

# Someone Between: Searching for Identity Through Performance

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*Someone Between is a one-woman show based on the life experiences of Chantria Tram, co-founder of Apsara Theatre Company and a first-generation Canadian. After escaping the turmoil of Cambodia in 1986, Chantria Tram and her family found amnesty in a Thai refugee camp. They stayed there for three years before being plunged into the Canadian mosaic. Upon arrival, Tram faced not only the challenges of any child her age, but also those of a new immigrant, adjusting to a new culture while trying to negotiate the demands of her parents who expected her to be their "perfect Cambodian daughter." Tram uses oral history as the source of her text. The play's dramatic arc is constructed of short snippets, memories, and stories drawn from interviews and Tram's own recollections. Someone Between was first performed in May 2009 in Montreal and it was subsequently remounted for Centaur Theatre's 13th Annual Wildside Theatre Festival in 2010. The play will continue to evolve in 2010, with a creative residency and performance at the Maison de la culture de Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. From there, it will be performed in different venues throughout Canada. This article, consisting of excerpts from interviews conducted with the playwright and performer, Chantria Tram, delves into her creative process, the play's connection to her family and to her search for identity, as well as the use of oral history performance in creating dialogue between communities and generations.*

## Introduction

*Someone Between* is a one-woman show based on the life experiences of Chantria Tram, co-founder of Apsara Theatre Company and a first-generation Canadian. It is a play about a young Cambodian-Canadian struggling with the pressures of reconciling her traditional Khmer upbringing with her new Canadian home. After escaping the turmoil of Cambodia in 1986, Chantria Tram and her family found amnesty in a Thai refugee camp. They stayed there for three years before being plunged into the Canadian mosaic. Tram faced the challenges of any child her age, as well as those of a new immigrant. She adjusted to a new culture, while trying to negotiate the demands of her parents who expected her to be their "perfect Cambodian daughter" who cooked and cleaned, was quiet, polite and ladylike, and who awaited the day when she would marry a nice Cambodian boy.

This negotiation between two cultures and two generations can be a heavy burden to bear. How can we understand the gap that can exist between parents and their children, magnified through immigration? How do we reconcile the

multiple contexts that make up the lives of immigrants: the world they left, the context they found, and the future they wish to build? *Someone Between* provides a fascinating context through which to consider these questions. The play's main character, who is both the writer and performer, draws the audience into the intergenerational struggle of a young Khmer-Canadian woman who wants to understand her place and her identity.

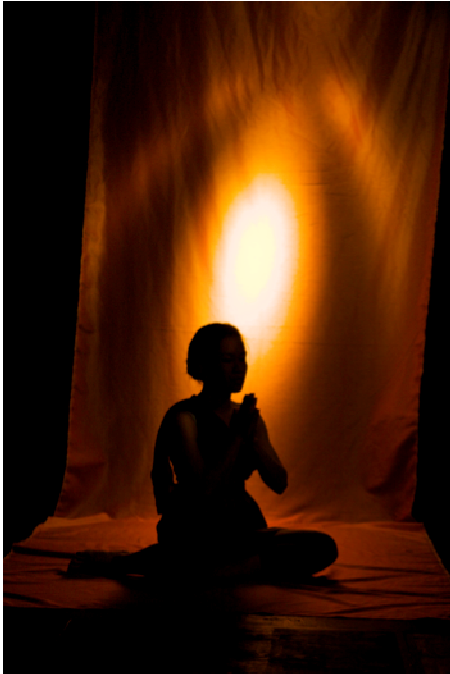


Image 1. "Upon entering the space, everyone bows three times to the monks."<sup>1</sup>

Apsara Theatre Company was founded in March 2008 with a mandate to create multicultural and intercultural theatre that is inclusive and meaningful, in order to build bridges of dialogue amongst Canada's diverse populations. The artistic process at the Company is focused on exploration, creativity and playfulness, using all the possibilities that the language of theatre has to offer, including space, body, movement, object and sound. Chantria Tram and myself, as young artists and co-founders of the Company, wish to create performances that are socially, politically and culturally relevant, and reflect the present Canadian reality. *Someone Between* was the Company's inaugural production. It was first performed as a staged reading of the text-in-progress during the Art Matters Festival in Montreal in 2008, under the title *Gratitude: A One Woman*

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<sup>1</sup> Image taken from *Someone Between*, Chapter: Forty-five Minutes Of Agonising Aromas, by Safe Solvent.

