



First They Killed My Father review - Angelina Jolie's triumph spotlights casualties of war

The actor turned director's passion project is a psychological stunner that shows the effects the Khmer Rouge's reign left on the people of Cambodia

Peter Bradshaw

Tue 12 Sep '17 22.57 BST

Whatever may be thought of Angelina Jolie and the controversial way she auditioned young people for this particular film - a Netflix production which airs later this month - she has created an accomplished piece of work which is possessed of a genuine artistry. It is something to compare to the films of Vietnamese director Tran Anh Hung, especially the dreamily sensual epiphanies of *The Scent Of Green Papaya* (1993) and *At The Height Of Summer* (2000).

The action is set in Cambodia, a country with which Jolie famously has a personal connection; her 16-year-old adopted Cambodian son Maddox is credited as an executive producer. Jolie has adapted the 2000 memoir by Cambodian author Loung Ung, about growing up in the mid-to-late 70s at the time of the Khmer Rouge's campaign of violence, which wiped out one quarter of the country's population.

Newcomer Sareum Srey Moch plays Loung, a little girl whose father is a policeman under

the old US-backed regime. When the Khmer Rouge arrive in revolutionary triumph, her terrified parents (played by Phoeung Kompheak and Sveng Socheata) realise that they must efface any hint that they were once the hirelings of a government for which the newcomers have a fanatical loathing.

The father must pretend that he is just a manual labourer when the zealots come round looking for people to kill or throw into “re-education camps”; he must forget that he ever spoke French, the language of the oppressor, despite KR soldiers jeeringly speaking to him in French, trying to get him to crack. The family are brusquely taken away and set to back-breaking physical work on an agricultural collective. But the point is not to grow food; it is to feel ashamed and afraid, and to reinforce the new rulers’ theatre of cruelty and power.



A scene from First They Killed My Father Photograph: Pax Thien
Jolie Pitt/Pax Thien Jolie Pitt/ Netflix

The children are always hungry; there is a hair-raising scene when a horribly big spider is caught, cooked and eaten. With cinematographer Anthony Dod Mantle, Jolie contrives some eerily beautiful overhead shots showing their ideological fear farm from above: the people working there do indeed look like insects. When Loung’s sister dies, her mother is allowed no more than a few seconds to weep, then she must continue to work. Loung’s other sibling explains to her the idea of reincarnation: the dead person stays intensely asleep for three days, then realises she is dead, goes to the river and then prepares to return. Loung replies grimly that she hopes her sister does not return - to this. Finally, they are told by their mother that they must run away.

Jolie frames the action with a political context which places the blame not merely with Pol Pot but with Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger and their unofficial bombing campaigns against a neutral country. In Cambodia, the US government really did find a way to prove their “domino” theory: the grotesque violence caused pain, anguish, rage and Khmer Rouge popularity in a chain of consequence, factors which toppled against each other like dominoes. Yet the film’s real ferocity is saved for the ideologues of terror.

The woozy visual stillness, with which Loung had originally registered the sheer strangeness of their Maoist new life in the country, is now no longer in evidence. There is just hardship and pain. The film’s final scenes, showing the actual figures themselves as grown adults, gesture at healing, closure and forgiveness. But it is very hard to forget the horror of what has gone before.

Topics