



PRIX SACD  
SEMAINE DE LA CRITIQUE  
CANNES 2016

# DIAMOND ISLAND

កោះពេជ្រ

A FILM BY DAVY CHOU





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AURORA FILMS presents



**PRIX SACD**  
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# DIAMOND ISLAND

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A film by **DAVY CHOU**

FRANCE / CAMBODIA / GERMANY / QATAR / THAILAND

1H43 • 2016 • 1.85-2K • COLOR • SOUND 5.1

*Photos can be downloaded at  
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Diamond Island is a symbol of Cambodia's future, a sprawling, ultra-modern paradise for the rich on the river in Phnom Penh.

Like many other country boys, Bora, 18, is lured from his village to work on the construction of this property developers' dream.

There, he forges new friendships and is even reunited with his charismatic older brother Solei, who disappeared five years ago.

Solei introduces Bora to the exciting world of Cambodia's privileged urban youth, with its girls, its nightlife and its illusions.



## INTERVIEW DAVY CHOU

**/ Your documentary, *Golden Slumbers*, dealt with a cinematic tradition, which although now lost was significantly concerned with genre movies. Was that experience adequate preparation for dealing with fiction in a feature film format?**

To my mind, each film is a natural extension of the other with regard to the issue of Cambodia's here and now, and its youth. In *Golden Slumbers*, a documentary that went looking for traces of Cambodia's cinematic heritage that may not have been the subject matter, but the challenge was to start in the present to bring out the past. The part played by young people was peripheral but crucial, reflecting a tension between amnesia and awakening. When I finished the film, I was obsessed with the idea of making a feature with youth as its fulcrum, in order to fully explore the present. Other than that, formal and aesthetic issues seem to me to be strictly the same in documentaries and fiction.

**/ At what point did you start writing *Diamond Island*? And how did you integrate your short *Cambodia 2099* (2014)**

**into that process?**

I spent 2012 working on a feature film script, but when I went back to Cambodia in 2013, I realized it didn't work and I gave up on it. Even though it was nothing like *Diamond Island*, it was a movie about Cambodia's youth. I went back to Diamond Island for the first time since 2010, when I shot the footage that's at the end of *Golden Slumbers*, and it just leapt out at me—that was where I had to set my movie. Without a script and in the knowledge that developing a feature would take another 2-3 years, I began shooting *Cambodia 2099*, coming up with a story set on Diamond Island in a few days. It was vital for me to reverse the usual process by shooting first to release the inspiration for a feature. Writing *Diamond Island* took another 18 months, mostly alone until Claire Maugendre came on board with a fresh take on the project, which we finished writing together.

**/ What does this place represent to you? A mutant space, the brutal and sudden manifestation of globalization and modernity in a country that has not totally come**



**to terms with its past?**

It's a place that embodies more than any other the impassioned and cruel relationship between youth and the myth of modernity in action in the country. The starting point was the connection between Diamond Island and, on the one hand, the people building it and, on the other hand, those who meet up there when night falls. Hundreds of young kids ride around and around the island on scooters, staring wide-eyed at unfinished buildings and hoardings that depict a future Cambodia that resembles the Champs-Élysées. There is a kind of brutal outburst of modernity in a country that wasn't used to it at all. It's as if the country has been thrust into the future, and young people born during a period of deprivation stemming from historical tragedies are totally disoriented.

The movie is structured around the desire, at once violent, naive and immediate, that is engendered at every level of society by this outburst of modernity.

**/ Does this abrupt outbreak also serve to eliminate a past that has not been completely assimilated?**

What is surprising on Diamond Island, and by extension in every major construction project that has grown up in Cambodia in recent years, is the complete absence of traces of the past, of history and culture. I'm struck by this ongoing amnesia, sweeping the past under the rug while embracing modernity. I thought it would be interesting for the movie to follow that path by immersing itself fully in this new world, even if vestiges of the past subsist: the countryside

at the beginning, hints of what the island used to be, and signs of the past before the Khmer Rouge. But no more. The corollary of this blind leap into the future is the erasure of the past.