*Show*. A year later, we read the nearly-final draft at the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling at Concordia University. Chantria was also invited to perform an excerpt of the play at the Festival du Monde in 2009 as part of the tenth Annual Cambodian Festival. Apsara Theatre Company hosted the official premiere of *Someone Between* at Montreal's Monument National in May 2009 and it was subsequently remounted for Centaur Theatre's 13th Annual Wildside Festival in January 2010. The play will continue to evolve in 2010, with a creative residency and performance at the Maison de la culture de Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. From there, it will be performed in different venues throughout Canada; please see the attached *Someone Between* trailer for a quick overview of the play's style of performance.

Chantria Tram uses oral history as the source of her text. The play's dramatic arc is constructed of short snippets, memories and stories drawn from interviews and Chantria's own recollections. In this collage, we witness the journey of a young woman who finds herself between two worlds: old and new, family and the individual, Cambodia and Canada. In the creative process, Chantria plays many roles: she is the questioner and the responder, the writer and the performer. This is her story, her journey. Starting from her own perspective growing up as a bi-cultural woman and filling it in with the stories that she collected from her parents, both through interviews and informal conversations, she weaves a portrait that is highly individualistic. Yet by sharing her story with an audience, it takes on universal tones. Suddenly, it reflects not only the struggle of one woman, but also the struggles of many people, immigrant and Canadian alike, all individual, and yet all connected in this human quest to understand our identities.

Della Pollock suggests that "performance [of oral histories] is not so much an interesting or entertaining option as an obligation."<sup>2</sup> As the director of the play, I have been involved in the creation of this piece from the beginning. I needed to understand the motivations that led Chantria to write the play, so that these grounds would become just as necessary, urgent, and personal for me. In order to communicate with the audience through the means of the stage, I needed to have reasons to become personally invested in the project. The process of working on this play has convinced me that sharing oral history is an integral part of recording it. On a more personal level, I have witnessed the growth of a young woman's relationship with her family, and the affirmation of her roots and her identity through the research and retelling of her own story. In undertaking this creative process, Chantria threw a pebble into the lake of her history, creating circles that get larger and larger with each retelling. By opening a dialogue with her parents, she has learned about their struggles and has since started to see them differently.

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<sup>2</sup> Della Pollock, "Introduction," in *Remembering: Oral History Performance*, ed. Della Pollock (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 4.

By bringing what she learned to the stage in the form of a theatrical character and sharing it with others, she has allowed her parents to come into her world, hear her point of view, and continue the dialogue. The following are excerpts from interviews that I conducted with Chantria in 2009; they focus on her creative process and specifically the connections between her play, her family, and oral history. Anna Devere Smith believes that character and conflict are found in the interrupted thoughts, unfinished sentences, and use and misuse of punctuation when a thought is being created.<sup>3</sup> Thus, except when clarity is at stake, I have chosen to conserve the verbatim transcripts of the interviews, so that readers will hear our voices come through the printed text:

Milena Buziak (MB): Let's start with something simple. If you had to sum up the issues that you are exploring in this text...<sup>4</sup>

Chantria Tram (CT): Wow... Well, the whole feeling out of place, feeling different, um...and finding humanity in the characters and in the situations. Umm...issues...spirituality, sex, the kinds of things that I've had to figure out on my own with friends or like all of us, through television and overhearing things. Um...dealing with people's ignorance. Haha. Um. Dealing with my own ignorance, growing up and now...Um...issues...Maybe what makes somebody Canadian and what makes someone whatever else they are. And what we choose to keep too. Because in the end, it's about the choices we make.

MB: And what are you trying to do by sharing it with the audience?

CT: Well, I think if we look at the character, and I do have to see her as a character at this point, because it's just weird to speak about myself in that way...In terms of the character, because she struggled so much growing up and trying to figure out, well, I'm too Cambodian for this, but I'm too Canadian for this, and what the...? And having that internal struggle, but wanting to open up to both worlds, and just being scared because if I go too far this way, then I lose this and if I go too far that way, then I don't have that. I hope that other people would see a part of themselves in her, and in the stories. Whether, you know, they were born over there and then came here, or just having a different understanding of why their parents are the way they are, or that we all kind of have the same struggle.

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<sup>3</sup> Anna Devere Smith, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities* (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1993), ii-ix.

<sup>4</sup> Ellipses indicate pauses (not omissions).

MB: Do you think the struggle with family, values, generations, repeats itself whether from an immigrant perspective or from a Canadian-born perspective?

CT: Yeah, I think so. I think we all have this struggle. Even if you were born here, you still struggle with your family, you still want to break out, and let free, and eventually I find most of these people go back to their families, because they're just trying to figure out on their own who they are. And I think that's the story. The girl is just trying to figure it out on her own, without her family, which she thinks is holding her down or holding her back.



Image 2. "Mom, look."<sup>5</sup>

MB: But can you really figure out who you are without your family?

