

The CAMBODIA DAILY WEEKEND



Cambodian dancers Chumvan Sodhachiv, right, and Phon Sopheap rehearse with Malaysian dancer Lee Swee Keong in the background. Siv Channa

Cultures Connect

Japanese choreographer stages Hindu tale in Phnom Penh

By MICHELLE VACHON • THE CAMBODIA DAILY

From the very start of the performance, “Mahabharata” flows with the freedom and ethereal quality of a work by a master choreographer who has learnt all the rules and then invented new ones of his own.

Interpreted by dancers—four Cambodian, two Japanese and one Malaysian—who are among the best in their field, the piece unfolds at a rather fast pace, and flawlessly.

A dance which is also theater, contemporary in concept and rhythm, it is indubitably Asian.

“I always think that the Asian classical tradition of performing arts is like that—even in Japan, even in Bali or in Cambodia: It is all mixed together and cannot be divided into dance or theater,” said Koyano Tetsuro, one of the Japanese dancers.

Created by Japanese choreographer Hiroshi Koike, the work recounts some chapters of “Mahab-

harata,” the 2,000 year-old Indian epic that, along with the Ramayana, has become part of Southeast Asian culture—some scenes of the tale are sculpted on the walls of Angkor Wat.

In the work presented in Phnom Penh on July 12 and 13, dancers occasionally speak to the audience and even sing, at times freezing into beautiful tableaux of Khmer classical dance, at others miming a scene with both facial expressions and bodies.

“From the beginning [of my career], I did not want any categorization,” said Mr. Koike who has been part of the dance scene in Asia for more than three decades. Nothing prevents a dance from including songs or dialogue and it can still be considered a dance, he said.

Unlike some works in which dancers perform as part of the group, in “Mahabharata” each dancer follows his own path, switching roles as the story de-

velops. “There are 32 or 33 characters,” Mr. Koike said. “Everybody puts on masks and changes character.”

Repeatedly switching masks and costumes in the space of an 80-minute show is no small feat for the dancers.

“I perform four roles. So I have to quickly change character, and that’s rather difficult,” said Cambodian dancer Phon Sopheap.

“This performance has a lot of theater elements,” said Malaysian dancer Lee Swee Keong. “We have an interesting story and lines to say. The masks also add to the challenge.”

“The most challenging for me is the songs,” said Cambodian dancer Chumvan Sodhachiv, also known as Belle. “Normally, I don’t really sing.... But in this piece, I have to sing two kinds of songs. One is more or less traditional, and it’s OK. But in the other one...I have to scream and use facial expression.”

During the performances in Phnom Penh, a summary of each episode of the “Mahabharata” will



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be projected on a screen above the dancers in English and Khmer so that the audience can better follow the story.

The “Mahabharata” recounts a power struggle for the throne between cousins. Developed over centuries, it became a text filled with mythological characters and lessons on heroism and moral principles. It now is a Hindu sacred text.

The idea of staging the “Mahabharata” came to Mr. Koike after the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami that caused a disastrous nuclear meltdown and claimed the lives of more than 18,000 people in

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Japan. "At the time, many Japanese felt that we had to change...our basic ideas, our fundamental ideas" about human beings' interaction with nature, Mr. Koike said.

The "Mahabharata" gave him the opportunity to do so, he added. In one scene for instance, people have to deal with two forces of nature, fire and water.

The dance presented in Phnom Penh is the first portion of a three-part dance project that Mr. Koike launched after dissolving his dance company Pappa Tarahumara last year—the company, renowned for its groundbreaking shows, had

performed throughout the world.

Mr. Koike named his new venture the Bridge Project, the first part of which is the "Mahabharata" and is being produced with the Phnom Penh organization Amrita Performing Arts. Next year, he plans to create a second chapter of the dance in India with Indian dancers, and then bring all dancers to Tokyo in 2015 to complete the work and get ready to tour internationally.

This is the first time that Amrita has agreed to involve Cambodian dancers in a foreign choreographer's work that has not been

developed with them over weeks-long workshops, Amrita Director Fred Frumberg said.

A few years ago, Cambodian dancers would not have been ready for Mr. Koike, as they were just starting to create contemporary styles based on their Khmer classical-dance roots, he said.

But today, the circumstances are right, Mr. Frumberg said, "To work with another Asian artist who's already established and whose work I've seen and... admired for a long time, and to involve four of our stronger dancers who are ready to take on new styles

of performance."

"Mahabharata" truly is an Asian creation: The lighting designer is Malaysian, the costume designer Japanese, and props designers Cambodian. The recorded music was written by Japanese composer Kensuke Fuji and Cambodian musician Say Tola plays some music segments live during the show.

The performance on July 12 and 13 will be held at 6:30 p.m. at the theater of the Department of Performing Arts located behind the Spark Club and accessible through Street 173 off Mao Tse Tung Boulevard.



Siv Channa

Above: At rehearsal, Cambodian dancer Chumvan Sodhachivly lies on the ground along, from left, Cambodian dancers Khiev Sovannarith and Khon Chansithyka, Japanese dancer Koyano Tetsuro and Cambodian dancer Phon Sopheap.

Left: From left, Malaysian dancer Lee Swee Keong, Cambodian dancers Chumvan Sodhachivly and Khon Chansithyka, and Japanese dancer Koyano Tetsuro.