

by Denise Heywood

LITTLE FEMALE DANCERS as young as three years old go through their graceful movements, heads held high, tiny hands bent backwards and bare feet moving imperceptibly across the ground. The vision of elegance and rigorous training belies reality for these are underprivileged children in a rural school in Cambodia, able to receive free tuition only because they have been given places with a foundation dedicated to teaching classical dance. Meanwhile, on the other side of the globe, a lithe, young male Cambodian dancer is dazzling the American dance world with his virtuoso performances in Western and Cambodian ballet. Sokvannara Sar was a country boy plucked from his village dance troupe and taken to America where he has become celebrated through a film about his life, *Dancing Across Borders*. Finally, in France the Royal Ballet of Cambodia (Ballet Royal Cambodge) is touring the country this month with 32 dancers and musicians. Inspiring projects such as these show that the revival of Cambodian dance since the genocidal Pol Pot regime of the 20th century, when 90 percent of the dancers were murdered, has taken on a new impetus, nationally and internationally.

Until now the emphasis has been on saving dance through old surviving artists resulting in the rebirth of the Royal Ballet and the training of young dance troupes. But the future challenge is to give a new generation of dancers the recognition they deserve. Unfortunately the cash-strapped government is unable to provide substantial funding although the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts collaborates with the Royal Ballet. For the rest, non-government organisations such as the Neginn Karet Foundation For Cambodia, founded in 1994 by Ravyann Karet-Coxen, a Cambodian woman married to an Englishman, has given opportunities to 128 disadvantaged children in 14 villages around Angkor to become dancers and musicians in the sacred traditions. So successful has her school become that it has been brought under royal patronage. Last year King Norodom Sihanouk, a former dancer and choreographer, personally recognised the troupe's talent, inviting them to make a historic presentation in the Royal Palace's Hall of Dancers, the Chanchhaya Pavilion. In America, Sokvannara Sar's success is due to the vision of another woman, Anne Bass, a dance patron, who discovered him on a trip to Cambodia and brought him back to America to train with the School of American Ballet and perform with the Pacific Northwest Ballet.

For centuries dance was preserved by Cambodian royalty, patrons of an art form that was sacred. The dancers' role was so important that the kings of Angkor, ruling from the 9th-15th centuries, created their own royal ballet, the *lakbon luong*. The ballet performances would have been auspicious, a way of communicating with the ancestors in the heavenly realm. The kings would conduct *luong suong* ceremonies to invoke the help of the *tevada*, the celestial spirits, when the country faced droughts or floods. If their dances were received favourably, the deities would bestow their blessings on the country and the prayers of the king would be granted. The precise performance of these rituals was vital as the kings believed themselves to be *devarajas*, god-kings, and it reaffirmed the connection between heaven and earth, fertility



Sokvannara Sar and Philip Glass, Vail International Dance Festival. Photo by Erin Baiano

Cambodian Dance

and abundance, that was intrinsic to Cambodian religion and culture. To preserve the sacred dances, emphasis was placed on perfecting gestures handed down from master to pupil since they were rarely recorded in any form of texts. Dancers practised from childhood, embodying the essence of sacred traditions which were incorporated into their daily lives.

Since the tragic events of the 20th century, the continuation of this fragile legacy has been supported by Princess Buppha Devi, daughter of King Sihanouk and half-sister of the current monarch, King Norodom Sihanouk. She was the greatest dancer of her generation in the 1960s. Last year, the Royal Ballet of Cambodia, for which she has choreographed the dances, toured France and Belgium to give seven performances of *The Legend of the Apsara Mera* a reinterpretation of a ballet created in the 1950s by Sihanouk's mother, Queen Kossamak. Princess Buppha Devi, dedicated to the protection and perpetuation of dance, also granted royal patronage in 2006 to Karet-Coxen's rural dance school where sacred rituals have been resuscitated and preserved.