CT: No. Well, that's it, right? That's the fun part. That's the dramatic conflict and the arc of the play. And I think that's why she always goes back to the family, because that's where it's rooted, right? She is constantly trying to move forward and away, distance herself from the very thing that would complete her. I grew up consciously or subconsciously comparing Canada and Khmer or

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<sup>5</sup> Image taken from *Someone Between*, Chapter: A Good Cambodian Girl, by Safe Solvent.

Cambodian. Anything Khmer was somehow tainted with being poor, uneducated, invalid and backwards. They were not on equal plains to me. Wanting to just be accepted as another Canadian, I never fully embraced my Khmer self mainly because I never understood what it is to be Khmer. I never gave it a chance to breathe until now. This project is the beginning of that.

MB: Did you envisage other people in it, or was it always clearly a one-woman show?

CT: No, I think it was clearly a one-woman show. I think it's kind of interesting that this is from one point of view, and the one woman has to play her father, she has to play her mother, so I think the form really tells a lot about the content.

Because right now I'm still Chantria, taking on the role of my mother, so I'm not completely my mother, I'm telling her story but I will always be Chantria, always telling my own story.

MB: You use oral history as the source of your text and I know that most of the moments or chapters of the text, as you call them, come from you. Like you said, this play is your story, subjective and viewed through your eyes. You never really "become" the other characters you play. But you do speak as your parents, and in taking on their characters in the performance you're telling a part of their story too, particularly their escape from Cambodia to Canada. Do you ever interview your parents at all or talk to them about the things you're going to write?

CT: Yeah, well initially, it's all stories that I recalled, like things I've heard, phone conversations with my mother and things like that, but in terms of details that I don't remember or know of, then I interview my parents. And it's a lot of information to take in, there are a bunch of names that I don't recognise and names that I don't remember, and it's in Cambodian and it's in Vietnamese...

MB: Like names of places or of people?

CT: Both. Yeah. Of places we've been to and people we've met, and I'm trying to research it, but I don't know how to spell it, and just things like that that get in the way. And there isn't a lot of information about it either. It's hard to do your research when there's not a lot out there.<sup>6</sup>

MB: What were some of the questions that you asked your parents?

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<sup>6</sup> Chantria Tram, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, 15 January 2009.

CT: Well, you know, I asked them mostly factual questions. And mostly for the story of the escape through the jungle. I asked them when, how, and why they moved from South Vietnam to Cambodia, how...anything that put things more into context, like when, how and why they left Cambodia. The journey through the jungle itself is a huge story but I didn't expect all these other little stories that kept unfolding as I listened to my father explain the events. The craziest story that my father told me was when my parents were caught trying to cross the borders of Cambodia and Thailand the first time they tried escaping. They were caught by an army that gave them the option of being deported back to South Vietnam, where they were from, or to join the army. So it is crazy to think that at three years old, I was in an army. My mother went into more detail about the journey and when I think of it, it doesn't sound or feel real. I know it is, but it doesn't feel that way. It sounds like some fabricated elaborate epic story that you would see in the movies and then walk out feeling inspired and grateful for being alive. I felt that way when I heard it.

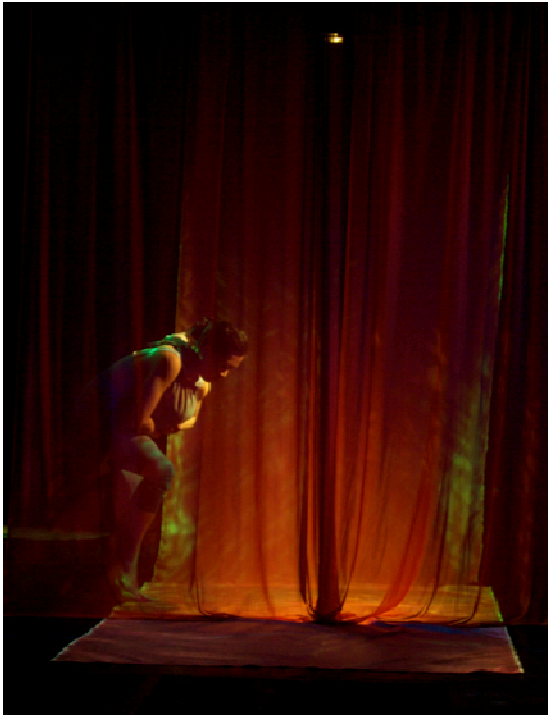


Image 3. "My parents just kept on going."<sup>7</sup>

Uh...I didn't really ask them how they felt. Because I don't know if I could've gone there with them. I don't know why...I think maybe it would get too deep. And too emotional for me.

MB: For you?

CT: Yeah...because my parents still seem to me...they seem so sturdy and grounded and I think it may be...might've been too much for me to go there emotionally with them. And also feeling guilty that I brought those feelings up and have them talk about it and think about how they felt, and having them go through that again, and...

