

A DOCUMENTARY FILM BY JOEL GERSHON

CIRQUE DU CAMBODIA



JURY PRIZE WINNER
CIRCUS
INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL
2021

2022
berkshire
international
film festival
AUDIENCE
AWARD WINNER

WINNER
AUDIENCE AWARD - FEATURE
MIDDLEBURY
NEW FILMMAKERS
FESTIVAL
2021

Bangkok International
Documentary Awards
BEST FIRST TIME PRODUCER
BKKDOC 2021

SEBASTOPOL
DOCUMENTARY
FILM
FESTIVAL
2022

OFFICIAL SELECTION
DisOrient Asian
American Film
Festival of Oregon
2022

OFFICIAL SELECTION
UNITED NATIONS
ASSOCIATION
FILM FESTIVAL
2020

OFFICIAL SELECTION
Sydney
Festival
2024

OPENING FILM
CAMBODIA
TOWN FILM FESTIVAL
Official Selection
2021

Facebook/Instagram
@cirqueducambodia

www.cirqueducambodia.com
Trailers: youtu.be/yTfLB-gkRf4
and bit.ly/3Xwq33x

A photograph of two young men standing in front of the Angkor Wat temple complex in Cambodia. The man on the left has long hair tied back and is wearing a black t-shirt. The man on the right has short dark hair and a mustache, wearing a dark tank top. The background shows the iconic stone towers of the temple under a clear sky.

Cirque du Cambodia follows the journey of two teenagers who live out every child's fantasy – **to run away and join the circus**. But it isn't just any circus they hope to join: They dream of taking the stage with Cirque du Soleil, the largest theatrical company in the world.



AWARDS

Jury Prize 2023 DC/MD/VA Film Festival

Jury Prize 2021 Circus Int'l Film Festival

Audience Award 2022 Berkshire Int'l Film Festival

Audience Award 2021 Middlebury New Filmmakers Festival

Best First-Time Producer 2021 Bangkok Int'l Documentary Festival

DIRECTOR/PRODUCER/SCREENINGS AND DISTRIBUTION **JOEL GERSHON**



After graduating from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, Joel worked as a producer for the groundbreaking Air America Radio network, working directly for Rachel Maddow and with such talents as Mark Maron and Al Franken.

In 2005, Joel became a reporter for the International Herald Tribune in Bangkok, fulfilling his lifelong dream of living and working abroad as a journalist. He then worked as the regional correspondent for The Hollywood Reporter before moving on to producing broadcast news pieces and short documentaries that

have aired internationally on CNN and Current TV and screened at various film festivals. Throughout his career, Joel has had the privilege of interviewing a variety of notable people, including Al Pacino, Jeremy Irons, Jeff Bridges, Amitabh Bachchan and Nobel laureate Wangari Maathai.

Joel later worked as a national television reporter and producer and as a university professor in Thailand, teaching media studies at one of the nation's top schools.

After 12 years of living abroad, Joel moved back to the U.S. in 2017 after taking a teaching job at American University in Washington, D.C.

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* **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

Originally a New Yorker, I moved to Bangkok to work as a print journalist and television reporter/producer from 2005-2017, where I was captivated by the many fascinating cultures I encountered throughout Asia. But it was in 2011, when I visited Cambodia, that I came across something that struck me in the most magical and unexpected way. With few expectations, I went to a local tourist attraction at a special arts school, *Phare Ponleu Selpak*, in a small Cambodian village.



There, I witnessed a circus show performed by local youths — some of whom were orphans, others recovering drug addicts, but all with little hope of a bright future. The palpable joy on the performers' faces (and the audiences') gave me goosebumps, and I knew right then and there that I had to capture those faces, the mind-boggling circus tricks and the incredible stories of these young people's lives. Little did I know that telling the story of this special circus would consume my life for the next decade!

Phare's circus is part of the "social circus" movement, which teaches circus arts to at-risk youths who come from challenging backgrounds. I quickly learned about the benefits that come with circus training: excellent physical fitness, a sense of responsibility and teamwork, an understanding of the importance of staying focused and accomplishing goals. I grew to understand how social circus programs serve as an effective way for vulnerable youths to escape poverty and potential danger and to have a chance at a better life. The importance of the circus and the arts in these young people's lives was something I hadn't seen, heard or thought of before, and it deeply moved me.

As I learned more about *Phare*, I met two of its top students, Dina and Sopha, who were a cut above the rest in terms of their abilities and dedication. They were so talented that they were accepted to train at an elite circus school based in Montreal. That set into motion their quest to attain a seemingly impossible dream: to perform with Cirque du Soleil, also based in Montreal.

With a narrative this compelling, I knew Dina and Sopha's unique journey — from Cambodia to Cirque — would make a powerful and dramatic film. I wanted to share their determination and hope and promote the concept of the social circus. I hoped that others could see the importance of creativity and art in overcoming the many challenges that vulnerable children around the world face.

