



## Sundance Review: Nerakhoon (The Betrayal)

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*Nerakhoon (The Betrayal)*, the feature directorial debut of cinematographer Ellen Kuras, took 23 years to make. The film, about a family caught in the tides of war, is as much a history lesson about a part of the Vietnam War that is little known as it is a story of how co-director Thavisouk Phrasavath came to America at the age of 14 with his mother and nine siblings after his homeland, Laos fell to the Communists.

Thavi's father, a former commander with the Royal Laotian army, was recruited by the CIA to work intelligence along the Ho Chi Minh trail during the Vietnam War, as a part of the United States government's clandestine operations from Laos during the war. When the United States withdrew from Laos, Pathet Lao gained power and Thavi's father was declared an enemy of the state and sent to a "re-education" camp. Thavi, then just 12, was repeatedly arrested because of who his father was, and finally, in fear for his life, left his family to swim across the Mekong River to a refugee camp in Thailand, where he was finally reunited with his mother and siblings two years later.

In 1981, Thavi's family, presuming his father was gone forever, relocated to the United States full of hope for the future, only to find that the sponsors who brought them to the United States were dishonest, taking the money they were paid to help the family and depositing the entire family -- mother and 10 children -- into a cramped room in a slum in Brooklyn next door to a crack house. As the eldest sibling, Thavi struggled to help his mother keep the family alive, while trying to imprint enough of their country's cultural values on his younger siblings to keep the family together.

Kuras first met Thavi four years later, in 1985, when she was looking for someone who could teach her Laotian. She met Thavi, the two became friends, and after hearing his personal history, she knew she wanted to tell his tale. *Nerakhoon (The Betrayal)* is a visually beautiful film -- a combination of cinema verite and archival footage with elements of experimental filmmaking blended

in as well. The film is simultaneously a micro view of this one family's struggles to survive in and adapt to a foreign culture in the aftermath of war, and a macro statement about the fight of immigrants to retain a sense of self-identity, sense of culture and sense of self while assimilating to a new environment. The larger story could have been told through the lens of any immigrant group -- refugees from Laos, Cambodia or Vietnam as a result of that conflict, or immigrants from Mexico today, or even the struggle of Native American tribes in the United States struggling to maintain tribal identities in a modern world.

What Kuras accomplishes here, though, is taking those broader themes of immigration and cultural identity (not to mention the responsibility our government bears to take care of the people in other countries it uses to further its own goals in wars) and refracting those broader ideas through the narrower lens of one family's story. By blending elements of narrative and experimental filmmaking into a documentary, Kuras makes these wider themes personal. Kuras and Thavi, working together on this film, narrow the broader themes to their direct impact on him and his family, making a much more impactful and real tale than if Kuras had simply made a dry, historical documentary about the US government and Laos during the Vietnam war.

As one might expect from a film directed by a famed cinematographer, *Nerakhoon (The Betrayal)* is beautifully shot and visually poetic. Kuras has a talent for using images and imagery to tell her story, and she immerses us into the lives of Thavi and his family through 23 years of following and filming their story. It's an unforgettable journey, and listening to Thavi himself chart the course of his family through the film, one learns more than just a history lesson about Laos and Vietnam; Thavi's story is about love, family, culture, betrayal, struggle, and, ultimately, survival and triumph, making *Nerakhoon (The Betrayal)* a powerful tale with a heart and soul you won't soon forget.