MB: Do you think that it would do them good to talk about it, or do you think that it would stir up stuff that they don't wanna...

CT: I don't know. I was kind of hoping that my factual questions would just kind of lead them and I was hoping that they would just...I was trusting that the questions would open that dialogue, and that they would tell me as much as they wanted to tell me. Although they're not really ones to offer their emotions, so maybe if I really did push them and asked them directly, maybe it would somehow frame them? Like, "oh we're finally being asked..." but...selfishly, I didn't, because I think it would've been too much for me to handle. It's one thing to hear it, but it's also being the interviewer and interviewing your parents and hearing that, um...well, maybe that's the next step, maybe that's the next chapter, you know. Now that the facts are out, are being talked about now, maybe they can go deeper with me. I have this list of questions that I made months and months ago and once it came to actually doing it, I felt flooded with these blocks. To go there meant to honestly, genuinely, openly speak with them. It is not a place that I go to often with my parents, especially my father. It is my most vulnerable place. I can stand in front of hundreds, thousands of people and perform, but to be in a room with just my parents and speak to them with my heart open is harder.

Once, my mom was telling me a really hard part of crossing the jungle, which I don't really want to reveal right now, and at one point, she just asked, "Don't you feel bad for us? Don't you feel any sympathy?" And I was like, yeah, of course, but it was like...in that moment, it was so difficult for me to show that. And I was just...it was like an out of body experience, I saw myself sitting there and my

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<sup>7</sup> Image taken from *Someone Between*, Chapter: My Parents' Story – The Journey, by Safe Solvent.



mom on the couch. And *normal* people would probably sit beside each other and talk about things, and hug and stuff, you know. But I was so...I was not...I was not ready to go there. Yeah, I was still playing the role of the interviewer rather than her daughter. Because I think I needed to do that to protect myself somehow. It's easier to do that.<sup>8</sup>

In interviewing her parents, Chantria was working with a double-edged sword. On the one hand, her intimate knowledge of them allowed her to ask questions many strangers would never think of asking. On the other hand, being so closely connected to them put her in a position of vulnerability that another interviewer would not have experienced. She had to deal with the emotions that resulted from talking about things that they very rarely shared, and she also had to negotiate her own emotions when it came to finding out about parts of her past that she knew little to nothing about. In writing the chapter of the play entitled "My Parents' Story – The Journey," what started as a very vague fairy-tale story of crossing a jungle in a far away land suddenly became quite detailed in some sections, resembling a history lesson, and in other instances it was so emotionally charged for the performer that it was difficult to move forward. It took several rewrites to develop the story that ended up on stage, trying to balance historical facts and Chantria's emotional involvement and theatricality; to watch a part of this scene see the attached video link entitled: The Journey (link #1).

Naturally, Chantria's relationship with her parents is key in this performance. Her ambivalent status of daughter-interviewer-subject-writer-performer is what made the creative process and the performance so interesting and challenging. For Chantria, this play originated out of a need to speak, to tell her own story while finding out more about her history. So the idea of having someone else interview her or her parents to make a play out of the resulting content never occurred to her. However, throughout the conversation, the same burning question kept creeping into my mind. So finally, I had to ask it:

MB: Often, in oral history, there is the interviewer and the interviewee, and then the interviewer takes the material and does something with it. But you are doing both of these things at once. Do you think you are more likely to censor the stories that you do choose, even in the choosing of them, because you're attached to what they are and what they mean?

CT: Well, I...I haven't censored anything for the reason that it's too personal for me. At least I don't think I'm censoring anything.

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<sup>8</sup> Chantria Tram, interview by author, Montreal, Quebec, 27 May 2009.

Although you know, there are times when I wonder, what would mom and dad think when they hear this, but, I mean the biggest thing that I thought was super revealing was...was my father's comment, that one time we hear him speak in the play...and that was tough to write because, well I don't want to portray my father as this racist asshole, because he's not, it's just how he feels. I think what is limiting is not being able to completely step out of it, since they're my stories. And all these stories that I want to tell, but which ones to keep, like "I definitely want to keep this one because I am personally attached to it," but I have to look at the overall arc of the play. Yeah, I'm having a hard time with that. I think I'm learning to do that though, to find the balance.

Also, there is a reason why I am so incoherent and vague about certain things we've talked about in this interview between you and I. When I first started this project, one of the first stories was one that involved my parents, but very quickly we agreed it wouldn't be part of the play. Now I look back and I am glad I didn't use it because I think it may have, no, I *know* it would have invaded their privacy.

