

NATIONAL

‘Finding Face’ Examines Circumstances of 1999 Acid Attack

BY FRANK RADOSEVICH
THE CAMBODIA DAILY

The music videos show a beautiful young girl swaying slowly to the beat—her hair tossed by a gentle breeze and her smile lighting up the screen.

But that image of a teenage Tat Marina, then a rising karaoke video star, was forever erased Dec 5, 1999 as she spoon-fed soup to her young niece at a food stall outside Olympic market. There, in broad daylight, Tat Marina was pulled to the ground, kicked and doused with more than a liter of nitric acid.

The chemicals—consuming the skin on her face, ears, hair and large swathes of skin on her neck, shoulders and back—left more than 40 percent of her body burned and scarred.

Years later, the day’s events haunted her.

Nightmares robbed her of sleep. Fear of reprisals gripped her days. Her scars drew stares and frightened small children.

“I just feel like they took my life away,” Tat Marina said Tuesday by telephone from the US. “It was a nightmare.”

Now, nearly 10 years later, the notorious and high-profile acid attack on Tat Marina is the subject of a documentary film that examines the case and how it fractured and scarred the lives of the girl and her family when she was only 16.

Filed in Cambodia and the US, “Finding Face” also focuses on the spate of acid attacks against women that followed in the months after the brutal attack on Tat Marina.

The filmmakers, a husband-and-wife team from the US, said they initially set out to shed light on the scourge of acid attacks and the “culture of impunity” in Cambodia that

often surrounds the perpetrators.

They decided to tell Tat Marina’s story after learning of her situation, particularly that no one was ever arrested or prosecuted for the crime.

“She is someone who had a bright future and whose life has been forever changed, obviously, in a fundamental and dramatic way,” said Skyler Fitzgerald, who co-directed and co-produced the nearly 80-minute long documentary film with his wife Patti Duncan. “She was broken for a long time, and she’s been mending herself.”

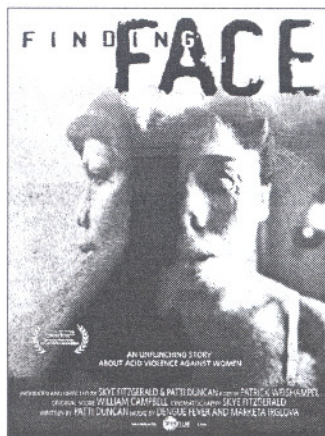
The documentary is scheduled to open today at the International Film Festival and Forum on Human Rights in Geneva. Duncan said no showings are scheduled in Cambodia, given the film’s sensitive subject matter and fear of retribution against its subjects, some of whom still live in Cambodia.

“She is someone who had a bright future and whose life has been forever changed...”

—SKYLER FITZGERALD,
CO-DIRECTOR, CO-PRODUCER

“The last thing that we want is to create a film that will endanger anyone,” she said, calling the project a “challenging one,” given the turbulent blend of pain, sorrow, anger and fear.

In fact, as a precaution, the filmmakers have notified a number of local and international organizations as well as the US Embassy in Phnom Penh and several US representatives about their project and those involved in case anything happens to them. Some of the doc-



Provided by Spin Films

umentary was shot covertly to keep a low profile while in Cambodia.

At the time of the attack, police and Tat Marina’s relatives fingered Khuon Sophal, the wife of then-Council of Ministers’ Undersecretary of State Svay Sitha, as the perpetrator.

In the film, Tat Marina recalls how Svay Sitha made her his mistress; reportedly sending Khuon Sophal into a jealous rage and prompting the attack.

At the time, then-Investigating Judge Mong Mony Chakriya said the Phnom Penh Municipal Court had issued arrest warrants for Khuon Sophal and two unidentified bodyguards, who allegedly took part in the attack on Tat Marina.

Mong Mony Chakriya, now a Supreme Court Judge, said Tuesday that he could not remember the Tat Marina case or the arrest warrant.

In the intervening decade, no one has ever been arrested for the attack on Tat Marina, which left her fighting for her life and horribly disfigured.

Sent abroad for years of plastic surgery and now living with her

older brother and working in the US, Tat Marina, now 25, said she has not returned to Cambodia since she left, and that, out of fear for her and her family’s safety, she does not plan on ever returning. She and her family have also largely abandoned hope of seeing those responsible brought to justice.

“We hardly talk about it anymore,” said Tat Segundo, her 39-year-old brother. “I keep my distance. She keeps her distance. Even though we live in the same house.”

Contact details for Svay Sitha were unavailable Tuesday and a man answering Khuon Sophal’s phone said “hello” several times but did not respond to questions by a reporter.

Phay Siphon, a spokesman for the Council of Ministers confirmed Svay Sitha is currently a secretary of state for the Council, but said the body had not discussed the Tat Marina case during his tenure with the Council.

Tat Marina said her feelings about the film, of which she has seen only an unfinished version, are a mixture of excitement and fear. She hopes that in the end, the telling of her story will end attacks of this nature or ensure they no longer go unpunished.

“I don’t want that to happen to anybody,” she said. “I don’t want anybody to feel what I have right now.”

Uch Sokhan, Chamkar Mon district police chief, said Tuesday that there have been no new developments in his district concerning the acid attack on Tat Marina a decade ago.

“There is nothing new. That case has been quiet,” he said.

(Additional reporting by Phann Ana)