To achieve this, Karet-Coxen, with limited resources, took students from the poorest families in the country and brought the best possible teachers to train them in a modest school she created on the road beyond the temple of Banteay Srei. Four simple, open-air pavilions covered with palm thatched roofs, surrounded by vegetable plots, loom like a vision on the quiet country road. Here, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, children in spotless costumes dance in perfect unison with the music, recreating ancient rites as if they have never done anything else. So enthusiastically did these barefoot children, daughters and sons of farmers, respond to their teachers that within three years Karet-Coxen

felt ready to place them under royal patronage.

In January 2010, to mark the third anniversary of this patronage, a group of 14 girls performed a time-honoured sacred ritual for the well-being of the King at Banteay Srei, the nearby 10th century temple. Among the delicately carved pink stones, the dancers moved gracefully in the last glowing rays of a tropical sunset, illuminated by flickering candles. Dressed in white, symbol of purity and virginity, the prepubescent girls, who symbolise celestial angels, went through the motions of a religious rite that echoed the past but had in fact been recreated by Karet-Coxen herself. As they advanced along the causeway in perfect harmony, a vision of exquisite refinement and dignity, their ethereal presence evoked another realm, as if they were a living image of the gods and of the temple's divine symbolism. In August, they also danced a *Boung Suong*, a holy ritual, at the 11th-

century temple of Preah Vihear in northeastern Cambodia, a spectacularly sited sanctuary at the Dangrek mountain range on the border of Thailand, currently at the centre of controversy over ownership. The sacred performance was the first Hindu ritual in hundreds of years at this temple, composed of an 800 metre long series of sanctuaries through which the dancers walked.

Performances such as these are rare today as dance tends, with the

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exception of the Royal Ballet, to be a spectacle for tourists rather than a celebration of the gods. But if dance is no longer a ritual of the temple or a ceremony of the royal court, what is its future? Is it at risk of becoming a secular spectacle, devalued by being divorced from its ritual context and placed in the commercial arena? 'We do not dance for entertainment or money,' says Karet-Coxen emphatically. 'And certainly not to amuse tourists in the hotels ... we are dancing for our God'. This is possible thanks to her foundation and the generosity of its sponsors. However, other performances in hotels and restaurants in Siem Reap do benefit from the financial opportunities these offer, in the absence of any alternative. This is both advantageous and perilous. What was once the preserve of religious ceremonies is now entertainment for the public and this collision of the sacred and profane is a controversial one. Yet some dancers claim that whether they are in a temple or a restaurant, the performance is the same, having the spiritual dimension and depth of feeling regardless of its context. Every performance is preceded by a prayer by the dancers, the *sampeah kru*, asking permission of the *gurus*, the spirits of dance, to bless them. They realise too that they are giving audiences a glimpse of Cambodia's rich cultural heritage.

Publicising that heritage, Sokvannara Sar, who was born in Siem Reap and studied traditional dance at the temple of Wat Bo, would never have found his American mentor, Ann Bass, had he not been dancing commercially for guests of the World Monuments Fund. She spotted him 10 years ago and, as a member of the Board of Directors of the New York City Ballet, the Fort Worth Ballet, the School of American

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Ballet Royal Cambodge. Photo: Anders Giras

