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Forward from the past

The performing arts in Cambodia are finally in a position to move from revival and preservation to contemporary creativity

Ask any well-seasoned traveller to describe Cambodian dance, and the answer might allude to the celestial nymphs that adorn the Angkor Wat temples known as the *Apsara* that today remain an icon of Cambodian classical dance. Others might wonder if Cambodian dance had not been entirely obliterated as a result of the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge during the brutal Pol Pot regime from 1975 to 1979, when approximately 90 per cent of all Cambodian classical performers were either killed or died of starvation or disease because of their links to what was considered a decadent class.

Cambodian classical dance is very much alive, thanks to the efforts of the few artists who survived the genocide by either sheer luck or by hiding their true identities. Immediately following the fall of the Khmer Rouge, the surviving artists put out a call throughout the country to identify their surviving colleagues and in 1980, many artists reunited for the first time in a performance that was both an agonising recognition of the loss of life, and a testimony to the eternal endurance of Cambodia's great performing arts heritage.

A remarkable momentum has been achieved in the post-war mission to revive and preserve Cambodia's great performing arts legacy through years of support from such programmes as the Rockefeller/Asian Cultural Council-led Mentorship Programme, CAP (Cambodian Artists Project), programmes initiated by Unesco, the French Cultural Center and many others. These efforts were strengthened through the full-time commitment of a number of smaller NGOs such as Amrita Performing Arts (APA) which has worked in direct collaboration with professional artists from the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA) to propel the momentum forward, towards one which has emphasised national capacity-building. Tours initiated and supported by numerous partners have brought Cambodian classical dance to mass audiences in the USA, Australia and throughout Europe, not to mention the immediate region.

The young generation of performers are developing in very different ways as they become exposed to contemporary trends in a wide variety of cultures and confront their natural desire to innovate. The result in dance is a growing community of young people who

are excited and inspired by modern forms of dance and theatre and want to incorporate new ideas into their creative palette.

These young dancers need and deserve a voice. While many are becoming bolder in challenging their teachers and working independently of the Ministry of Culture, Cambodia remains a patrician culture where cultural precepts are handed down and democracy has little part to play in cultural institutions. Young Cambodians look to foreigners and NGOs to assist them in transitions of this kind, as it's often foreigners who have the resources to facilitate the process and to advocate successfully. Amrita has become a major catalyst in helping these young artists find their voice and move their creative drives forward in a pro-active, nurturing and culturally sensitive environment.

The Cambodian government has yet to provide solutions on how to sustain its own cultural heritage beyond its celebrated tangible heritage. Despite marked improvements over the last few years, RUFA and its sister Secondary School of Fine Arts, remain demoralised and underfunded institutions. These conditions, far from stifling the growth of the arts scene in Cambodia, have given birth to a new breed of young, eager and in many cases, visionary artists representing a pool of potential future arts leaders who realise that the next steps must come through greater independence.

APA was launched in 2003 with a mandate that addressed all issues related to the post-war revival and preservation of Cambodia's performing arts heritage. After nearly seven years as a UNV specialist in production management from 1997 under the auspices of Unesco with a strong allegiance to the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts, APA aimed to uphold the aspired ideals established in those seed years, while trying to shape a new vision that focused on a sustainable life for the young generation of artists that included creativity, productivity and stronger international relations.

A new approach to developing cultural diversity is now taking shape across contemporary Asia, and Cambodia stands at the epicentre of this cultural insur-

gency. By drawing upon their common cultural bonds and dance traditions, artists from Cambodia and their regional counterparts are finally in a position where they can collaborate in reconnecting their artistic heritage to today's audiences. These efforts have led to the creation of a new generation of cutting-edge work, deeply rooted in the traditions of their classical training from both sides of the divide. Unlike our regional counterparts in Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia who have sought for years to strike the balance between preserving their traditions and developing their own contemporary dance styles, Cambodian dancers were far behind in this process and consequently extremely vulnerable to outside influence.

The contemporary work we have implemented has been through highly effective collaborations with artists from within the Mekong and Southeast Asia region. As we continue to advance, it has become clear that the Cambodians need more intensive training in various forms of international, contemporary technique and expression.

To that end, we have lowered the 'safety net' by bringing in collaborators from further afield, as the artists reveal greater technical ability and passionate artistic zeal. Highly successful workshops have led to the creation of new and exciting repertory with such artists as German choreographer Arco Renz, and Toronto-based choreographer Peter Chin to name a few.

It will be many years before the wounds inflicted by the Khmer Rouge are erased or even begin to fade into the background, but the development of Cambodian dance cannot continue to fall victim to its own tragic legacy. Today, young artists in Cambodia, teachers, students and performers alike, are taking responsibility for their own cultural destiny. They are also at a level whereby they can compete with the world's best and want to be judged accordingly. They still need support and encouragement; however, that support must not be born out of pity but rather out of celebration for one of the world's great cultural revivals.

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