**/ I imagine you had to rely on non-professional actors. Where and how did you find them?**

There are practically no professional actors in Cambodia. The TV and movie industry is still in its infancy and the dominant acting style is very overblown, so I had to find young people with no experience in front of the camera. For four months, with my team, I scoured Phnom Penh and the surrounding districts for my characters. I spent a lot of time on construction sites, outside factories and in clubs frequented by workers. Likewise

on Diamond Island itself. I learned that casting on spec is all about trusting your intuition. I spotted the actor who plays Bora when I was riding a motorbike down a street where he hawked for taxi-vans. There was a twinkle in his eye that caught mine. Dy, Bora's friend, really was a construction worker on Diamond Island. I also found Aza, the female lead, on Diamond Island, when she was hanging out with her girlfriends one evening. And Solei, the big brother, is a very talented painter I had heard about. The actor who plays Virak, the leader of the gang, was pretty much the only one with acting experience. He's a clown and he was cast by Georges Bigot in his production of Hélène Cixous's play, *The Terrible but Unfinished Story of Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia*.



**/ Did the actors' personal stories influence the narrative?**

I had not in any way planned for the actors' personalities to transform the characters to such an extent. When you write a character, it's a projection of something. It is fascinating when that projection encounters the individual reality of an actor, with his or her story, personality and emotions. In my script, Solei was definitely less mysterious and sensitive than Nov Cheanick's portrayal of him. Samnang Nut, the clown, brought an element

of buffoonery to Virak. And, with regard to Aza, I'm convinced the character I came up with was much less interesting than the version the actress brings to the screen.

**/ So she remodeled the story to some extent?**

In the script, we took a gamble on a character appearing in the final third to take the film somewhere new. I get the sense that it was her personality, a blend of vitality and insolence, which allowed our detour to work,

as if a hurricane were suddenly blowing through the movie. In fact, we even renamed the character Aza, which is the actress's real name. In the same way, meeting Nuon Sobon, the actor who plays Bora, was a decisive moment. As the actors had no experience and no stated ambition to act in a movie, we spent several months rehearsing with them and my assistant Meas Sreylin. At first, they weren't even rehearsals but workshops teaching them how to move, look at each other and express emotions. Meanwhile,

I was getting to know the actors and adapting their characters to them. I spent so long in those sessions filming Bora's face that, by the end, I'm pretty sure I knew every tiny modulation of emotion by heart. One of the most memorable scenes to shoot was the kiss because Sobon had never kissed a girl before. On set, I shot lots of takes where he stopped short just before the actual kiss. It created a kind of euphoric tension, with the whole crew waiting for the first ever kiss of our leading man. Obviously, we only got it once, that real first kiss, and I'm deeply moved every time I watch that scene.

**/ You chose a fairly classical plot, but you set it in a rapidly evolving environment.**

Yes, I decided to keep the story simple and classical, following one main character, Bora, and weaving a web around him of colorful characters who all develop during the movie and enable us to capture this world in motion. At the same time, I played with slipping less classical forms into the film, such as promotional or YouTube videos, drone shots, day-for-night scenes, and some "magical" special effects. The point was to feel free to make a movie that is generous both in its form and with its characters, and not to worry about going off on a tangent.

**/ This cross-fertilization, sometimes within a single shot, echoes the reality of Phnom Penh and Diamond Island, where a construction site, poverty and ostenta-**

**-tious wealth can all be found in the same frame.**

Which explains the frequent use of wide shots to keep the characters rooted in that backdrop, and to get a constant sense of the dialogue between the island and its young inhabitants, while at the same time keeping our perspective. When it comes down to it, the film is all about distance and proximity: Bora constantly tries to reduce the distance that separates him from his older brother, Solei, all to no avail; Bora inexorably drifts away from his construction worker buddies, including his best friend, Dy, despite his promise to watch over him at the start of the film; and, in a more but not completely anecdotal way, there is the distance that needs to be bridged between boys and girls, as shown by the gentle caress of a hand on a tummy in the night. I didn't make any of that up. I just spent whole evenings observing the courting rituals of couples on Diamond Island.

