

Arriving in America

In Houston, Texas, telling the story of a refugee's flight from Cambodia to the U.S.



Felix Sanchez

Japanese soprano Mihoko Kinoshita plays Cambodian refugee Yani Rose Keo in a new chamber opera, *New Arrivals*, commissioned by the HGOco.

By JULIETTE HOPKINS • THE CAMBODIA DAILY

On April 4, 1975, Yani Rose Keo received a call that would change her life. It was from an American official at the U.S. Embassy, advising her and her family to flee the country immediately as the Khmer Rouge were closing in. With the engines for the C31 military plane already whirling, she had little time to gather her things or her thoughts. She

“Cautious, careful people, always casting about to preserve their reputation and social standing, never can bring about a reform. Those who are really in earnest must be willing to be anything or nothing in the world’s estimation.”

—Susan B. Anthony

boarded the jet with her husband and youngest son bound for Thailand, just 13 days before Phnom Penh fell to the Khmer Rouge.

Her loss and the new life she built for herself helping others in the U.S. is the subject of a new chamber opera, *New Arrivals*, commissioned by the community outreach arm of Houston Grand Opera, HGOco, as part of their ongoing East + West initiative, which premiered in Houston this June. The project will see a total of eight 30-minute chamber operas produced, with each one focusing on a different Eastern immigrant population in the Houston area.

New Arrivals celebrates the life of Ms. Keo, now a proud Houston resident who cofounded Houston’s Alliance for Multicultural Community Services in 1985, an organization that assists refugees settle into their new American life.

New Arrivals’ producer, Evan Wildstein, wanted to tell a story that would at once engage with Houston’s Cambodian community and honor the extraordinary life of Houston’s most well-known Cambodian

refugee.

“Anyone who has met Yani, or has learned of her experiences, is immediately touched,” he wrote in an email. “Her desire to help people is infectious, and she is tireless in her efforts to make the world a better place—and we felt there was no better Cambodian story to tell than Yani’s.”

Mr. Wildstein approached New York-based librettist Catherine Filloux and composer John Glover to create a chamber opera that would capture the essence of Ms. Keo’s spirit.

Ms. Filloux, of French-Algerian heritage, came to the project with extensive knowledge of Cambodia and has been writing plays about the country for the past 15 years. Her last production, “Where Elephants Weep,” staged in Phnom Penh in 2008, was the first contemporary Cambodian “rock” opera of its kind.

Ms. Filloux and Mr. Glover flew to Houston, where they met with Ms. Keo and witnessed firsthand her work at the Alliance for Multicultural Community Services. “I began to talk to all sorts of refugees in her agency,” said Ms. Filloux, “and became interested in the way she has used her energy and leadership skills to empower for decades now refugees from not only

Houston, but all over the world.”

“I was just deeply attracted to the way in which she turned her pain and anger and what happened to her into this great impulse to help people.”

Ms. Filloux set *New Arrivals* on an airplane to symbolize the journey of refugees in transit between their old and new lives. As Ms. Keo sits on the plane, three other refugees join her -- a “lost boy” from Sudan, a Nigerian orphan and an ethnic Nepalese refugee from Bhutan. Each character appears one-by-one to tell their stories in brief arias.

New Arrivals has involved a number of cross-cultural collaborations between the “artistic communities in Houston and Phnom Penh. Perhaps the coup of the work is Mr. Glover’s blending of Western orchestration with traditional Khmer smot chanting in the score.

“It was important that the music be a blending of Western and Eastern musical practices to give an accurate portrait of Yani’s experiences,” said composer Glover.

The work is scored for four Western-trained opera singers, a string quartet, marimba and the Cambodian smot chanter Pheun Sreyrov. Two smot chants are woven into the opera: the classic “Orphan’s Lament” and the “Lotus Flower Offering,” a prayer of transformation and enlightenment.

“I wrote the music keeping Srey[pov]’s repertoire in mind,” said Mr. Glover. “So the art of smot had a central influence on the sound of the piece.”

Ms. Sreyrov sings in Khmer, and the opera singers perform in English, with the two musical forms in constant dialogue throughout the piece.

Mr. Glover learned about the art of smot during a two-week trip to Cambodia in October 2011 where he spent each day meeting with different master musicians supported by Cambodian Living Arts and learning music at the Sotavanna Phum Puppet Theater in Phnom Penh.

“The way smot addresses the feeling of loss, and the powerful vocal expertise required to perform it, seemed the natural way to go for creating an operatic work about Yani,” he said.

Ms. Sreyrov, 21, is the only Cambodian performer in the cast, with the lead of Yani played by Japanese soprano Mihoko Kinoshita.

This will be Ms. Sreyrov’s fourth time in the U.S., but her first time performing alongside a Western orchestra. She was invited to be involved in the project by Trent Walker, a scholar of Buddhist Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and another key mover in the project.

Ms. Sreyrov and Mr. Walker studied under the same smot teachers--Prum Ut, Koet Ran, and Yan Borin--and have performed together in Cambodia and the U.S.

Mr. Walker agrees that *New Arrivals* is breaking ground when it comes to fusing Western and Eastern sounds: “Whereas smot is nearly always performed a cappella or with a single instrument accompaniment in Cambodia, in *New Arrivals*, Sreyrov’s smot is interwoven in a rich array of orchestral instruments and four operatic voices. The resulting sound is stunningly different than traditional presentations of smot in Cambodia.”



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Kate Ehle



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From top: Mihoko Kinoshita sings alongside tenor Peter Tran in the first fully-staged performance of *New Arrivals* earlier this month; New York based composer John Glover collaborated on the project. A scene from *New Arrivals* with Cambodian smot chanter Pheun Sreyrov performing in the background.