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PRESENT

โศกนาฏกรรม

GRANDMA NAI WHO PLAYED FAVORITES



A FILM FROM CHHEANGKEA

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GRANDMA NAI WHO PLAYED FAVORITES

AN ANTI-ARCHIVE AND NOMAD PRODUCTION

In co-production with Kongchak Pictures
With support from the Fonds Image de la Francophonie
and the Black Family Film Fund

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Narrative Short, 2025
19 minutes, Color, DCP, 5.1, 24fps, 1.375

Countries: Cambodia / France / USA
Languages: OV Khmer / ST English, French



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During her chaotic family's Qingming visit, dead Grandma Nai sneaks away from her peaceful afterlife after overhearing that her Queer grandson is about to get engaged to a woman.

SYNOPSIS

On the scorching day of the Qingming Festival in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, dead Grandma Nai wakes up to the noise of her chaotic family arriving at her tomb to perform their yearly grave-sweeping rituals and send offerings to her. Their visit, along with their complaints and gossip, is nothing but a disturbance to the peaceful afterlife Nai shares with her tomb neighbor and best friend, Grandma Mui.

Nai's irritation toward her family is set aside when her beloved grandson, Meng, arrives. As the Qingming festivities unfold, Nai and Mui overhear a conversation that reveals Meng's mother pressuring him to marry Pech, a young woman from a wealthy family. Concerned for her grandson's happiness, Nai and Mui sneak into the family's SUV to follow them to the meeting with Pech's family.

They arrive at a karaoke-restaurant—an oddly fitting setting for this absurd and awkward occasion. At the venue, the two grandma ghosts witness the performative courtship between the two nouveau-riche families and Pech's innocent flirtations with Meng. Everything changes when the grandmas take notice of Meng's attraction to Pech's handsome older brother.

As 1960s' Cambodian rock'n'roll fills the karaoke queue, Nai and Mui sing, dance, and meddle with the affairs of the living, scheming to steer Meng away from the arrangement. Despite their spiritual guidance, it is up to Meng to ultimately stand up for himself and choose the life he truly wants.







PERSONAL STATEMENT

My Grandma Nai was often irritated. She scolded anyone who ever did anything frivolous or annoying. So when it came to her grandchildren, Grandma Nai played favorites, and I was hers. Growing up, I knew I wasn't like most boys, so I clung tightly to Grandma Nai because, by her side, I was protected.

Having lost her at a young age, Grandma Nai has become my personification of hope. In moments of loneliness, I often speak to her and wonder if she could hear the secrets and stories I share. Then one day, I imagined a world in which she could. I imagined her presence living at the tomb we built for her. And next to her was a neighboring grandma ghost with whom she could confide and laugh.

They'd spend their days gossiping about their families and playing made-up games. Out of these imaginations, the characters of Grandma Nai and Grandma Muy were born.

Making a queer film in a traditional country like Cambodia was not easy. Instead of scouring the streets or working with professional actors, we approached LGBTQ+ organizations and our own network in the small queer community in Phnom Penh for the casting process. When I first met Saroeun (Grandma Nai), a fun-loving grandmother who has been with her trans husband since before the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s, I instantly fell in love with her charm and warmest of smiles. Bonrotanak (Meng) was known to us for his charisma in beer commercials and the billboards that came with them. We bonded over extensive conversations regarding queer life in Cambodia and how we fit into it. Much like the character, Bonrotanak isn't out to his traditional family—the pressure and fear the character feels are all too familiar to him.

Originally, I was hesitant to cast actors who were too similar to their roles. But during rehearsals, it was apparent that our mutual understanding was crucial to the heart of the film. We never needed to explain our queerness to one another, which allowed us more time and space to play and build upon the world I wrote, ultimately resulting in the irresistible chemistry between the film's Grandma Nai and her grandson.

