



2009  
SAN JOAQUIN

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# A Cinematic Endeavor

FILMMAKER  
SOPHOAN SORN  
RAISES THE  
CULTURAL BAR  
IN SAN JOAQUIN

by PATRICIA KUTZA

CINEMA BUFFS can look forward to seeing an interesting array of films at the First International San Joaquin Film Festival, to be held in Stockton during the first week of June. It's a good bet, however, that none of the film story lines will be as compelling as the real life story of the festival's founding director, Sophoan Sorn. »



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—Sophoan Sorn

Determined to expand the film and arts community in San Joaquin, Sorn has orchestrated the San Joaquin Valley’s premier international film festival, showcasing over forty films from fourteen countries around the world. “It’s been exciting to see the interest generated so far,” says Sorn. “We’ve received film entries from Australia, India, South Africa, Slovakia, and Iceland, to name a few. Our Festival’s Board of Directors view [the films] and then vote for the selections that we will screen at the festival.”

The multi-genre festival’s films will range from comedy to documentary to drama, with global shorts and two cinema tributes to Latin America and Israel that will open and close the festival.

Growing up in what Sorn calls the ‘salad bowl’ of Stockton, after immigrating with his family from a life of Cambodian refugee camps, his bio reads like a marathon to learn all there is worth knowing about the visual arts, namely photography and cinematography.

“We were a part of that great immigration of people from many cultures in the early nineties, and thanks to ESL [English as a Second Language] classes, I was speaking fluent English six months later,” he says. By age 18, he had started Sophoan Sorn Productions, where his photographic portfolio came to the attention of Dr. Robert Benedetti, executive director of the Jacoby Center for Public Service and Civic Leadership at the University of the Pacific. Benedetti was directing an oral history project, “Stockton Speaks,” and needed a photographer for the interviewees.

“Sophoan was very effective in capturing the spirit of the people we profiled,” says Benedetti. From Sorn’s point of view, this experience was pivotal. “I would do my work, eavesdrop on the stories of nine different ethnic groups, and hear the viewpoints of multiple generations,” says Sorn. “Their stories really inspired me.”

Two years later, this same multicultural awareness motivated Sorn to found the Stockton Crossing Cultural Bridges (SCCB), now known as San Joaquin Cross-Cultural Media (SCCM), and to produce its first documentary, *To: Iloilo and Battambang*, celebrating Cambodian and Filipino cultures, made in collaboration with the

Stockton Sister Cities Association and the Stockton Arts Commission. SCCM is now part of the recently-formed Stockton Arts Center Alliance, which includes such influential organizations as the Stockton Symphony Association, Stockton Chorale, and With Our Words, Inc., a spoken word poetry association.

Sorn acknowledges that naysayers may consider his latest endeavor, the first San Joaquin Film Festival, overreaching in a time when Stockton is struggling to find its identity as a city. “Yes, you could question if people will have the time to see a movie when they are working double jobs,” says Sorn. “But the arts are really a celebration, and I believe Stockton is ready for a dynamic event like the festival. It can do so much more for this city than just showcase films. When I think of how we can grow this festival, I think about that epitome of independent film festivals, the Toronto Film Festival. With its blend of education, film screenings, and other programs, it now draws nearly a half-million attendees a year.”

Benedetti agrees. “There’s a lot of very good learning that takes place when you bring the public and the art communities together, and I really applaud Sophoan’s efforts in creating this festival. His negotiating and fundraising skills are remarkable. Not only is Sophoan a great artist, he is also very good at getting people together.” If anyone can pull this ambitious venture off, it will be Sorn, he adds.

**FIRST INTERNATIONAL SAN JOAQUIN FILM FESTIVAL** June 4-8, 2008  
For more information and ticketing locations, visit [www.sjccm.org](http://www.sjccm.org)