



Nerakhoon (Documentary -- Laos)

A Pandinlao Films presentation in co-production with P.O.V./American Documentary. Produced by Ellen Kuras, Flora Fernandez-Marengo. Executive producer, Cara Mertes. Co-producer, Wilder W. Knight II, Neda Armian, Gini Reticker. Directed by Ellen Kuras. Co-director, Thavisouk Phrasavath. Written by Kuras, Phrasavath.

By [SCOTT FOUNDAS](#)

The wounds inflicted by the U.S. military's covert Vietnam-era operations in Laos still run deep, as evidenced by "The Betrayal" ("Nerakhoon"), which details one Lao family's harrowing efforts to start a new life in America. More than two decades in the making, this heartfelt debut docu feature by veteran cinematographer [Ellen Kuras](#) brings an affecting personal dimension to a sprawling sociopolitical narrative, intimately detailing how the agendas designed to advance the interests of nations can destroy individual lives. Results signal a long, well-traveled life on the fest circuit and on television, with limited theatrical play also a possibility.

It was in the mid-1980s, while seeking a Lao language tutor for a planned docu about another refugee family, that Kuras first encountered the charismatic [Thavisouk Phrasavath](#) (credited here as pic's co-director, co-writer and editor) and decided to turn her camera upon him instead.

Back in Laos, Phrasavath's father had worked for the CIA choosing targets inside the country for U.S. bombing runs. Following the fall of the CIA-backed Royal Lao Army to the Communist Pathet Lao in 1975, the Phrasavaths became personae non grata, with Thavi's father being shipped off to a re-education camp and his mother fleeing the country with eight of her 10 children in tow.

After a brief period in Thailand, the family applies for asylum in the U.S. and lands on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn, where their vision of a gold-paved promised land quickly gives way to the harsh realities of poverty, street gangs and a cramped tenement apartment shared with a Cambodian family of six.

Pic then winds its way toward the present, with Kuras managing to have her camera running at just the right times to capture several stranger-than-fiction dramatic moments, including a series of unexpected revelations about the family's presumed-dead patriarch.

As a d.p., Kuras' work has included multi-pic stints with such visually venturesome directors as [Martin Scorsese](#), Michael Gondry and [Spike Lee](#), so it's hardly a surprise that "The Betrayal" offers a higher level of aesthetic involvement than most documentaries. In addition to the expected talking heads and news-reel footage, Kuras captures many lyrical images of everyday life both in Laos and in Brooklyn (where, in one particularly memorable moment, Thavi and his brothers go fishing for dinner in [Prospect Park](#)). Mix of multiple different film and video formats further enhances pic's varied visual textures.

Working from what must have been an enormity of raw footage, Kuras and Phrasavath have assembled "The Betrayal" in a free-associative fashion that, particularly in the opening half-hour, jumps back and forth in time between Laos and America and eschews on-screen supertitles and other conventional documentary storytelling aids.

Though an admirable attempt to allow the characters to tell their own story in their own voices, docu may be a bit too freely associative, as it becomes difficult at times to identify individual characters (some of whose names aren't even given until well after we've met them) and the precise order of events. Pic's second half, which proceeds in a more linear fashion, is resolutely gripping.

Camera (color, Super 8mm/16mm/Super 16mm-to-HD video), Kuras; editor, Phrasavath; sound, [Ellen Bruno](#), [Ruth Cullen](#), Stu Deutsch, Peter Hunt, [Judy Karp](#), Kuras, [Etienne Sauret](#), [JT Takagi](#). Reviewed at Ocean Avenue screening room, Santa Monica, Calif., Jan. 13, 2008. (In Sundance Film Festival -- competing.) Running time: 96 MIN.