I wrote it, probably to get something off my chest and thought, well I had to experience these choices of theirs and so I became part of their story and therefore it is also my story. I kind of claimed it. And it wasn't my right. I feel the same with some of this. There are moments within that journey through the jungle that I could not have imagined anyone going through and they did. I have such deep respect for them and their determination and drive to be here. So for the sake of the play, some details were changed. Some were heightened, others removed or changed.

MB: Would it have gone deeper if the interviewer was someone else, not connected with you or your family?

CT: Interesting question. I wonder too. Part of me says yes. Maybe my parents would be more willing to open up. And same goes with this interview between you and I. If you hadn't been connected with the play, maybe I would be more willing to open up and speak, or at least be more specific, because you wouldn't have heard it all before. I know I can go deeper with this piece and I am excited to venture into that. I know I still have questions, if not more than before. And I think that's a good thing. I am becoming more curious and willing to search and go to that place that has terrified me. I am still struggling with my inner child that is scared to be judged by her own people. Being judged by other people is one thing. I can say, well f-- you anyway, but feeling judged by the Khmer community is a hard

thing for me. I've somehow attached my validity as a good person to that.

MB: So does this mean that you would be interviewing your parents more?

CT: Yup. Definitely. And now with more specific questions, and now I think delving deeper and passing the facts but going to how they felt and how they feel now as opposed to back then, how they view the world based on their experiences... Yeah, definitely. Not for this play, but maybe for something in the future. And it's funny because I don't... when my mother was here a few weeks ago I asked her, "how was your relationship with your mom?" And it was the first time we've ever talked about my grandmother.



Image 4. "Chantria, Did I ever tell you how I find out that I was pregnant with your brother?"<sup>9</sup>

Um...I actually want to interview them a lot about how they grew up, like how their life was before everything. Yeah. That's gotta be interesting. It's weird thinking that they had this whole other life before you, you know, like this whole other experience. I think it's always been a curiosity of mine that probably turned into this project

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<sup>9</sup> Image taken from *Someone Between*, Chapter: Cycle of Life, by Safe Solvent.

that's leading me to do this. And I think now they're also open to talking about it, whereas they probably weren't before. This play is helping because now they realize that I'm not a kid anymore and that I'm trying to understand their reasoning and their choices. You know, my dad on my last visit, he was like, "you know, one day, I'm gonna sit you down and I'm gonna tell you about my childhood." I was like, really? Yeah, and I...I've never expected that of him.<sup>10</sup>

What began as factual interviews about Chantria's family's escape from Cambodia eventually led to a newfound trust and respect, as both Chantria and her parents learned to share their stories and viewpoints, using the play as a pretext for dialogue. In learning about the people they were before she knew them, Chantria became interested in her parent's past. At the same time, speaking with her father and mother about their childhoods would not have been possible if she had not taken on this project and treated their oral history with dignity. And yet, in her play, Chantria is revealing many things about her family that would have otherwise remained private. She embodies her mother's reaction to her first period, her father's silences about sex, and both of their expectations about her training and marriage. She also reveals her parents' reaction to her dating a Black man, and talks about a delicate issue found in many immigrant communities – a thing called "marriage for papers," a plan to sponsor someone from "back home." At the same time, the character in the play, like Chantria in real life, comes full circle, realizing that it is only through her parents and her community that she can really connect with her two sides and embrace her hybrid identity. Given these revelations, I wondered how her parents felt about them:

MB: This play obviously has a lot to do with your relationship with your family, with your parents, with your roots. Even if you changed certain details of your real life stories, most of it is rooted in the truth and, I must say, is quite daring to stay so honest when putting your own story on stage. How does your family feel about it?

CT: Well, it's interesting, because it's changed over the course of the past year. Last year, when they got the first draft of the text, we didn't really have an open dialogue with my family about like "oh, we read your play, we think this, this, and this," it's...and that is what the play deals with, my relationship with my parents, and this is – it's my way of speaking to them. But when they read the play, I only heard from my little brother what they thought, and what he said to me was, "they don't like it." They automatically rejected it. But I expected

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<sup>10</sup> Tram, interview, 27 May 2009.

that. Because it's about...I'm exposing things. And it's about them, and I'm sure there are tons of things in there that they don't want me to say. But since they've read the text I feel like things have changed, like when I went home to Toronto, things felt different, it felt like they knew me better. They didn't treat me like that little girl anymore, it's more like here's this young woman, and this is what she has to say.

