



The Legend of Apsara Mera. (Photo: Pete Pin, Royal Ballet of Cambodia, BAM)

What the Body Remembers

Karen Greenspan

At the beginning of April I bounced from event to event to catch the first offerings of the Season of Cambodia festival in New York City, which lasted through May. It manifested the miraculous rebirth of Cambodian culture since its near annihilation by the genocidal Pol Pot regime of the late 1970s. Given that most Cambodian master artists, choreographers, and musicians are survivors of the Cambodian genocide – “what the body remembers” along with the spirit’s perseverance has staved off the decimation of the country’s traditional culture. What breathes new life and currency into the work of today’s Cambodian artists is their courage to face their past and present as they create an authentic expression that honors both.

In Cambodia the New Year is celebrated in April with three days of traditional festivities that include purification ceremonies and visits to Buddhist temples and pagodas to make offerings and donations. Season of Cambodia was conceived as a New Year’s Festival, offering some of the finest examples of Cambodian art and culture. Because it is the height of the dry season, just before the monsoon rains bring renewed life to Cambodia’s farmlands, the annual New Year’s Festival centers around renewal and fertility.

Season of Cambodia opened with a ritual at the Rubin Museum in which two orange-robed Cambodian Buddhist monks sat cross-legged atop a dais chanting prayers and sprinkling white flower petals upon those gathered before them, giving a palpable aura of ceremony to the occasion. The festival continued with dance performances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Joyce Theater, and Guggenheim Museum. Arts Brookfield in the World Financial Center’s Winter Garden featured shadow puppetry. Cambodian rock music presented

at Le Poisson Rouge contrasted with traditional music at Asia Society. Sopheap Pich’s visually and emotionally arresting rattan sculpture was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum. Cambodian film, dance classes, and panel discussions took place throughout New York City, filling out a vibrant schedule of events.

This celebration of Cambodian culture evoked the regenerative powers of the *apsaras* – celestial dancers considered to be guardians of the Cambodian people. Bedecked with jewels and ornamental headdresses, the *apsara* dancing images are carved into the walls, pillars, and niches of the ancient temples in the tangled jungles of Angkor, retelling the jewels of Khmer literature and performing ancient fertility rites. As an image of fertility, symbolic of the welfare of the Khmer kingdom, they were believed to be the embodiment of the life-creating energy generated in concert with the Khmer monarch. (Khmer is pronounced K-my and refers to the majority ethnic group in Cambodia.)

The Khmer Empire of Angkor stretched from 802 to 1432 C.E. and was a golden age of Cambodian wealth and power, noted for ambitious temple-building projects and vast irrigation and waterway networks. Today, Angkor is a massive temple complex and national park covering two hundred square kilometers in northern Cambodia. Considered to be one of the seven architectural wonders of the world, Angkor had nearly three million visitors last year, according to a June 2012 report by BBC News Asia.

During the Angkorean period, thousands of *apsara* dancers were employed by the royal court to serve in the temples by performing offertory rites to the ancestral spirits on behalf of the kingdom to ensure harmony between the country and the spiritual world – especially in regard to rain and fertility. This applied in the literal sense as they also served the timeless function of providing a royal harem for the king.

The Khmer Empire at Angkor fell to the Thais in 1431. At that time many *apsara* dancers

were seized and taken to Thailand. But some royal dancers continued the court dance tradition in Cambodia on a greatly reduced scale even into modern times. During the mid-twentieth century the monarchy continued the tradition of its classical dancers performing sacred dances for the deities to ensure blessings for the land and its people. When drought struck Cambodia in 1965 and 1967, delegations of peasant farmers beseeched King Sihanouk to order performances of the ceremonial dances.

Civil war broke out in Cambodia in the 1960s and civil strife intensified along with American and South Vietnamese invasions until the communist Khmer Rouge took over in 1975. Influenced by China's Cultural Revolution, Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge army were systematic and ruthless in pursuing their political aim of wiping out all vestiges of the monarchy – including classical court culture and performance as well as capitalism and foreign influence.