We spent our first four production days at Wat Kambol, the pagoda in which my Grandma Nai was laid. I went to greet her at her tomb every morning and prayed for good weather. True to her protective nature, for four days, she kept the monsoon rain away. The final day happened to be the Hungry Ghost Festival, and so I brought her flowers that my boyfriend had bought. It appears that Grandma Nai was indeed still looking out for her favorite grandson.

ARTISTIC STATEMENT

“Grandma Nai Who Played Favorites” places us, front and center, at two family gatherings—surrounding a Cambodian person’s most important life decision: choosing a spouse. Setting the film in these events raises the stakes to their highest level, forcing characters into direct confrontation between their deepest desires and their duty to family and traditions.

Nai’s relationship with her neighbor and fellow ghost, Muy, infuses the film with vibrant personalities, empathy, and humor. In my conceptualization of these ghosts, I wanted to grant them full access to their senses and physicality, as if they were simply other humans moving through the world. Their invisibility to other characters sets them apart, allowing them to deliver unfiltered social commentary. Given my naturalistic treatment of these ghosts, I inject subtle horror-inspired elements into the visual design to hint at the fantastical elements.

Music plays a key role in the film. Using three popular ‘60s Cambodian songs in the karaoke scenes not only allows me to tell the story through pure visual storytelling, but also evokes a nostalgia that invites viewers into the film.

So much of queer or Cambodian cinema I’ve seen is plagued with violence, darkness, and fear—I want to contribute a film that places lightness, peculiarity, and joy first. The grandmother in this film might not be a realistic depiction of a living Cambodian grandmother, but in her spirit, she is an embodiment of unconditional love—the kind that instills hope into our hearts.







CAST

Meng Bonrotanak RITH
Nai Saroeun NAY

Pech Sokun Theary TY
Muy Phalla IM
Lin Chansophorn “Rose” BUTH
Viseth Ponleu CHAB

Lai Naryroth SAY
Lee Sophat PEOV
Hong Bophal MEAS
Cheng Thi Rea
Rath Piseth CHHUN
Bopha Sotheara NIN
Samnang Phanna YEM

Nak Sreynak
Nin Sreyney
Sreyla Sela PRUM
Rith Sophanrith PHON
Cousin Justin Justin NG



CREW

Writer/Director/Editor Chheangkea

Producers Daniel MATTES (Anti-Archive)
Karen MADAR (NoMad Productions)

Co-Producers Loy TE
Vincent VILLA

Director of Photography Shyan TAN

First Assistant Director Senghorng “Mio” THONG

Casting Savunthara SENG

Acting Coach Sreylin MEAS

Production Designer Bandiddh PRUM

Costume Designer Phuong NGUYEN

Unit Production Manager Monysak SOU

Location Manager Socheata VAN

Sound Designer/Mixer Vincent VILLA

Colorist Elie AKOKA







ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

Chheangkea is a Cambodia-born filmmaker based in Brooklyn, New York. He earned a BS in Architecture from MIT and an MFA in Filmmaking from the NYU Tisch Graduate Film program, where he was a Dean's Fellow. He is a former Marcie Bloom Fellow and a recipient of the Sundance Asian American Scholarship.

Through his films, Chheangkea seeks to showcase the complexities and nuances of queer and Cambodian stories. His upcoming short film, *GRANDMA NAI WHO PLAYED FAVORITES*, will premiere at the 2025 Sundance Film Festival. His previous short film, *SKIN CAN BREATHE*, was a finalist of the 2022 HBO Max APA Visionaries competition and is now streaming on Max. His debut feature film, *LITTLE PHNOM PENH*, is currently in development, having been selected for the HamptonsFilm Screenwriters Lab, MunichFilmUp, and the NYU Purple List in 2024.

FILMOGRAPHY

Skin Can Breathe (2022, narrative short, 11')
Grandma Nai Who Played Favorites (2025, narrative short, 19')
Little Phnom Penh (in development, narrative feature)