Ballet and the Board of the American Friends of the Paris Opera Ballet, as well as being Vice President of the Friends of Khmer Culture, she was impressed by his talent. In a gesture worthy of a fairy godmother, she sponsored him to study at the School of American Ballet in New York where he spent five years, before joining the Pacific Northwest Ballet in Seattle when his teacher, Peter Boal, became Artistic Director. His success story is the stuff of dreams. Training in the rigours of Western ballet, so utterly different from Khmer, he has since performed in many classical pieces including *Giselle*, *La Sylphide*, *Coppelia*, *Le Corsaire* and George Balanchine's *La Sonnambula*, and returned to Phnom Penh as a guest artist at the Chaktomuk Theatre to celebrate the opening of the new United States Embassy. In 2008, he performed *On the Other Side*, accompanied by renowned American composer Philip Glass, for the opening night of the Vail International Dance Festival, and has worked with the brilliant choreographer William Forsythe, a translator of ballet's essence from the antique to the modern world, in his innovative *One Flat Thing*, reproduced. Sar's versatility and ability to cross cultural boundaries are shown in *Dancing Across Borders* a documentary nominated for numerous awards which charts his path from rural backwater to the international stage. It is a story not only of one person but of a whole country. These two examples, together with the work of other non-government organisations such as Amrita Performing Arts, an international arts production company based in Cambodia, ensure that dance is not only perpetuated for its historical value but prepared for a global audience, securing a future that would not otherwise have been possible. Amrita, led by director Fred Frumberg, collaborates with artists of the Ministry of Culture as well as freelance artists to produce traditional and classical performances in Cambodia and abroad, encouraging them in contemporary theatre, dance and music through exchange programmes and international tours. Frumberg believes that the revival of classical dance has been successful. 'It is here to stay,' he says. But he wants to prevent dance from becoming 'a precious gem hidden within a glass museum showcase'. He promotes young artists and choreographers who are ready to be included in the international contemporary dance community, seeking the tools to create their own dance vocabulary. Frumberg has been collaborating with choreographers such as Emmanuèle Phuon, who is French-Khmer, Peter Chin, a Chinese choreographer in Toronto, Arco Renz from Germany and Takiko Iwabochi from Japan. Among exciting new productions that have travelled abroad is *Khmeropédies II* by Phuon, based on the master-disciple relationship, incorporating elements of classical court dance as taught by the master, with contemporary movements as imagined by her students, accompanied by a range of music from traditional Cambodian court music to Yves Montand, *Einsturzende Neubauten* and Cambodian hip hop.

Hopefully as Cambodian dance becomes better known throughout the world through the Royal Ballet's tour of 2010, as well as through modern dance performances, more choreographers and dancers from other countries will come to exchange artistic ideas with Cambodia. Dance – and culture – does not exist in a vacuum. It is always changing, adapting, absorbing and developing. In order to survive physically, it must break into strands. If it becomes frozen, it loses its lifeblood. But to survive spiritually it must remain constant. Therefore, innovative ideas and new performers will contribute to the evolution of dance, but at its core the ritual re-enactment of ancient traditions is the framework upon which everything else rests. Dance must exist in both temples and theatres. With the dedication of Princess Buppha Devi, Ravynn Karet-Coxon, Anne Bass and Fred Frumberg, this is now possible, although funding is limited and sponsorship is vital. Through their efforts a Cambodian country boy can cause a sensation in America while children in rural Cambodia can learn a thousand-year-old tradition. Thus the heritage of dance remains intact while its future evolves. Both have a role in the Cambodia of the 21st century.

Ngin Karent-Coxon Foundation: www.nkfc.org.

Sponsorship of US\$5 per week allows a child to continue training in these traditional arts.

Anne Bass: www.dancingacrossborders.net for future film showings in US.

Fred Frumberg: www.amritaperformingarts.org Amrita's new dance pieces with Peter Chin will premiere in Canada in February 2011 and with Arco Renz in Singapore in May 2011.



View of the sanctuary of the Mosque of al-Mu'ayyad, Cairo from Pascal Coste, *Architecture arabe ou monuments du Kaire*, Paris 1839

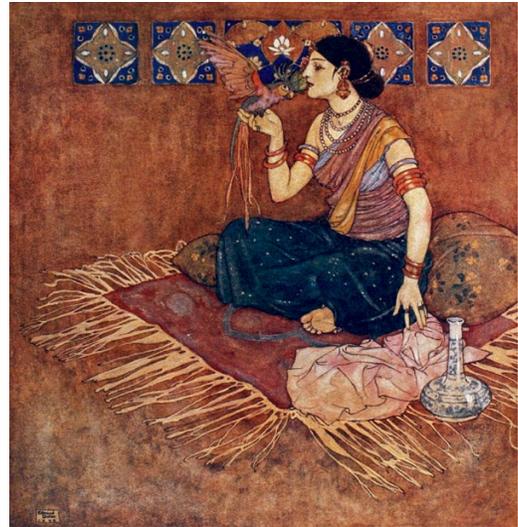


Illustration by Edmund Dulac from Laurence Housman, *Stories from the Arabian Nights*, London 1907