In their attempt to erase society's memory and return to what they called "Year Zero," they tortured and killed dancers, artists, doctors, teachers, intellectuals, and professionals while much of the population was forcibly starved, marched, relocated, and separated from family and friends, turning Cambodia into a vast labor camp in the jungle. There are estimates that 90 percent of Cambodian performers and dance teachers were murdered or starved to death.

The precious few who miraculously managed to survive either posed as peasants in the countryside or made their way to refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border. The Khmer Rouge were overthrown in January 1979 and finally the population was free to move about. Many returned to home villages or cities, but many fled the country and formed communities abroad in France, the United States, and elsewhere.

The surviving dancers channeled their energies into the transformative work of reviving the classical Khmer dance from the brink of extinction. Some survivors even believed

that they were spared from death for the express purpose of keeping the Khmer dance alive. Some revival and preservation work was started in the refugee camps. HRH Princess Norodom Buppha Devi, who was the Cambodian Royal Ballet's prima ballerina during the 1960s, explained, "Because the classical dance was never notated, choreography was mainly passed physically from the teacher to the young dancers – the restoration process has relied largely on the memories of . . . senior masters." Reconstruction occurred by passing remembered steps "from teacher to teacher, teacher to dancer, and dancer to dancer." The survivors reconstructed the dance and so began to reconstruct themselves.

In 1991 the royalty returned to Cambodia and brought back the Royal Ballet of Cambodia in both the role of performing sacred dances for the country and as an ambassador and representative of Cambodia's cultural heritage. Today, dancers are trained at the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh and court dance has successfully moved out of the palace and into society. In 2003 UNESCO awarded Cambodian classical dance, known as Robam Borann in the Khmer language, the status of a masterpiece of oral and intangible heritage of humanity owing in large part to the devoted work of HRH Princess Norodom Buppha Devi, as the Minister of Culture and Fine Arts from 1999 to 2004. She continues her work with the Royal Ballet as chief choreographer and tireless champion. As part of the festival, Brooklyn Academy of Music presented the Royal Ballet of Cambodia performing *The Legend of Apsara Mera*, choreographed by the Princess, based on two Khmer creation myths.

Cambodian classical dance is slow and smooth with a continuous, graceful energy. There are long periods of standing in place with one foot raised while small movements of the hands, feet, and head continue. According to Dr. Toni Shapiro-Phim, cultural anthropologist specializing in Cambodian dance, "With fingers curled back into a half-moon, toes flexed upward, and the lower back arched,



Khmer Arts Ensemble in Sophiline Cheam Shapiro's *A Bend in the River*. (Photo: Khvay Samnang)

the dancing body . . . reflects the curvilinear form of the serpent." The dancers often trace a figure-eight floor pattern "recreating and honoring the image and spirit of the *naga*," or sacred serpent, which represents the spirit and immortality of Cambodia through its control of rain and fertility. The *naga*, so prominent in Cambodian myth, is also illustrated in temple carvings and architecture.

A signature aspect of Khmer dance is the use of four basic hand gestures that can be linked in some 4,500 combinations. These gestures function linguistically with a narrative vocabulary. The highly stylized, extreme wrist and finger flexion requires that dancers continually stretch their fingers backward – almost to the wrist. Children are selected for dance training at an early age while their muscles and bones are very supple.

For centuries all of the four dance roles –

the male, the female, the monkey, and the giant – were performed by female dancers. Since the mid 1900s, men have performed the monkey role and have brought their own quality to it. Young dancers are selected for training to perform one specific role by their dance master. In this culture, which deeply venerates its elders and worships the spirits of its ancestors, young dancers submit to hours of stringent group lessons followed by hours of private lessons at their master teacher's home. Today, there is an urgent imperative to impart and preserve this fragile dance heritage before the collective memory of the remaining masters disappears.