And now that they saw the play in full performance, a year later, they told me that they really really enjoyed it, they know I am not doing this to hurt them, but to honour them. But they...they...hah, my mom was like, "just a couple of things, um, you know, the Black thing, you know, we're not saying that ALL Black people are bad. I'm sure there are some that are good." And then she's like, "and the other thing is that uh... the marrying your cousin thing... we just don't want people to think that we're just trying to scam the government and we're bad people and..." but she didn't say it in a "take that out" way, it was like, you know, your text is great, the show is great, but...think about these things. So uh, it was approached in a really good way. Where as in the past, I would never imagine her to be that nice about it. Yeah. No, actually, they're really supportive, and they want this to go further and they're helping me make contacts. I think what I saw after the performance was a newfound respect for what I actually do. Which was nice.<sup>11</sup>

Sitting in the audience behind Chantria's family during the performance was especially interesting. "Cut the beef very thin," says Chantria as the character of her mother, and a burst of laughter erupts from the second row where they are sitting. "You're gonna thank me when you're older," Chantria continues, and the rest of the audience joins in the laughter, perhaps recognizing their own parents. The play vacillates between situations and themes in which we can all see ourselves (or our parents), and situations that are completely foreign to a non-Buddhist, giving the audience a chance to latch onto the character and her familiarity, while learning about our differences as she takes us on her journey. This "familiar other" can be seen in the attached video link entitled Mom/Temple (link #2).

Chantria is the guide, the bridge between two different cultures. And, as the character realizes at the end of the play, being "someone between" is an added richness, not an inconvenient fact. The title of the play itself is intriguing. It goes beyond the simple explanation of being between two worlds or two generations,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

because, in the course of writing this play, Chantria found out that she was born in Kandal, Cambodia; she also realized what “Kandal” meant in Khmer:

MB: You know the story of Kandal, where you finally find out where you were born, and it actually means “in the middle...” Did that actually happen? Or was it just convenient because the play was called *Someone Between*?

CT: Yeah, that actually happened. It was a few months ago. And it was funny because my mother was going to Cambodia that very day that I called and she was leaving the house in like literally half an hour, and I called just in time, and I was like, “ok, before you leave, where was I born?” ...this really random question. She’s like, “why do you wanna know that now?” I knew she was leaving for Cambodia for a month and so if I didn’t do it then, I would have to wait and that would drive me crazy. I was following an impulse that told me that it was time to answer that question. So that did actually happen, and I was completely shocked with her answer. Cause I’m writing a story about this girl who’s in the middle without knowing what might happen, and... it was funny, cause I was still trying to figure out what the hell am I doing with this show, what is the story, and then when I had that conversation with my mom, it just clicked. The place was called Kandal and it means “in the middle” in Khmer. It was like, oh, this is what the story is about. That’s when something dropped, you know. And I felt... I don’t know, maybe I’m superstitious, but I felt like that was meant to happen. Like that was how I was supposed to figure it out or something.<sup>12</sup>

MB: So up until that point you didn’t know...

CT: No... and I didn’t question and I didn’t care. I know that it’s terrible but I...I always thought, yeah, so I was born in Cambodia, but I never cared to know the name of the town... I would say that story was probably the hardest one to put down on paper. Because I feel like I’m confessing all those things. I don’t know where I was born, I don’t know my grandparents, I don’t know their names, I don’t know my family, you know? I’m just like, I don’t know anything! I’m finally confessing it.

MB: What’s the reason behind making this confession public?

CT: I think it’s because I’ve finally come to terms with it, and I’ve accepted the fact that I don’t know these things. Because I used to feel really guilty and I’ve always felt ashamed about it. But now I’m

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

like no, it's ok that I don't know because now that I've acknowledged the fact that I don't know, I can...know. Go from here. Ask the questions I need to ask.

MB: How did this project change you?

CT: Hmm... I've grown up kind of judging my parents, and this play made me really look at them and deconstruct them as characters, and it's through the process of writing the play that I really came to appreciate them. It's made me...it's made me question many things. It's made me confront a lot of things that I wasn't willing to or ready to confront. It took me this long to find out where I was born. That's not normal! I asked my mother, "Why didn't you ever tell me?" She's like, "You never asked." I'm like, "I didn't ask?" "Yeah, how am I supposed to know you didn't know that?" Well yeah, I never *asked*. I just never, I thought, yeah, Cambodia, sure. Now, I would love to go to Cambodia and see where I was born. So I'm really looking... I'm terrified, like *terrified*, to go back, but I'm really looking forward to that. To see my face in all these other people. Because I never really got to do that. Other than with my parents and my brother.

MB: So do you think the need to go back to Cambodia was born out of or alongside with this project?

CT: I think so, yeah, because I didn't really feel confident enough, because I was still thinking "I don't know who I am." And I didn't want them to start asking questions about what I was doing. I didn't want to be judged by them. And writing this play made me kind of go deeper into...it's made me reconnect with my family and my community. A lot. Because I've had to ask all these questions.

