

KHMER DANCE PROJECT



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Royal Khmer Dance

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Past and Present

In 1906, two years after succeeding his half-brother Norodom, King Sisowath of Cambodia, accompanied by the Royal Ballet, embarked on a long trip to Marseilles for the French Colonial Exposition. France responded warmly to the charming dancers and the king's entourage. The famous sculptor Rodin was so enchanted by the dancers that he traveled with them and drew evocative sketches of their fluid, graceful movements. Lamenting their inevitable departure, Rodin, profoundly moved, confessed: "What emptiness they left me with. I thought they had taken away the beauty of the world. I followed them to Marseilles; I would have followed them as far as Cairo."

Under the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975 to 1979, Royal Khmer dance was banned from the soil of Cambodia. Its artists were executed or died from malnutrition, illness and forced labor. After the regime's collapse in 1979, Royal Khmer dance had almost disappeared; few former dancers had survived.

Ever since this brutal period, Royal Khmer dance has slowly

and painstakingly struggled to retrieve memories. Former dance masters have tried to revive the gestures, music, and artistry that are part of Khmer classical dance's heritage. Their long-lasting and devoted efforts were finally recognized and honored when UNESCO proclaimed the Royal Ballet of Cambodia (or Royal Khmer dance) a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2003. Yet, two years later, the campus of Royal University of Fine Arts which is devoted to the Arts was moved out of the center of the capital Phnom Penh. Many of its faculty and students have since deserted the far-away facilities, resulting in the slow death of what was, since 1964, the main government-sponsored program for transmitting the tradition of Royal Khmer Dance.

The Khmer Dance Project

Even though Royal Khmer dance is known worldwide and has recently been recognized through the Royal Ballet of Cambodia by UNESCO, no systematic inventory of all the facets of this art form has yet been undertaken. The task of collecting resources is ever more urgent as old master dancers disappear, one after the other. The Khmer Dance Project, funded by Anne H. Bass and in collaboration with the Jerome Robbins Dance Division

(JRDD) of the Library of the Performing Arts (LPA) of the New York Public Library (NYPL), has taken on this vital project.

The Khmer Dance Project (KDP) has started amassing documents on the Royal Khmer dance in order to build a broad and comprehensive data base with the intention of eventually giving free-access to individuals (private, researchers, dancers, etc...) interested in this art.

In light of Cambodia's recent history, with the disappearance of the majority of artists under the Khmer Rouge regime, and due to advanced age, the continuing deaths of the survivors, this project is more crucial and significant than ever. Furthermore, Khmer society is undergoing enormous changes, and institutions, such as the Royal Court, that supported the traditional performing arts in the past, no longer do so. At the same time, external influences are giving rise to new cultures, and the values that had supported performing arts are also undergoing transformation. The Royal Khmer dance is struggling in an age where it is increasingly difficult to transmit traditional performing arts in their original form.

There have been a number of previous initiatives in which the old masters of this art form have been interviewed in order to create an oral history. These efforts have also often included collecting any written documents, photographs, audio and visual

recordings that could be found. It is hoped that as the Khmer Dance Project gains momentum and credibility any private individuals and institutions that have such material will donate it. In due course it is intended that this information will be freely available in digital form.

Beginning of Khmer Dance Project

The project was born when Anne Bass, an American patron of the arts- and of dance in particular, realized that ancient traditions of Royal Khmer dance were at risk of not being handed down properly to future generations. With the advice of Philippe Peycam, Director of the Center for Khmer Studies, and in collaboration with the New York Public Library, it was decided that a comprehensive data base would be created. Destined for the NYPL's Jerome Robbins Dance Division (JRDD), home to the world's most comprehensive collection of dance material, this data base is a pioneering achievement due to the sheer scope of gathered media: written documents, videos, photos, and music.

It is anticipated that copies of the KDP material will also be given to the Library of the Center for Khmer Studies (CKS). CKS has already received copies of recorded material from Cambodian

Living Arts that has been generated from the Music Masters program.

Advice was also given by Cecily Cook of the Asian Cultural Council (ACC), New York. In 1975-76, NYPL's JRDD worked with the parent organization of ACC, the John D Rockefeller III Fund, which sponsored a project that included travel to Asia with the purpose of conducting in depth research of Asian Dance by Gigi Oswald, then curator of JRDD. At that time the political situation precluded including Cambodia and since that time little has been done to strengthen Asian material at JRDD

To provide wide access to this material, especially all of KDP's original interviews, a translation program will provide Khmer transcripts and English subtitles.

Launch of the Khmer Dance Project

The Khmer Dance Project was launched in March 2008, led by former dancer and scholar, Suppya Nut, along with Pen Hun, a young dancer completing a Master's degree on Khmer dance in Thailand. They planned and conducted the interviews of artists in Cambodia while Michelle Potter, NYPL's recently retired curator of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division, helped them to establish interview formats and release forms that would conform to those

used by the JRDD. A crew from Bophana Audiovisual Resource Centre, cameramen Mesa Prum and Visal Sea completed the team.