Cambodian classical dance is accompanied by a *pin peat* musical ensemble, a gamelan-type, all male percussion ensemble including drums, gongs, bells, xylophones, and the *sralai* (an oboelike reed instrument). The narration

and dialogue of the dance-dramas used to be chanted by a female chorus of former dancers. The loss of so many dancers during the Cambodian genocide forced a change in the composition of the chorus today.

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The Joyce Theater presented the Khmer Arts Ensemble performing *A Bend in the River*, the masterly work of the highly accomplished Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, in collaboration with composer Him Sophy and sculptor Sopheap Pich (all contemporary Cambodian artists and survivors). The piece wrestles with notions of revenge as presented through a Khmer folktale. Cheam Shapiro used her foundation in Cambodian classical dance (she was trained by and danced with the Royal University of Fine Arts in Cambodia) as a jumping-off point from which she pulled, bent, and stretched to create an authentic yet current Cambodian expression through dance. All the elements – the magical set evocative of shimmering rapids (constructed out of IV-tubing); props (a kinetic rattan crocodile sculpture); the simple yet elegant costumes; the lighting, music, narration, and finely tuned dancing – worked together to create an integrated, authentic Cambodian expression.

Cheam Shapiro's feminist voice spoke through her narrator's well-used wry humor. She is a remarkable example of an artist, human being, and woman negotiating her life and art both in Cambodia and in the United States as she pioneers a Cambodian dance idiom that straddles old and new, East and West using a classical as well as innovative vocabulary.

The Amrita Performing Arts dancers performed *My Mother and I* and *Olden New Golden Blue* at the Abrons Arts Center at the Henry Street Settlement. The dance works, respectively by Chey Chankethya and Peter Chin, explored the tension between individualism and conformity, tradition and experimentation, and preservation of the past while orienting toward the future. The dancers spoke, sang, acted, and danced the repertory as "total theater" that felt like watching a Cambodian "sit-

com" – if there is such a thing. The dancing incorporated Cambodian classical elements (hand gestures, one-legged stance with knee and foot flexed backward, a low serpentine walk in plié on flexed feet), modern dance, and butohlike expressionism.

As I watched these exquisite performers, I thought again about "what the body remembers." Their formative training in the Cambodian classical dance technique and roles has indelibly marked their dancing and I only became aware of it when they were not exclusively performing Cambodian classical movements. I don't think I have ever seen such physical and emotional intensity and core power in a group of dancers – something about that monkey role! No matter how far the choreography veered away from the traditional repertory, "what the body remembers" has created a performing instrument in these Amrita dancers that truly reminds one of their past.

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Under the giant palm trees in the glass cathedral-like space of Brookfield Properties' Winter Garden, the Cambodian Shadow Puppet Troupe of Wat Bo immersed the audience in exotic sights and sounds as they performed a classic tale containing elemental human themes.

The Wat Bo Troupe was founded by a Cambodian Buddhist monk, the Venerable Pin Sem in 1992 while he was still living in a refugee camp on the Thai border. Because he was a practicing artist before becoming a monk, he was able to recreate the art of shadow puppetry while in the camp by drawing from childhood memories. He invited twenty-five monks to join the project and they eventually located their troupe at a pagoda (religious temple) in Siem Reap – the heart of the ancient kingdom of Angkor.

Shadow Puppetry, or Sbeik Thom, is thought to have developed during the pre-Angkor period (before 802 C.E.), as there are bas reliefs from Cambodian seventh-century temples depicting women puppeteers with their figurines. In this highly evolved theater

form, the puppets themselves are works of art, intricately hand-carved from cowhide, resembling dark filigree panels. A large white screen is traditionally lit from behind with a bonfire of burning coconut husks. Here, in the Winter Garden at the World Financial Center in lower Manhattan, a projected bonfire lit the screen across which the puppets were manipulated behind as well as in front.