**/ There are two scenes that clearly derive from video games.**

Diamond Island is a completely fake world. It's the reign of the superficial in a country that is still one of the poorest in the world, all a short distance from Phnom Penh, which still bears the scars of history. In developing the look of the movie, I was immediately drawn to virtual worlds and the issue of digital imagery. With my director of photography, Thomas Favel, we explored commercial cinema's rare experimentations in digital

filmmaking. There are Michael Mann's latest movies, and *Miami Vice* in particular, playing on color and the image's very substance. Or Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers*, with its fluorescent aesthetic, or the Wachowskis' *Speed Racer*. Even so, these examples were empowering to us, encouraging us to dialogue with the images of video games, contemporary music videos, such as Kendrick Lamar's, as well as mangas, and the work of visual artist James Turrell. Similarly, in terms of the soundtrack, with sound designer Vincent Villa, we approached the different spaces on Diamond Island as so many individual identities. Likewise, our approach to recording day and night was different. In some scenes, we also pushed the voices and ambient sound toward more artificiality, such as in the deliberately distinctive ADR, with hushed voices appearing to be both close and removed, but always with this idea of reaching for the truth despite the artifice.

**/ Or extracting the truth through artifice?**

Absolutely. But rather than the truth of reality, I would suggest it's emotional truth that guides this movie. Deep down, by means of a non-judgmental gaze, I wanted to capture the characters' vision of their environment. I wanted audiences to feel the desire and awe of a 20-year-old country boy who has never been confronted by the capital city and who suddenly discovers a phony world that provokes powerful emotions within him.



It has to be said that the first time you go to Diamond Island, there's a sense of being on a trip around a movie lot, like a Universal Studios tour. The place kindles a fantastical dimension that gradually infiltrates events. It's this hypnotic aspect of the island that slowly immerses the characters in a dreamlike crucible of sounds, colors and images. I met hundreds of young people when I was casting the movie and, every time, I saw that Diamond Island was the place of their wildest dreams. The movie is about those dreams, as well as the disillusionment that is an inherent part of any spell.

**/ The nightmare concealed beneath the dream?**

Yes. There is a discreet and inexorable progression toward tragedy. I didn't want to show things in dichotomous terms, but rather

slip a sense of anxiety under the colorful, fluorescent images in testimony to underlying truths, while our focus is on the surface, as if poetry and nightmare were walking hand in hand. The film is also a morality tale, which asks what is the price to pay. I wanted to find a tone of tragic lightness, blending joy and melancholy. There is an attraction toward the end of things, and that is also the crux of the movie, in respect of the loss of innocence, and leaving things and people behind as we go through life. That's what the character of Bora learns.

**/ With regard to the music, once more, you introduce a wide palette of sounds and compositions. Who did you work with?**

Two musician friends, Christophe Musset and Jérémie Arcache, former members of the