The Bophana Centre is playing an important role not only in filming but also in copying all master footage and in storing original material until the project is completed. This close relationship was made possible thanks to the commitment of Rithy Panh, the founder and director of Bophana, who acted as project counselor.

The project is greatly indebted to HRH Princess Norodom Buppha Devi who is very concerned about the future of Royal Khmer dance and the Royal Ballet of Cambodia. Both she and Proeung Chhieng, the Dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA), have supported the project from the very beginning.

KDP is also indebted to Fred Frumberg, Director of AMRITA Performing Arts, for his advice and for the photos and biographies of some of the Royal Khmer Dancers.

The Khmer Dance Project would like to especially thank and express its appreciation to His Majesty, King Norodom Sihamoni, who displayed a profound interest and strong support of the project by according us two royal audiences.

First Phase of KDP filming

Elderly dance masters

(Year 1, 2008)

The current situation of Royal Khmer dance compelled us to focus on interviews of elderly dance masters. Very few members of this first generation have survived the Khmer Rouge period. Prominent artists, such as Chea Samy, Chhea Khan, have already died. Only five remain:



- Sin Sama Deuk Chho (Chho)



- Soth Sam On (Leah)



- Ros Kong (Kong)



- Em Theay (Theay)



- Sim Muntha (Tha).

Even though these master dancers played a prominent role in the renaissance of Royal Khmer dance, they still have no official biographies. Some information can be gleaned from research by western scholars such as Toni Shapiro and Eileen Blumenthal, but all wrote in English. Some masters such as Chea Samy, who died 10 years ago, or Em Theay were interviewed a number of times. Others however, are still not known, notably Soth Sam On, who is now in extremely poor health, or Sin Sama Deuk Chho, a retired dance master who still works to earn a living.

The first phase took almost six weeks (March and July 2008) as each dance master was personally interviewed. Several hours were spent at each session asking the masters about their lives as artists in the Royal Palace, about traditional dances or melodies, and about the names of artists (dancers and musicians) who disappeared under the Khmer Rouge.

During this first phase we collected about 13 hours of interviews, which include the complete biography of each dance master; information about deceased artists and their names; and a portrait of King Sihanouk's grandmother, Queen Kossamak Nearyrath the patron of the Royal Ballet during the 1950's and 1960's.

In addition during this first phase we enriched our collection by filming:

a ritual ceremony of homage to the spirit of dance



- the rehearsal of an old ballet recreated by HRH Princess Norodom Buppha Devi and its final performance in Chatomuk Theatre
- the Dance School at the new campus of RUFA



- the student final examination of traditional songs.

**Second phase of KDP of filming
of Artists trained under the old masters
(Year 2, 2009)**

Phase 2 of the Khmer Dance Program focuses on the second generation of artists who trained under the old masters filmed in Phase 1. This group of dancers also suffered tremendously during the Khmer Rouge regime. Almost 90% of this generation's artists died because of bad treatment, illness, and dedication to their art. Some dancers were asked to dance for their Khmer Rouge guards before being killed. Some survived and settled in Western countries, mainly in the US and in France. While some prominent artists living abroad may be included in this project, priority will be given to artists living in Cambodia. Our team has gained solid experience organizing interviews and a better understanding of the context in which the later artists are evolving.

During this phase (January and July-August 2009) 6 to 8 weeks of interviews including two sessions of filming are planned. The following artists have been selected:

- Dancers: Princess Norodom Buppha Devi, Proeung Chhieng, Minh Kossony, Pen Sok Chea, Pen Sok Khuon, Pum Somaly, Ruos Yarann, Sophiline Shapiro, Bunchanrath, Soth, Thaong Kim An.
- Administrators: Chheng Phon, Pich Tum Kravel
- Singers: Duong Marey, Hun Sarath
- Musicians: Proeurng Pruon and two or three musicians
- Craftsmen: Men Sinoeurn
- Embroiderers: Sim Muntha, Lim Sylvain

We would also like to interview several prominent figures:

- Princess Norodom Buppha Devi
- Prince Norodom Sirivudh
- Princess Norodom Vacheara,

all three of whom had mothers who were star dancers. We will also interview

- His Excellency Son Soubert, whose grandmother was a star dancer.

Session 1: January 2009

Session 1 began in January 2009, with a series of interviews at Angkor Wat of the second generation of artists:

- Proeung Chhieng
- Soth Somaly
- Pen Sok Chhea
- Hun Sarath
- Duong Marey

This first round of interviews centered on the biography of each artist. During this session, we also filmed

- the art of sewing costumes for male and female roles.

