/Backers
POV/American Documentary

International Sales
Cinetic Media

US Distributor
None (PBS television)

Executive Producers
Cara Mertes

Producers
Ellen Kuras
Flora Fernandez-Marengo

Co-Producers
Wilder W. Knight II
Neda Armian
Gini Reticker

Screenwriters
Ellen Kuras
Thavisouk Phrasavath

Cinematographer
Ellen Kurras

Editor
Thavisouk Phrasavath