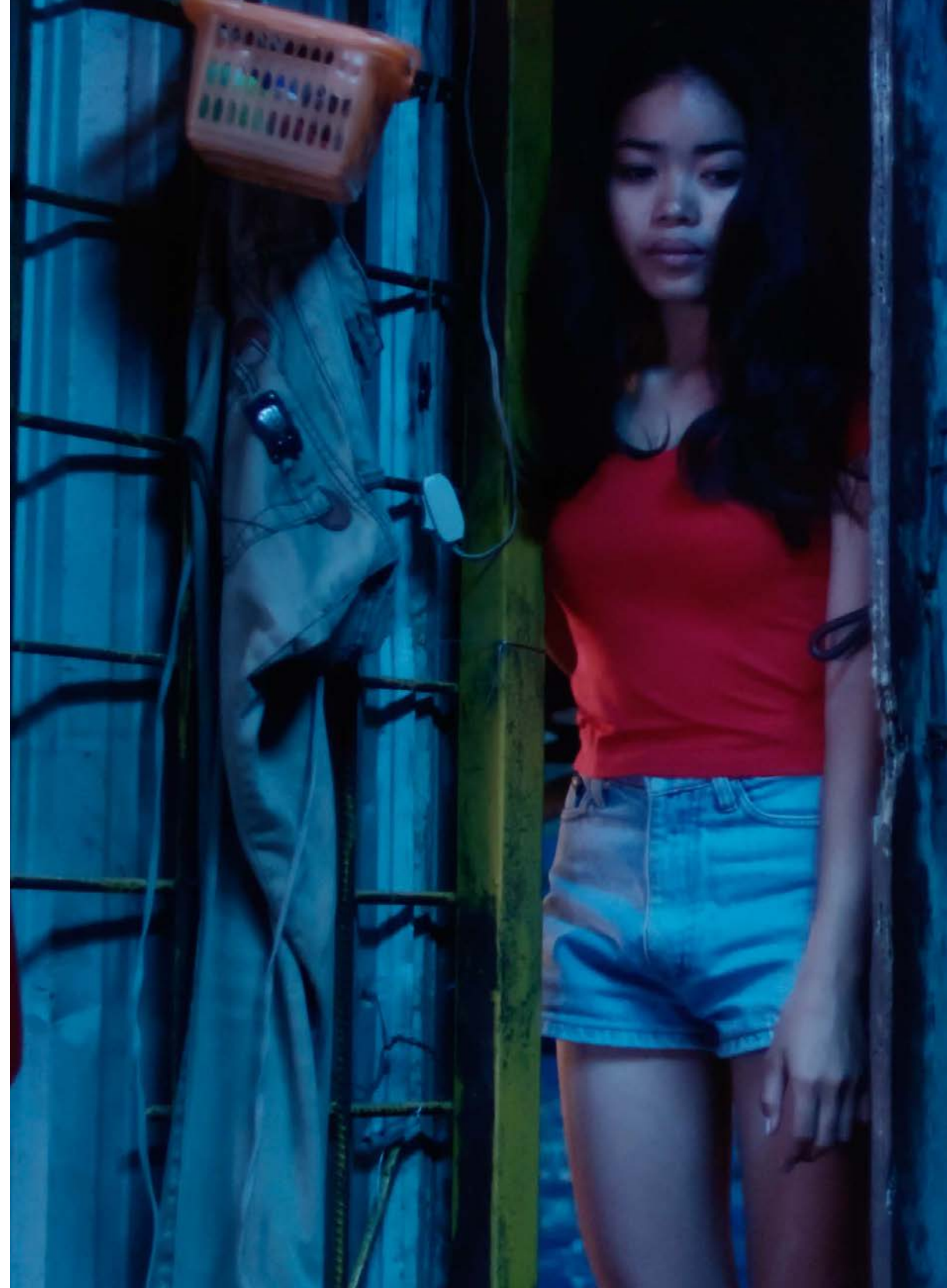
band, Revolver. We talked a lot before we started work and they sent me some early compositions while I was still prepping, so I was able to use them on the shoot, which proved especially helpful since we were simultaneously shooting and editing. I don't quite know how that impacted on my approach on set, but the emotional color created by the music definitely sets the tone of the movie. We decided not to be scared of emotions, empathy or even grandiloquence. We wanted the score to be heterogeneous as well, combining orchestral colors and synthetic colors with magmas of sounds and clear notes rising above all that. Together, the two guys came up with wonderful music that, to my mind, totally embraces the spirit of the movie.

**/ You mentioned the burgeoning movie industry in Cambodia. Do you shoot**

**there partly to experience an environment where anything is possible?**

After *Golden Slumbers*, I asked myself whether I wanted to shoot in France or Cambodia, and I followed my inclination to build on the documentary process. I realized that going back to Cambodia, for me, meant confronting the issue of astonishment—the possibilities of a first time—which is a common thread running through the story of the film, the characters' stories and the location. ■

*Interview recorded in Paris, April 2016.*







## DIAMOND ISLAND

Diamond Island—Koh Pich in Khmer—is an island hugging the shoreline of Phnom Penh, at the confluence of the Mekong and Tonle Bassac rivers. In olden times, this alluvial spit of land provided shelter for a few fishing and farming families. In 2006, after an agreement was reached between a Chinese investment fund and the Overseas Cambodian Investment Company (OCIC), a subsidiary of Canadia, one of Cambodia's largest banks, those families were displaced, with the support of the government, in order to allow the development of real estate projects with an accumulated value of several billion dollars.