– Joel Gershon

Screenings

2020 United Nations Association Film Festival

Palo Alto, CA/virtual — Oct. 20, 2020 **World Premiere**

2021 Circus International Film Festival

(virtual) — April 17, 2021 **Jury Prize Winner, Best Feature**

2021 Big Apple Film Festival

New York, NY /virtual — May 27, 2021

2021 Middlebury New Filmmakers Festival

Middlebury, VT — Aug. 20, 2021 **Audience Award Winner, Best Feature**

2021 Cambodian Town Film Festival

Long Beach, CA — Sept. 25, 2021 **Opening film**

2021 Bangkok Documentary Awards and Festival

Bangkok, Thailand — Dec. 17, 2021 **Winner, Best First-time Producer**

2022 DisOrient Asian-American Film Festival

Eugene, OR (virtual) — April, 1-10, 2022

2022 Asian Night Market

Eugene, OR — May 20, 2022

2022 Cambodia International Film Festival

Phnom Penh, Cambodia, (3 screenings) — June 29, July 2-3, 2022.

2022 Sebastopol Documentary Film Festival

Sebastopol, CA — March 26, 2022

2022 Berkshire International Film Festival

Great Barrington, MA — June 4, 2022 **Audience Award Winner, Best Feature**

2022 Sonoma International Film Festival (Summerfest)

Sonoma, CA — August 5, 2022

The Hippodrome Theatre

Gainesville, FL — Nov. 9, 2022

2023 Takoma Park Film Series

Takoma Park, MD — Feb. 10, 2023

2023 DC/MD/VA International Film Festival

Washington, DC — Feb. 25, 2023

2024 Sydney Festival

Sydney, Australia — Jan. 16, 2024

2024 Association of Asian Studies Annual Conference

Seattle, WA — Mar. 16, 2024



* **PRESS**

[Surrender to the Flow Magazine — Fall 2023](#)

[View PDF](#)

[SOVRIN Magazine \(Khmer language\) —1/2023](#)

[View PDF](#)

[Nikkei Asian Review—1/16/21](#)

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Life-Arts/Arts/From-Cambodian-rice-fields-to-the-big-top>

[Khmer Times—12/24/20](#)

www.khmertimeskh.com/50796942/circus-film-juggles-festivals/

[Hideaway Circus Podcast — 11/12/20](#)

hideawaycircus.com/podcast/2020/11/12/episode-91-joel-gershon-director-of-cirque-du-cambodia

[KWMR Radio—10/20/20](#)

archive.org/details/joel-gershon-cambodia

[The Mercury News—9/30/20](#)

www.mercurynews.com/2020/09/30/sf-bay-area-exploding-with-film-fests-in-october-heres-a-rundown/

[Voice of America—10/17/20](#)

bit.ly/3wr377u

[Nikkei Asian Review—6/17/17](#)

asia.nikkei.com/Life-Arts/Life/Circus-shows-temple-tourists-another-side-of-Cambodia

[Cambodia Daily—5/21/16](#)

www.cambodiadaily.com/news/flying-high-weekend-112816/

[Phnom Penh Post—11/8/13](#) www.phnompenhpost.com/7days/...





* **TOPIC OVERVIEW**

Although it is not widely known, circus training of children who face challenging life circumstances, or "social circus," has emerged as a novel and effective approach to help these youth. The movement uses the dynamism and daredevilry of the circus arts to engage marginalized and disillusioned youth, providing them with opportunities and skills to better their lives. For some, the circus ultimately provides jobs that can lead to careers in circus. For others, learning circus tricks like juggling or acrobatics can lead to greater life lessons — how to take risks, how to work and perform with others, how to set goals and focus on reaching them — all learned in an alternative, yet viable way.

Over the past few decades, social circus programs have been created all over the world, from St. Louis to South Africa, and have been established in countries throughout Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. By chronicling Sopha and Dina's journey, *Cirque du Cambodia* hopes to spotlight this growing social circus movement, depicting what a difference it can make in the lives of children in violence-ridden or poverty-stricken areas.



ADDITIONAL SOCIAL CIRCUS RESOURCES:

American Circus Educators
www.americancircuseducators.org
American Youth Circus
www.americanyouthcircus.org
Social Circus Day
www.socialcircusday.org
Circus Harmony
www.circusharmony.org



FULL SYNOPSIS

Cirque du Cambodia follows the journey of Sopha Nem and Dina Sok, two young men who live out every child's fantasy – to run away and join the circus. But it isn't just any circus they hope to join. They dream of taking the stage with *Cirque du Soleil*, the largest theatrical company in the world. And it isn't just any home they are running away from.