At the Arts Dance School in Siem Reap we interviewed:

- Kim Boran

a current teacher at the school and formerly the Founder and Director of the Wat Bo Dance School. In the 70s Kim Boran was a member of the Royal Ballet.

In addition teachers were interviewed at the School of Dance and Music at Chouk Sar (near Banteay Srey) which is funded by the Nginn Karet Foundation and is under the patronage of Princess Buppha Devi. The school is named

- Le Conservatoire SAR Samdech Reach Botrei Norodom Buppha Devi

and it is the first school to bear the name of the Princess.

The teachers interviewed were:

- So Chanthou
- Keo Sa Roeum

At both schools we were able to film a number of folk dances as well as Royal Khmer dance. Folk dances are also included in our filming project, for they are a part of the national Khmer heritage.

This first session of Phase 2 resulted in a total of almost 40 hours of footage and interviews.

We ended by giving interviews about the KDP to the *Phnom Penh Post* and *Cambodia Daily* newspapers. Articles on the KDP should be released in the next two or three months.



Session 2: July-August 2009

Session 2 will start on July-August 2009, mostly in Phnom Penh and its surroundings. We will interview prominent artists such as:

- Proeung Chhieng
- Soth Somaly

who are both dancers and choreographers; we will also continue our interviews with others mentioned above. We shall take the opportunity to interview one star dancer from the period of Queen Kossomak Nearyrath

- Voeun Savay

who lives in France and who will be in Cambodia this summer.

We will also film:

- Chheng Phon
- Pich Tum Kravel

two retired administrators who actively contributed to rebuilding the School of Dance at RUFA and the Royal Cambodia Ballet dance troupe after the Khmer Rouge regime. Through Chheng Phon we will have access to his niece

- Sophiline Chem Shapiro

Contacts have already been made to meet journalists for more interviews about the KDP (*Cambodge Soir, Phnom Penh Post, Cambodia Daily*).

Third phase of Filming
Third Generation of Artists
(Year 3, 2010)

The third phase of the Khmer Dance Project will focus on the third generation of artists who grew up after the Khmer Rouge and who studied dance outside the Royal Palace. We will work closely with the organization AMRITA Performing Arts, which has already compiled a series of biographies of these young artists. As for the second generation of dancers, a number of the most talented individuals have now settled in the US and France, rendering the process of interview more cumbersome. Two film shoots are planned in Cambodia: (January/February-July/August 2010)

Session 1 - January 2010

Session 1 will begin in January-February 2010, and will take place in Siem Reap and Phnom Penh. We will do interviews at Angkor Wat with the third generation of artists including

- Em Satya
- Hun Pen.

In Phnom Penh, we will focus on

- musicians specializing in the flute, the xylophone, gongs and drums.



We will also include

- Princess Buppha Devi
- Prince Norodom Sirivudh
- Lim Sylvain
- HE Son Soubert.

During this last phase, we will focus on

- the art of making masks, jewelry, and headpieces.

Filming will be done in Phnom Penh where one the most skillful craftsmen still works with his apprentices in his workshop to perpetuate the tradition of the Royal Palace.



Session 2 - July-August 2010

Session 2 will finalize interviews with the third generation of artists in Phnom Penh.



We will also film the art of embroidery still exercised by one old master

- Sim Muntha

with the help of

- Lim Sylvain (designer and embroiderer).

Another aspect of Royal Khmer dance is the ritual and the offerings to the gods. We would like to organize

- a ceremony at the Royal Palace to pay homage to the spirit of dance.

This must be submitted for approval to HRH Princess Norodom Buppha Devi and HE Kong Sam Ol at the Royal Palace on behalf of HM King Norodom Sihamoni.

A number of sequences of gestures (*kbach*) which are rarely performed due to their difficulty should be recorded with the help of:

- Sylvain Lim
- Proeung Chhieng.

To finish, we will compile all dance related documents from individuals, local libraries (National Library, Buddhist Institute, National Museum of Cambodia), and from the Royal University of Fine Arts of Cambodia.

Conclusion

Thanks to its numerous interviews with artists, the project will offer extensive video documentation of Royal Khmer dance, the first for any Southeast Asian dance form.

Identification of existing Archival Material

There is also a concurrent and urgent need to identify and catalogue existing archival material that is primarily in France, the

United States, Japan and other Southeast Asian countries- especially Thailand and Laos.

Cambodian Living Arts-Master Musicians

Another project, which has concentrated on recording Master Musicians, has been undertaken by Cambodian Living Arts under the leadership of Arn Chorn-Pond, Charley Todd and John Burt. Copies of this material have been given to the Library of the Center for Khmer Studies. The Khmer Dance Project will work with CLA to ensure that music as it relates to the Royal Dance tradition is also properly documented.



March 22, 2009

Suppya Hélène NUT

Director Khmer Dance Project