Sbeik Thom is considered to be a sacred theater form, which is an act of worship, and so it began with a blessing ceremony or Sampeah Kru, replete with burning incense and sprinkling holy water to venerate ancestral teachers. Following the ritual, there was a brief enactment of the *Battle between the Good and the Bad Monkey* – basically, a battle between good and evil in which good prevails (but with a Buddhist slant). The Good Monkey brings the captured Bad Monkey before the wise Hermit for a judgment on their grievance. Contrary to my expectations, the wise Hermit rules that the Bad Monkey must be forgiven and freed,

declaring, “You are both the same. You must learn to forgive one another.” And so, renunciation of the ego wins the day.

The final section of the performance was a retelling of a scene from the *Reamker* myth – the Cambodian version of the famous *Ramayana* epic. This classic war of men over an abducted woman, in which the gods get in on the action, is a tension-filled battlefield drama with magic spells, evil serpents, valiant eagles, pathos, and victory.

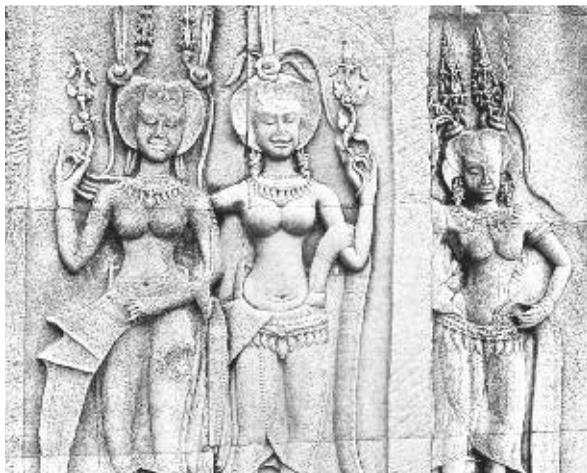
Beautiful as the puppets are, the real show occurred beneath them. The puppeteers are all finely trained performers of Lakhaon Kaol, or classical male masked dance. Below the hand-held puppets these puppeteers performed highly athletic choreography filled with quivering bourrées, powerful squats and lunges, one-legged balances, and the characteristic rhythmic hyperextension of the elbows as they paraded warring gods, men, and animal puppets across the screen. Particularly exciting was when the puppeteers peeled



The Cambodian Shadow Puppet Troupe of Wat Bo. (Photo: Anders Jiras)

the two-dimensional forms off the screen for a three-dimensional engagement on the stage. The dancers performed a “monkey duet” with the typical crouches, scratching, preening,

posed to be a ballet dancer.” Perhaps it was this early assertion of her strong will – insisting on pursuing serious dance training to become a performing artist, in spite of her father’s expectations to the contrary, that has given her the fortitude and commitment to breathe life back into the traditional dance of the royal court that was all but extinguished just thirty-four years ago.



Angkor Wat. (Photo: Karen Greenspan)

nitpicking, and joking around. Another treat was when, with drawn swords, they danced a Cambodian duel.

Two narrators (one male and one female) standing on opposite sides of the stage, chanted the story while the classical *pin peat* ensemble played an energetic musical accompaniment. One of the most poignant moments was the grief-filled lament sung by the female narrator as Rama discovered his mortally wounded brother on the battlefield. “I am so sad. I crumble with unspeakable pain.” What could resonate more universally than that?

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HRH Princess Norodom Buppha Devi stepped onto the stage of the Bruno Walter Auditorium at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts for an interview with renowned Peter Sellars, the iconoclastic theater and opera director. The Princess is a petite, demure, septuagenarian and was dressed in her modest uniform – a navy blue ankle-length skirt with matching shirt/jacket.

During the sometimes humorous conversation, she shared her personal stories of becoming a dancer in the Royal Ballet, recounting how “the daughter of a king was not sup-

posed to be a ballet dancer.” There was a presentation of a few short video excerpts of the Royal Ballet of Cambodia from as far back as 1960, including footage of HRH performing a solo. This was a teasing glimpse of the archival work of the Khmer Dance Project, initiated to document the classical Khmer ballet through filmed interviews and performances to keep the legacy of the surviving masters alive.

