

DANCE REVIEW

It's Monkey See, Do and Dance

'Khmeropédies III' and Amrita Performing Arts at the Guggenheim

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Forty five minutes of monkey impersonations? Dressed only in undershirts and shorts, seven male dancers of the Cambodian Amrita Performing Arts institution held the audience's attention on Sunday evening at the Guggenheim Museum with unflinching skill and charm. The dancers are all specialists in the role of the monkey from the Cambodian classical masked dance known as Lakhaon Kaol; but here only one of them ever donned a mask, and then only briefly. The production, choreographed by Emmanuèle Phuon, was called "Khmeropédies III: Source/Primate"; I'm sorry I missed the chance to see parts I and II.

And I wish we had been told, in person or program material, more about the centuries-old Cambodian monkey dance tradition, to which the word "classical" has been applied and which has been the subject of much modern Cambodian dramatization. Still, even to those of us who live where monkeys do not roam free, the simian impression was immediate and sustained.

These men scamper across the stage on all fours at many different speeds. For much

of the time, their torsos lean down from their pelvises, and — though nothing draws attention to their technique — the control and fluency of both spine and thigh is exceptional. One man pauses and allows one arm to swing loosely; three men become a clustered family, with one climbing over the others and all three locked in complete mutual absorption; two men jump in alternation and leapfrog over each other; several at times become, briefly, bipeds.

In several sections these men/monkeys sit still and groom one another. This is generally performed in pairs, with the quiet, steadiness and complete concentration that monkeys often show. One spellbinding scene shows three couples and a loner; the couples perform three sets of mirror actions, as if each had literally found his other half, but the seventh carries on, aloof and unfussed, as if making a point of not being jealous.

Certain athletic passages are breathtaking. Men spring high from crouched positions, never straightening limbs as in ballet but still effortlessly soaring and turning in midair.

All of “*Khmeropédies III*” is copied from life — and several scenes are played in silence, or with the performers’ apish grunts and whoops. In one sequence a singer, Kamala Sankaram, walks around the auditorium, vocalizing in ways that evoke gibbons (and birds as well). The piece is always on the cusp between dance and mime — but in three sustained scenes the action is turned fully into dance by music and rhythmic musicality.

The eclecticism of the taped music is fascinating: a Steve Reich 1977 piece for pieces of wood, a series of African rhythms played by pygmies and music (“*Brao Legends Len*”) from an ethnic minority of Northeast Cambodia. As these choices reveal, “*Khmeropédies III*” is not meant to be solely a work of Cambodian heritage.

In a preperformance discussion with Stanford Makishi (the director of performances at the Asian Cultural Council) and Eric J. Sargis, a Yale anthropologist, Ms. Phuon related how she wished to give her Cambodian dancers some of the aspects of Western dance theater she herself had experienced as a dancer with Mikhail Baryshnikov, Yvonne Rainer and others. Mr. Sargis, who acted as a scientific adviser to the group, spoke of how he recognized certain of their movements as specific to the orangutan, which has not inhabited Cambodia for many centuries; and how he had worked with the dancers to give them further movement ideas.

In one episode, one “monkey” appears to die; and nothing is more marvelous than the individual characterizations with which each other monkey reacts. There is no overt display of emotion, but the long, steady, unflinching gaze of one man into his colleague’s dead face — while others tenderly, coolly examine the lifeless limbs and feet — is a most moving image. Then, when left alone, the corpse comes back to life as if galvanized by spasms.

“Khmeropédies III” came to us as part of the current [Season of Cambodia festival](#) showcasing the arts of the country. I must add that a few sections of this work outlived their welcome simply by doing the same kind of thing too long; and that the moments when the dancers all turned their faces to the audience offered the wrong kind of cuteness.

But the dancers were rightly cheered. This piece has mimicry, charm and virtuosity throughout; sometimes its spell goes deeper yet.