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S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine

S21: La Machine De Mort Khmère Rouge

(Docu -- Special Screenings / France)

An INA/Arte production, with participation of CNC, FACCID, VRT, Czech Television, RTSI, TV1 YLE, Tele-Quebec, SBS-TV Australia. Produced by Cati Couteau. Executive producers, Liane Willemont, Aline Sassoon. Directed, written by Rithy Panh.

With: Vann Nath, Chum Mey, Kim Houy, Prak Khan, Sours Thi, Nhiem Ein, Khieu Ches, Tcheam Seur, Nhieb Ho, Som Meth, Top Pheap, Peng Kry, Mak Thim, Ta Him, Yeay Cheu.
(Khmer dialogue)

By DEREK ELLEY

Cambodian-born helmer Rithy Panh, who has chronicled his country's wounded soul in both features and documentaries, directly tackles the atrocities committed in the name of revolution in "S21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine." Rounding up two of the only three survivors of the notorious interrogation center Tuol Sleng, where 17,000 were detained and sentenced, Panh's coolly pragmatic docu brings them together with former guards as both sides attempt to understand how the events of 1975-79 managed to take place. Film's subject assures it a place in fests and on public webs, though as a docu per se it dissipates its impact through repetition and over-leisurely pacing.

With the Khmer Rouge's leaders still not having been brought to trial, pic is another unofficial step in the process of Cambodians coming to terms with a horrific recent past. Chief "interrogator" here is Vann Nath, a painter who was imprisoned, like most, on unspecified charges. He questions his onetime oppressors with quiet irony and a serene lack of anger. All say they acted either on orders, out of fear of their own lives or because they'd been brainwashed into total obedience to the Party.

Confronted with a wealth of surviving evidence -- the Khmer Rouge was nothing if not bureaucratic, with immaculately typed files and annotated photographs recording every detail of their actions -- the former jailers can only mumble their regret and shame.

There's no shortage of existing docus on the subject, and Panh's doesn't bring either a fresh enough angle or enough new material to the table to justify its length. Apart from a brief intro with B&W footage showing the country at the time, majority of pic is set in the largely empty rooms of Tuol Sleng (now a genocide museum visited by tourists), where the jailers re-enact their daily procedures for the camera.

However, for newcomers to the subject, there's no background about Tuol Sleng itself, or even much on the S21 Bureau that ran it. Most strikingly, film gives no sense of the chilling horror still exerted by the facility, a faceless former school tucked between houses in an average Phnom Penh suburb.

Technically, the DV-shot film is fine, and an improvement on Penh's previous docu, "The Land of Wandering Souls" (1999), which toured fests. For the record, a book by Panh and Christine Chaumeau, published in April, has also been spun off the film project.

Camera (color, DV-to-35mm), Prum Mesar, Panh; editors, Marie-Christine Rougerie, Isabelle Roudy; music, Marc Marder; sound, Myriam Rene. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (Special Screenings), May 16, 2003. Running time: 105 MIN.