The audience responded warmly to a lecture-demonstration by members of the Royal Ballet showing the four roles and how each of them would portray the same emotional state (happiness, sadness, anger, love).

At one point in the discussion, the Princess revealed that her exceptional experience of knowing and having performed all four dance roles gave her the unique ability to recollect and reconstruct them, when so many of her masters and contemporaries had perished along with their knowledge and memories. In Sellars’ introductory remarks about the history of Cambodian court dance, he explained that in ancient times the royal family was believed to be appointed by the gods as guardians of the dance. HRH firmly shoulders this responsibility and makes no apologies about the fact that her first priority regarding dance in Cambodia is to save the existing traditional ballet heritage.

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Upon entering the Brooklyn Academy of Music Howard Gilman Opera House for the performance of the Royal Ballet of Cambodia, I was immediately invited into a sacred realm with the scent of burning incense on a can-



The Legend of Apsara Mera. (Photo: Pete Pin, Royal Ballet of Cambodia, BAM)

dlelit altar located downstage right. Two female elder dance masters entered along with the chorus, musicians, and the four principal dancers to perform the Sampeah Kru ceremony. They knelt before the altar, praying to the spirits of the artists and teachers who came before and requesting protection and inspiration during the performance. The two masters then took the headdresses for each of the four roles from the altar and ceremonially placed them on the heads of the assigned performers – giving them license to inhabit the roles. And so began the performance.

Robam Borann, or Cambodian classical dance, is a dance of elegant subtlety. The dancers embody the gods and goddesses with the quality of effortless composure and serenity, seamlessly transitioning through a continuous flow of sometimes barely perceptible movements.

The four singers of the chorus (two men and two women) sat on the floor, downstage left,

with legs folded underneath, next to the *pinpeat* musicians. The calm, cathedral-like echo of their narrative chant bled into the haunting, reedy song of the *sralai* (oboelike instrument) as it wielded its mesmerizing power like a snake charmer over the dancers and the audience. The dancers' gently pulsating elbows, moving into and out of hyperextension, accompanied by the feet alternately thumping the ball of the foot and then the heel, replicated and magnified the hypnotic rhythm of the drumbeat.

The company performed *The Legend of Apsara Mera* – a ballet choreographed by HRH Princess Buppha Devi, based upon two Khmer origin myths: “The Churning of the Sea of Milk” and “The Legend of Kambu and Mera.” “The Churning of the Sea of Milk” retells an ancient Indian story depicted in a bas-relief in the temple known as Angkor Wat.

In a post-performance “Artist Talk,” the Princess explained it was her idea to create a

ballet from this particular myth as it was not part of the traditional ballet repertory. The piece builds to a climactic tableau in which the gods and demons enact their eternal power struggle through a “tug of war” – clutching a giant *naga* which churns the waters of the ocean into a foam producing the divine *apsaras* as well as *amrita* – the elixir of eternal life.

This leads into another episode from the tradition, depicting the encounter between the *Apsara* Goddess Mohini and Asura, God of the Giants, for the coveted elixir of immortality. After a few amusingly restrained attempts to steal the silver cup from the Giant, the self-possessed Goddess obtains the cup after blinding the Giant with the toss of a sparkling crystal ball.

The opening story’s narrative serves as a prequel to the second act, “The Legend of Kambu and Mera,” a love story in which Mera, queen of the *apsaras*, who has been reincarnated on earth, falls in love with the Sage Prince Kambu. Out of their union, and even the melding of their names, Kambuja (the Sanskrit word for the Khmer kingdom) is born. This happens quite literally on stage when the two lovers imperceptibly seem to multiply into an entire nation of *apsaras* and princes (represented by the full company of dancers). This re-enactment of the birth of their nation is a powerful visual experience.