Bridge of Knowledge

Western Appreciation of Arab and Islamic Civilization in the Arcadian Library

THE ARCADIAN LIBRARY is Europe's most specialised private library on the history of the cultural encounter between Europe and the Arab and Islamic world. Its 10,000 volumes include works by travellers, scholars, scientists and artists, all of whom participated in and helped to produce the dynamic and productive relationship between East and West over the last millennium.

This January, the library is mounting a special show to mark the 100th exhibition at the SOAS Brunei Gallery in London (13 January to 26 March). On display are items from the entire range of the library's holdings, from travel to Turicica, from Islamic science to Arab literature. In an age where printing may soon become a thing of the past, the exhibition will explore the historical relationship between East and West as narrated by one of the most important vehicles for cultural transmission in human history: the book.

The items on show explore a range of themes in the history of East-West relations. One of the most extensive parts of the library's collection consists of travel books, and there will be a number of these on display. Travellers ventured east for a variety of reasons and in different capacities; as pilgrims, diplomats, merchants, soldiers and scientists. The works they produced were consumed by a readership hungry for knowledge about the world beyond Europe. And it was not just through the written word that they made their impact; they also left behind some magnificent artwork that brought alive the peoples and cultures of the lands to which they travelled.

Among the places that travellers visited was the Ottoman Empire, and the Arcadian Library also has an extensive collection of materials in this area. In the 15th and 16th centuries, Ottoman power grew steadily as it advanced westward into central Europe, and this threat provoked a violent response both on the battle field and in print. On display will be a number of European pamphlets, documents,



Letter of King James I to Sultan Osman II announcing the appointment of Sir Thomas Roe as ambassador, 9 July 1621



Detail from Matteo Pagano and Giovanni Domenico Zorzi, *Map of Cairo*, Venice 1549

chronicles and illustrated books that chart the evolving relationship between European powers and the Turkish world to the east, including indulgences sold by the Catholic Church to those who sought to buy their way to good grace by helping to fund the war effort against the Turks. But it is well to remember that these worlds were not always at war. They also traded and

engaged with each other as equal partners; on display are official diplomatic manuscripts sent by the English king to his Ottoman counterpart.

Another area covered by the exhibition is the scientific exchange that took place between East and West during the mediaeval period. After the decline of the Western Roman Empire, Europe entered a dark age in which the achievements of the classical era were largely forgotten. During this period scholars from the Arab world kept alive and added to the corpus of scientific and scholarly knowledge inherited from Greece and Rome.

Outstanding physicians, astronomers and mathematicians produced works which were translated into Latin from the eleventh century onwards. The Arcadian Library's holdings document fully this history of exchange and reception of knowledge. On display are books from the very dawn of printing, such as the incunabular Latin illuminated edition of the medical compendium the *Canon*, by one of Islam's greatest medical experts Ibn Sina, known in the West as Avicenna. Early printed editions of other scientific texts – medical, astronomical, alchemical – all testify to the profound impact that scientists from the Islamic world had upon western learning from mediaeval times to the Renaissance.

Another important field of East-West interaction was religion. While in the scientific sphere scholars worked in collaboration, here the relationship was more combative. The advent of printing allowed Muslim holy texts to be reproduced, both in Arabic and in translation. The Quran rapidly became essential reading among European scholars as they tried to improve their knowledge of the Arabic language and as they sought to refute its teachings. On display will be editions of the very first Qurans that were translated into European languages, the first Qurans printed in Arabic, and also the first Arabic editions of the Bible. They will be accompanied by theological texts