

Cinema: *Killing Fields* a must see

By Kathy Amen

The Killing Fields. Directed by Roland Joffe; written by Bruce Robinson; produced by David Puttnam for Warner Brothers. Starring Sam Waterson and Dr. Hing S. Ngor. Rated R (violence, language).

Usually, I don't recommend too widely a movie with as much violence as this one has, no matter how good it is. But the *Killing Fields* is an exceptional movie, deserving

of an exception to one's usual pattern of moviegoing. See it! You won't be sorry.

Sydney Schanberg (*Waterston*) is a *New York Times* foreign correspondent in Cambodia during the Vietnam War. Dith Pran (*Ngor*) is his interpreter, guide, and logistics expert in a country where transportation, electricity and other amenities are increasingly hard to come by. When the Khmer Rouge insurgents finally take over the country, survival takes precedence over filing stories.

As gripping, suspenseful and emotionally-charged as this first section is, the last part of the movie is its real heart and soul. Here Pran struggles to survive the khmer Rouge's brutal "ruralization" campaign. An estimated three million Cambodians were either murdered outright, or died of starvation or disease after the takeover. Schanberg suffers in new York, too, from guilt and helplessness.

Considering the subject matter of *The Killing Fields*, its graphic violence is actually used quite sparingly (there are many more killings off-screen than on). But the

suspense is almost beyond endurance. It's painful in other ways, too. Being reminded of the U.S. role in the chaos, for example.

And the children! In retrospect, which group seems more pitiful? The little ones killed and injured? Or the smiling, contented youngsters in the re-education camps, learning not to love their parents? What kind of adult will they become?

So with all this pain and anguish, why see *The Killing Fields*? Recounting the bare facts of the movie sounds horrible, but the experience of seeing it is uplifting as well as depressing. It is an inspiring testament to the strength of the spirit of humanity, when faced with unimaginable barbarism and cruelty. The background facts of the movie are true, sad to say, but Pran's and Schanberg's story is also true. And there lies the inspiration.

None of Waterston's previous movies have been hits (*The Great Gatsby*, *Capricorn One*, *Heaven's Gate*). But he is an appealing and accomplished actor. He portrays Schanberg's Yankee arrogance and his depth of feeling equally well.

Ngor was a doctor in his native Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge

takeover. His experiences uncannily parallel Pran's, but he has not acted before. Knowing what it was like firsthand is one thing, but turning in such a compelling and assured performance is something else again. He has since been nominated for an Oscar as Best Supporting Actor for 1984. But almost more unbelievable than Ngor's performance here is director Joffe's. He has never made another theatrical feature. But *The Killing Fields* is flawlessly paced and beautifully shot. Images of scenic tropical beauty contrast starkly with the horrors of war and oppression.

At the risk of going on and on, just one more rave comment. *The Killing Fields*' soundtrack is one of the best I've heard. Not only in its sparing, but very appropriate uses of American pop/rock songs, played on Cambodia radios, but also in the original score. It's emotional without being intrusive, and hauntingly underscores the drama of the story.

The Killing Fields sounds like a documentary, but it is filmed with a rare artistry. It's a story of mass insanity and individual courage that is unforgettable.



Sam Waterson and Dr. Hing S. Ngor in Warner Bros. *Killing Fields*.