In a way I'm sort of...I'm using this one-woman show as an excuse to talk to them. But it's me asking, in the end. I want to know these things, but I'm just too chicken to say: "This is Chantria, I'm asking you these things because I want to know, because I care." Rather than, "I'm writing this show, tell me everything I need to know!" I'm kind of hiding behind it sometimes, I feel, but it's given me a reason to open up that dialogue.

MB: So writing your story and using your own history is a way of communicating with your parents?

CT: Yeah, yeah, because I could never imagine myself sitting down and saying: "Here's how I feel about you, mom and dad." I can do that on stage, though!<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Tram, interview, 15 January 2009.

Through the use of performance, Chantria brings her oral history to life, providing both perfect strangers and her own parents with a glimpse of her struggle and bringing into the open issues that she held locked up for many years. The audience witnesses both the outer, open struggles with her parents, but also Chantria's inner struggles as she tries to affirm to herself and others who she really is. Without the performance, the cycle she embarked on when beginning this project would not be complete. It is through seeing the performance that her parents began to understand Chantria's view-point. This personal story, however, reaches another level of complexity as political issues pertaining to borders and territory appear on the stage. Chantria was born in Cambodia. Her parents and their families, however, are from South Vietnam, which is composed of the Khmer Krom people. Although she heard about this part of her story while growing up, Chantria never really thought about what that meant. When conducting research for this play, she finally had to face the fact that things were not as simple as she thought they were, and that Cambodian and Khmer do not necessarily mean the same thing:



Image 5. "Chantria, why you so stubborn? Ever since you were little, so stubborn!"<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Image taken from *Someone Between*, Chapter: After The Big Day, by Safe Solvent.



MB: What are some things you learned from the oral history of your parents while working on this play?

CT: My *own* history...I learned that it's really complex and that I'm still way at the beginning of unravelling this thing, and that I don't know what to call myself anymore, in a way. I... I can't really say that I'm Cambodian, even though I was born there, because my parents weren't born there and generations before weren't born there, but I was born there...and I grew up here in Canada, so like...do I say...I'm Vietnamese? But born in Cambodia? Or...I think now I just say I'm Khmer. So now people are like, what's Khmer? And that's probably the most accurate term to use. And I think that probably comes with being more comfortable with being Khmer, just liking that I guess, embracing it. And it changes the way I see their struggle. It's not just about the Khmer Rouge.

They...they're fighting for human rights for their people in South Vietnam specifically. And also to be accepted in Cambodia, because they're not. They're looked at as Vietnamese in Cambodia, and they're looked at as Khmer in Vietnam, so...either way they're persecuted or accused of something.<sup>15</sup>

Khmer Krom, the indigenous people of South Vietnam, have been facing racism and persecution by the Vietnamese government and people for many decades. "The big guns and tanks of the Vietnam War left a nation full of questions and no answers," says Chantria in *Someone Between*. "Khmer road signs were swiftly replaced with their new Vietnamese adopted names. Strips of land confiscated and claimed by the government. Monks defrocked and killed, temples driven down to rebuild new modern infrastructure and innocent villagers invaded and accused of treason then thrown into jail, at the very least. The Khmer language banned from learning in schools or in temples. The old replaced with the new. Stripping away... And I am here, sheltered from it all."

Through the process of writing this play, asking questions and learning her parents' stories, Chantria began to see herself differently:

MB: Do you think oral history constructs identity for the child?

CT: Yeah, maybe I would feel a lot different if I knew more about my grandparents and what they lived through. Maybe I would be more grounded in who I am. But even in my own family there's a mix of Chinese, so can I really say that I'm Khmer?

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<sup>15</sup> Tram, interview, 27 May 2009.

MB: Right, so in the end, is our identity just a construct of stories passed down?

CT: Yeah, and choices. My father has chosen to go this way. He was closer to his mother who was Khmer, and his father was Chinese but he spoke Cambodian, he spoke Khmer, so my father decided to embrace his Khmerhood. And reject his Chinese side. But you know, if he had embraced that, then would I perceive myself as Chinese? Or a descendent of Chinese ancestors, and then get obsessed about Chinese history or something? To find out who I was? Yes, I think oral history is essential in forming families; the structure, expectations and obligations of the members are formed because of what they know of their past; but I think it is dynamic. Stories change a little bit each time we tell them because, like in acting, we are in another moment in time and space. We are the We's of this moment and not the We's at that moment. I hope that makes sense. Because we are human beings that are constantly learning and changing, our perspectives may change depending on the lenses we are looking through. So I think in a way, oral history defines families. The stories I have grown up listening to have painted a certain picture for me of who I am and where I come from. And I think that these pictures are only faintly painted and cannot possibly give one big picture but pieces that are awkwardly placed together. And the picture changes because the pieces shift as we remember events and pass on the stories, whether of something happening to us a few years ago or from generations and generations past. Our values and beliefs are told through these stories and I think that is why my parents have been careful with which stories they have told me and at what point in my life. For example, when I was younger and didn't fully grasp, and I still cannot say I fully do, the idea of going through what they have gone through to get here. To me, they are stories of struggles, challenges, obstacles, defeat, triumph, love, determination and so much more. They are stories of fighters, survivors. That's such a big and overwhelming idea. To survive. And now that defines me.<sup>16</sup>

