

Tonight at Hancher: 'Soil' is as real as it gets

POSTED BY [ELEANORE TAFT](#) | FEB 9, 2017 | [ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT](#)



LITTLE VILLAGE
IOWA CITY'S NEWS & CULTURE MAGAZINE

SOIL

Strauss Hall, Hancher — Thursday, Feb. 9 at 7:30 p.m.



The dancers in 'Soil,' L-R: Chankethya Chey from Cambodia, Nguyen Nguyen from Vietnam and Waewdao Sirisook from Thailand. — photo by Miriam Alarcón Avila

Hancher hosts a world premiere this week: the multimedia dance theatre production *Soil*, directed by University of Iowa Assistant Professor of Dance Michael Sakamoto. The final performance is tonight, Feb. 9 at 7:30 pm in Strauss Hall, an intimate space that is making its debut as a theatre.

Soil developed over several years to become the hour-long work it is today, adding more dancers and perspectives to the mix. The work, now performed by a trio, is autobiographical, a composite of the dancers' experiences of immigrating from Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam and bridging the gap between their old and new homes.

Sakamoto is known for his work in contemporary butoh, a Japanese form of dance theatre, and has collaborated with one of the stars of *Soil* (Waewdao Sirisook, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Dance at UI) on butoh performance in the past. Elements of butoh sneak into the darker moments of the piece in the form of slow silent screams, gradually collapsing bodies and eyes rolling back in the head.

Slow gestural movements are also a common element in traditional Thai and Cambodian dance, although they are more stylized, and elements of traditional dance are woven throughout the production. Sirisook and Chankethya Chey, who also appears in *Soil*, are accomplished performers of these styles.

We are all alike, we are all different

The piece moves rapidly from one section to the next, and the close juxtaposition of varying styles, cultures and concepts illuminates points of both commonality and contrast as the sections butt up against each other. This accomplishes Sakamoto's goal of delving into the similarities and differences between the three countries' cultures.

"They're embodied in each other at the same time that they're distinct," Sakamoto said in a talkback, referencing a moment in the piece where the three dancers say how they like their papaya salad, something they have in common but that they prepare differently.

Food is a recurring theme in the show. When we meet the third dancer, Nguyễn Nguyễn's, he tells us about his childhood responsibility of making rice and preparing vegetables as he acts it out with actual ingredients. The show ends with the three dancers gathered on a mat, finishing the dish with fish sauce and lime and eating together.

This realism is inherent to Sakamoto's style. "It's very important for me as an artist that you're seeing real experience on stage," he said.

This is very much in the butoh tradition, which leans into the awkward and grotesque corners of humanity and focuses on the individual's natural movements rather than using a codified technique. Elements of this practice show up in *Soil* in moments when movement seems to be initiated by something inside, or a reaction to something outside, the dancers, rather than by the conscious force of their wills on their bodies.



'Soil' Front to back: Sirisook, Nguyễn and Chey. — photo by Miriam Alarcón Avila

Reality is subjective

“Is it a dream, or is it real?” Nguyễn asked, during the talkback. He noted that recollections are fragmented and there can be many versions of the same story. What we see may or may not be truth, but it is authentic, the dancers’ real experiences, Nguyễn said.

The dancers express particular uncertainty about early memories of childhood, their fathers back in Asia and the process of immigration. Nguyễn explained that he thinks refugees often have a deep nostalgia for and false memory of their former home that was destroyed, and this can lead to a conservative streak in the refugee community as they embrace the similarly nostalgic quest for the American dream.

Family ties are tested by physical and cultural distance

Throughout the piece, Nguyễn expresses tension between his family members as they try to bridge cultural divides. He acts out his overcompensating brother’s exaggerated, cocky American-ness as he tries to feel like less of an outsider, and mourns his conservative mother’s unwillingness to accept her son’s career path and sexuality.

The dancers seem to have a more vivid connection to their mothers, who are individually projected behind them. The dancers variously interact with the projections.

Chey stands and watches as her mother tells the story of escaping the [Khmer Rouge](#). Nguyen moves with great emotion, as if reaching for something with a hand fluttering over his heart while his mother fades in and out on the backdrop. Sirisook's mother makes the first appearance early on in a telephone call which Sirisook pretends to answer, the translated text projected behind her as she talks on the phone.

Filling out the narrative with media and words

Sakamoto is a self-proclaimed movie buff, and his direction manages to tie together so many different scenes and elements that it almost feels like watching a film instead of a dance performance.

He uses a variety of props, particularly clothing, to mark scene changes. A wide range of media allow the quick transitions to make sense. Sakamoto uses film, photographs and real-life soundscapes like ocean or rainwater and airport noise to bring the audience into the characters' realities. It works.

He incorporates seemingly mundane video, like a projection of a Facebook message being typed, a mother feeding her daughter and a close-up of a man breathing and looking around. When it's all put together, these ordinary moments are powerful, which again echoes the *butoh* traditions of exploring the minutiae of humanity and valuing naturalness over stylization.



The dancers in 'Soil,' L-R: Sirisook, Nguyễn and Chey. — photo by Miriam Alarcón Avila

Sakamoto also explores the idea of communication barriers in language, both written and spoken. The dancers talk over each other in three languages, seeming to have a conversation, though, “we think we understand each other but in fact we’re not,” Sirisook said.

At other times, the dancers break the fourth wall, interacting with the audience in the front row or speaking directly to them, or about them. Words appear in different forms — sometimes a dancer reads and writes in a notebook, while another seems to dance or speak her words. Other times, the projected words appear to be translations of what is being said.

By including an unusual amount of spoken and written words, the director's intention is much more obvious than it is in most dance productions. This makes the moments where Sakamoto deliberately distances the audience from the performers, as the characters speak several languages without an English translation, even more effective. The contrast creates an outsider experience for the audience because one moment they know what's happening, and the next moment that understanding is taken away.

Sirisook said during the talkback that after the coup in Thailand she became afraid to express herself freely. *Soil* was performed as a work-in-progress in Thailand two years ago and everything went smoothly, but if they did it again now they would have to be careful because things have changed, she said. Sirisook said she appreciates the freedom of speech that exists in America, although "I don't know how long until you will have less freedom just like us," she added.