The stated aim is to make Diamond Island a showcase for Cambodia's development and attractiveness to global investors. The island draws the crowds, and not only from its core-target of middle-class and wealthy buyers. The young people of Phnom Penh

have made it one of their favorite meeting spots.

One hundred hectares of land have been developed. The Greco-Roman style city hall, the suburban villas of Elite Town, the Canadia International School and various leisure facilities are already fully functioning, but the more ambitious projects, such as the Elysées and Casa Meridian luxury condominium buildings, the Riviera, a replica of Singapore's Marina Bay Sands, and the 555-meter high Diamond Tower, are still under construction or at the planning stage.

Diamond Island is the symbol of the internationalization of construction methods in South-East Asia, characterized by the withdrawal of municipal planning and the multiplication of private projects that identify new districts attractive to foreign investors and solvent locals. ■

## CREW

Directed by **Davy Chou** • Written by **Davy Chou**, in collaboration with **Claire Maugendre** • Produced by **Charlotte Vincent** • Coproduced by **Davy Chou, Hanneke van der Tas, Michel Merkt, Consuelo Frauenfelder, Soros Sukhum** • DOP **Thomas Favel** • Sound **Vincent Villa** • Editing **Laurent Levene** • Music **Jérémie Arcache** and **Christophe Musset** • Art direction **Kanitha Tith** • Color grading and VFX **Yannig Willmann** • Lighting **Bertrand Prévot** • Set design **Samnang Pak** • Costume design **Samphors Chorn** • First director's assistant **Olbek Martel** • Actors' coach and second director's assistant **Sreylin Meas** • Script supervisor **Chamroern Phoeurk** • Production manager **Sébastien Lepinay** • Postproduction manager **Katia Khazak** • Produced by **Aurora Films** • Coproduced by **Arte France Cinéma, Anti-Archive, Vandertastic, Michel Merkt, Garidi Films, Vycky Films, 185 Films, VS Service** • With the participation of **Arte France, l'Aide aux Cinémas du Monde - CNC - Ministère des Affaires étrangères et du Développement international - Institut Français, CNC and Filmförderungsanstalt, Doha Film Institute, Hubert Bals Fund, Asian Cinema Fund, Normandie Region** • **Arte International Prize at the APM of BIFF** • International Sales **Les Films du Losange**

## CAST

**Bora Sobon Nuon** • **Solei Cheanick Nov** • **Aza Madeza Chhem** • **Dy Mean Korn** • **Virak Samnang Nut** • **Lakena Samnang Khim** • **Mesa Sophyna Meng** • **Lida Jany Min** • **James Sreyroth Dom** • **Blue Batham Oun** • **Pinky Sreyleap Hang** • **Ana Phara Phon**





*From left to right :*

DY - MEAN KORN  
BORA - SOBON NUON  
VIRAK - SAMNANG NUT  
MESA - SOPHYNA MENG

# DAVY CHOU

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- 2016 -

## **DIAMOND ISLAND**

(Feature film)

*Critics' Week - Cannes 2016*

- 2014 -

## **CAMBODIA 2099**

(Short film)

*The Director's Fortnight - Cannes 2014*

*International Film Festival Rotterdam*

*Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival*

*Grand Prize Curtas Vila do Conde Festival*

*Grand Prize Hiroshima Festival*

*Grand Prize Vendôme Film Festival*

- 2011 -

## **GOLDEN SLUMBERS**

(Feature documentary)

*Berlinale Forum 2012*

*Busan International Film Festival 2011*

- 2008 -

## **EXPIRED**

(Short documentary)

*Entrevues Belfort International Film Festival 2008*

- 2006 -

## **DAVY CHOU'S FIRST FILM**

(Short film)