Knowing that she is a descendent of the Khmer Krom people and realizing what that meant changed the way Chantria viewed herself and her community. She began to understand her parents' involvement in the human rights conventions held at the United Nations and decided that she too had a part to play, and that it began with the use of oral history performance to raise awareness and

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<sup>16</sup> Tram, interview, 27 May 2009.

create dialogue, not only within a family or a community, but also between different people from different communities.

After each performance, we held a talk-back session with the audience, giving everyone a chance to ask questions and express whatever issues had arisen for them while watching the play. This allowed us to gage the impact that the play had on those in attendance. There were many comments of appreciation from young people, not only of Cambodian descent, but also descended from other ethnicities, and even “pure bred” Canadians who found themselves and their parents reflected on stage. The most surprising and rewarding comments, however, came from a number of parents. Chantria and I were slightly worried about the effect that this play would have on the older generation of Cambodians and Khmer Krom, considering the topics that were addressed, however, the responses were extremely positive. Parents appreciated seeing a young woman speak so openly about issues that were important to her. The most touching comment came from a Polish man, who, with tears in his eyes, told us: “This play helped me better understand my daughter.”



Image 6. “Sow Ma, the female leader, led the fight against the invaders but lost.”<sup>17</sup>

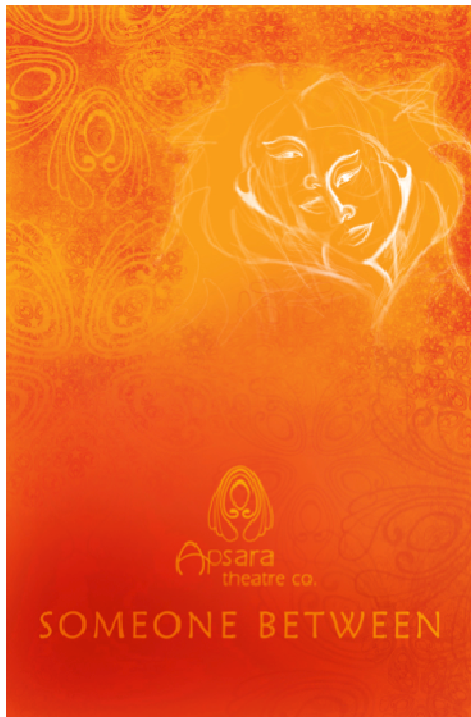
Chantria’s story is not a new one; it is a story lived and experienced by millions of people. Collecting oral histories permits historians to paint a more detailed picture of a person, a family, an event, a struggle, or a nation. *Performing*

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<sup>17</sup> Image taken from *Someone Between*, Chapter: The Forgotten Land, by Safe Solvent.

oral histories allows people to connect their individual struggles to those experienced by others. This invariably creates a new collective understanding of who we all are. A historian once said that sometimes, it is not that the stories are not told. Rather, it may be that they are not heard. In creating a performance, we wish to connect and share this story with as many people as we can in order to be heard and then hear back, thus continuing the dialogue. Theatre cannot be static or removed from the political or social reality that surrounds it. It needs to evolve. Hybrid identities are a big part of what constitutes Canadian identity. We want to see more plays that deal with who we are as a society today. There is no doubt that performing oral history is one way to do this. In taking the stage and telling a hybrid story, we are adding a page to the repertoire of what it means to be Canadian. Chantria accomplished many things through the creation of *Someone Between*. By interviewing her parents, she learned of her beginnings. By writing the text, she gained an understanding of her parents as people. By performing the show, she allowed them to see her perspective and understand her struggles. Now, we wish to spread this individual story so that we may reach others and come together as a community.

## Credits



*Someone Between* was written and performed by Chantria Tram, directed by Milena Buziak, and dramaturged by Mike Czuba. Lighting design by Jeremy Pinchuk, set and costume design by Lara Kaluza, original music by Sergio Sanchez, graphic design by Lavinia Manea, and the stage manager is Bryan James. The images included in this article were taken by Safe Solvent. The videography was done by Maxime Cormier and Jean-Christophe Meunier.

To find out more about Apsara Theatre Company, *Someone Between*, or the people involved in this project, visit [www.apsaratheatrecompany.com](http://www.apsaratheatrecompany.com).

Image 7. *Someone Between*<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Someone Between*, by Lavinia Manea.