Sopha and Dina grew up among the lush green rice fields and dusty dirt roads of Cambodia, outside the town of Battambang. Although Cambodia's ancient civilization was one of the most prosperous in the world, Cambodia's more recent history has been characterized by chaos and almost total destruction. In the 1970s, during the Khmer Rouge regime, almost 2 million people were killed, with many buried in mass graves in the infamous "killing fields." Since then, the country has been recovering, yet it still suffers from stark poverty. Many Cambodians are below the poverty line and children are often forced to leave school to work in the fields or beg on the streets.

Dina and Sopha lived lives like most other children in their country. As a child, Dina worked on the streets, collecting recyclable trash to sell, in order to help support their family. Sopha's family barely made ends meet with 12 siblings squeezed into a small home with just a few rooms and chickens and geese running about outside. But in this challenging landscape, Sopha and Dina's school, *Phare Ponleu Selpak*, served as a beacon of hope. *Phare* is a school for the arts where lessons are not quite "by the book." Students may be juggling balls one day, perfecting handstands and flying off a trapeze the next. Here, the younger generations in Cambodia are not only moving forward, they are soaring.

Phare Ponleu Selpak means "Brightness of the Arts," and the school's purpose is to educate young Cambodians in the arts, something the Khmer Rouge had tried to stamp out with brutality. The regime routinely executed artists, musicians, dancers and other artisans as untrustworthy infiltrators.

During this time, a group of young Cambodians who had fled the genocide to live in a refugee camp in Thailand, found that art lessons provided a rare sense of solace from the violence all around them and the deprivation of life in the camp. When peace finally was established in the early 1990s, this group of friends established *Phare* to provide healing and opportunity for the younger generations of Cambodians.

Their hope was that art, music, dance and drama could flourish again in their country. Its social circus program came later and is now one of its most successful, with its students performing in mesmerizing circus shows that are popular with tourists and locals alike.

Even among these gifted performers, Sopha and Dina stand out. They can do it all — juggling, tight-rope walking, Chinese hoops, break-dancing, acrobatics, even a bit of clowning — and do it better than their peers. In 2011, after eight years of training at *Phare*, they take a chance and applied to the National Circus School of Montreal, considered to be the best circus school in the world and the training ground for many performers who go on to the biggest of big tops – Cirque du Soleil, whose global headquarters are located just across the street. Not only are Sopha and Dina accepted, but they receive full scholarships.

This is a chance of a lifetime for the two teenagers, one they cannot pass up. But taking that chance will mean leaving everything they know behind – their families, their school, their friends, their country, their language, even the warm tropical climate they are so used to.

Bravely, they arrive in Montreal in the fall of 2011, they train relentlessly at the circus school for the next five years. Sopha becomes an incredibly strong-arm balancer and a deft acrobat; Dina develops into a steely-eyed juggler and a master tightrope walker, who can also rap, beatbox and breakdance. Over time, they develop into full-fledged world-class circus artists. During school breaks, Sopha gets gigs at amusement parks in Canada and the U.S., and Dina gets to perform during the opening ceremonies of the Pan American Games. But Cirque du Soleil remains just out of their reach.

And the circus life, though, is not without its risks. Sopha and Dina suffer minor injuries throughout their training and witness much worse.

While pushing their bodies to their limits at school, Sopha and Dina find that their lives outside the tents in Montreal require even more dexterity and determination. The high cost of living on a very tight budget, new languages to learn, even the weather are initially tough to adjust to, as they were not used to the harsh Quebec winters coming from place with tropical weather. But before long, they find their family — a family of acrobats and trapeze artists, who, like them, have also circus dreams.

2016 proves to be a momentous year for the pair. Just a few months before they are set to finally graduate from the circus school, and almost five years since they left home, Sopha and Dina return to Cambodia without telling anyone, thrilling everyone back home with a surprise visit. After so many years away from home, the two catch up with their families, see childhood friends, eat the food they love, sing karaoke and visit the ancient ruins of Angkor Wat.

Finally, Sopha and Dina graduate, and it's time to see whether they can make it professionally. Will either of these two make it to the biggest big top and perform with Cirque du Soleil? You'll have to watch the film to find out!







#artseducationworks

* SOCIAL IMPACT

Cirque du Cambodia is the authoritative film promoting the concept of social circus. While not overly pedantic, the film educates viewers about the incredible difference such programs can make in the lives of children growing up in poverty and instability. The film shows that once children are given the opportunity and tools to become valuable members of society, they avoid the pitfalls too often associated with under-served youth. This is the key to the betterment of our society as a whole.

During Covid, we helped raise funds for *Phare* through screening benefits and we continue to publicize the school's efforts during Q&A's at film festivals and on social media. The funds have gone towards *Phare* directly and towards scholarships to help subsidize student performers who show extraordinary talent to help them achieve their goals.

Social circus proves how these alternative methods of reaching out to vulnerable children can yield enormously beneficial results, and we are honored to help spread the good word about this approach.