In the “Artist Talk” the Princess also related how the role of the *Apsara* princess was choreographed specifically for her in 1962 by her grandmother, Queen Kossamak. The Queen created the dance movements and designed the costume and headdress to resemble the *apsara* stone carvings at Angkor Wat. Queen Kossamak was also responsible for the innovation of men performing the monkey role (originally performed by women – as with all the other roles). To accomplish this she brought master teachers from Lakhaon Kaol into the palace to train male dancers for the role.

The richness and intricacy of the costumes is dazzling. The dancers are transformed into radiant divinities wearing brocaded silks and velvets decorated with golden sequins, beads,

and braid, as well as gold-tone headdresses and substantial amounts of golden jewelry. Before a performance the slow laborious process of dressing the dancers requires many skilled hands tying, pinning, and at times even sewing the performers into the elaborate fabrics, accessories, and headdresses.

This offering from the Royal Ballet of Cambodia was like looking at an exquisite jewel box. As with any treasure, the discovery of its provenance added to the value of the experience.

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The morning after the ballet performance I headed over to the Mark Morris Dance Center, across the street from the BAM Opera House, to observe the master dance class given by the Royal Ballet’s master teacher and choreographer, Proeung Chhieng, and the Princess. Initially the company dancers performed their set training sequences, codified rituals from which the teachers and dancers never deviate. One of these movement phrases included a complex stretch done while seated on the floor, in which the wrist and fingers are wrapped backwards around the opposite ankle which is crossed over the opposite bent knee, showing the use of multiple body parts to assist in stretching others.

I marveled at how a master teacher homed in on one of the company soloists, attending to the dancer’s coaching by sitting on the floor next to her – continuously molding the dancer’s body with her hands, as the dancer proceeded through the prescribed movement sequence. Later, this same master was called upon to demonstrate the giant’s role. This woman, who looked to be over 40-years-old, with a bit of extra girth around her middle and a perceptible “no-nonsense” manner, gave a “full-out” performance of the character, exuding physical and emotional strength.

Then we were invited onto the dance floor and treated to these same movement patterns which promote extreme hyper-mobility of the hands, fingers, elbows, hips, and lower back – hallmarks of the Cambodian classical dance vocabulary. The master teacher and the com-

pany members circulated through the group gently prodding the unaccustomed Western bodies into semicorrect positions, creating a dawning awareness of the unique demands of this dance form. Chey Chankethya, from Amrita Performing Arts translated the instructions while encouraging, "Just keep smiling!"

Even the Princess got in on the action when she daintily hiked up her long, navy-blue skirt and squatted down to give a participant a "hands-on" adjustment. HRH expounded upon the intricacies of the dance hand gestures, giving an animated demonstration. At the end of her explanation she taught the ending prayer position for the hands – like a "révérence" in ballet class. Afterwards, she gave everyone the thumbs up gesture and said (in English), "Good job!"

I noted, one last time, the familiar faces of this group I had become a part of during these weeks of festival events. We were dancers, artists, museum and theater personnel, producers, supporters, reporters, scholars, visionaries, Cambodian diaspora, and unsus-

pecting venue subscribers – drawn to be touched by this culture that is in some respects a world apart, and in other ways much like our own.

I spoke with Vanna Sann, marketing and communications manager for the festival, to ask if Season of Cambodia would be touring elsewhere. He replied that several cities had made requests but that there were no plans as yet. I hesitated and then offered my suggestion: "I hope you will take Season of Cambodia back home to the Cambodian people." I was heartened by his response that it was the first priority of the festival producers. He continued that they already have plans to televise the performances on Cambodian TV as well as to produce live performances in three principal cities.

It is most fitting that the Cambodian people, who are piecing together a country whose cultural legacy was brought to the brink of destruction, have the opportunity to rebuild and be rebuilt through this celebration of the creative human spirit.

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