

## Review of 'Nice Hat!' in U.K. Magazine 'Firecracker' issue #16



### HIGH FIVE: BANGKOK INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2006

Robert Williamson picks out five highlights from the recent 2006 Bangkok International Film Festival...

#### *Nice Hat! 5 Enigmas in the Life of Cambodia*

I'm cheating here slightly as this isn't technically an Asian film, though it would surely be of interest to anyone familiar with Southeast Asia. Showing great perception, Canadian filmmaker David Brisbin (actually a production designer with high-profile credits including *In The Cut* and *My Own Private Idaho*) has taken it upon himself

to tell the story of Cambodian history and society through the medium of ... hats. Cambodians, it transpires, are obsessed with the things, favouring headgear as diverse as palm leaf boaters, crochéd bonnets and mass-produced baseball caps. Or, if they are true Khmers, they simply wrap a traditional sheet known as a krama around their heads.

DAVID BRISBIN TELLS  
THE STORY OF  
CAMBODIAN HISTORY  
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THROUGH... HATS.



All this is highly charming, but Brisbin's film delves deeper into the historical and ideological baggage of Khmer headgear, considering not only the citizens' hats but also the historical significance of the battle helmets worn in wars throughout the ages and the royal crown, which, it appears, may have been lost during the Pol Pot

regime, though such is its cultural significance that no such possibility has ever been officially acknowledged. Filmmaker Rithy Pahn eloquently relates his conflicted feelings about the krama, which, being the traditional Khmer garment, was co-opted as a symbol of the Khmer Rouge and in many people's minds remains tainted by such associations. For such a uniquely and definingly Cambodian item to be tainted in this way offers an otherwise unseen confirmation of the deep and fundamental psychological scars Cambodia has taken so long to overcome.

The film also considers Cambodia's economic outlook by examining the prospects of those working in the hat-making industry, which was initially boosted by globalisation but is now increasingly threatened by it. The film is at its strongest in identifying tensions such as these, though it is important to note that it is by no means pessimistic. Infused with a great love and respect for the Cambodian people, Brisbin's charming and sympathetic film strikes a perfect balance of concern about the past and optimism for the future.