



*Toni Shapiro-Phim, PFP Associate Director, was in Cambodia in 2004 for the world premiere of the lakhon khol piece, "Veyreap's Battle." She was there again in 2006 to undertake additional research and documentation, and has been instrumental in bringing PFP's lakhon khol excerpt to Philadelphia.*

*The monkey general Hanuman (Soeur Thavarak) battles Machanub (Phon Sopheap), the son he never knew. When the two realize their relationship, they hug and cry and put their differences behind them. From "Veyreap's Battle," an excerpt from the "Reamker," Royal University of Fine Arts Theatre, 2004. Photo by James Wasserman.*

by Toni Shapiro-Phim

# Masked men of Cambodia

In the 1940s, Cambodia's Queen Kossamak Nearyroath was so inspired by "monkey" dancers in a troupe based in a village across the river from the capital, that she decided to make a radical change in the composition of her own royal dance ensemble. She presided over the country's royal troupe, which was, at that time, exclusively female. The royal (or classical) dancers performed sacred pieces connecting earthly beings to the heavens, and lengthy dance-dramas enacting mythico-historical tales of love, magic, and battles. Goddesses and princesses, gods and princes, ogres (most often representing evil), and monkeys (usually portraying good) populated these dances, with all characters being performed by women. And then, at an annual festival on the palace grounds featuring crafts, food, and performances by people from many regions of the country, the Queen became entranced by boys from the nearby countryside dancing the monkey character roles. She proceeded to recruit some of those very children to dance as monkeys in the royal troupe. The troupe was no longer all-female; the monkey

roles have been danced only by men and boys ever since.

The boys she recruited had been performing as part of a tradition that almost parallels that of royal/classical dance. In village settings, all-male troupes (with men playing the princesses, too) would perform at New Year and other major occasions, as a kind of offering to the spirits and deities. This performance tradition, known as lakhon khol, has as its sole repertoire episodes of the Reamker, the Cambodian version of the Ramayana epic of Indian origin. The troupe of Vat Svay Andet village, the troupe spotted by the Queen all those decades ago, is still in existence. It is thought to be the only lakhon khol troupe in the country to have survived the war and revolution of the 1970s.

Every New Year (for Cambodians, the New Year falls in mid-April), the Vat Svay Andet troupe enacts excerpts from the Reamker, seeking to propitiate ancestral spirits for the sake of the well-being of the village as a whole. Before the upheavals of the late-20th century, the performance ritual lasted seven nights. These days it extends just three, yet nonetheless remains a complex, multilayered

fusion of various spiritual trajectories, and a focus of preparation and excitement for villagers of all generations.

The Reamker is the tale of the adventures of Preah Ream (Prince Rama) who, exiled to the forest (through no fault of his own), travels with his wife, Neang Seda (Princess Sita) and his brother Preah Leak (Prince Laksmana). The evil ogre, Reap (Ravana), ruler of the land of Langka, kidnaps the princess, whisking her off to his island abode. Preah Ream calls upon his monkey soldiers to help rescue her. Following numerous adventures involving magic, battles, tests of loyalty and endurance, the monkey soldiers and the princes arrive in the land of the ogres and defeat the enemy, freeing the princess.

The first Khmer (Cambodian) language version of the Ramayana story appeared in the 16th or 17th century. The manuscript was most likely a libretto for lakhon khol performance, recited by a narrator. The Reamker has inspired artistic creation in sculpture, painting, and dance-drama for centuries. The royal/classical dancers still count this story as a core element of their repertoire.

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The episode most critical for performance at New Year time in Vat Svay Andet is that of Kumbhakar and the release of waters. The ogre Kumbhakar, a brother of Reap, stretches his enlarged body across a river, effectively cutting off the flow of water to Preah Ream’s soldiers. The monkey warrior Angkut transforms himself into a dead dog, and floats toward Kumbhakar. Kumbhakar’s disgust mounts as he, unsuccessful at driving off the dead animal, becomes overwhelmed by the unbearable odor. At last, he jumps up and releases the waters.

For the residents of Vat Svay Andet, the performance of the release of waters is supposed to bring about their very own

release of waters – the rains – soon after the dry heat of New Year time gets almost intolerable. New Year occurs at the height of the hot season. With water being the lifeblood of the countryside, performance of this episode becomes a kind of magic act, assuring fertility of the land.

Village lakhon khol performers may have trained for many years, often under the tutelage of a relative, but they are not solely dancers. Most are farmers by day. However, as New Year or some other special occasion nears, they will spend evenings practicing, preparing for the event that includes the participation of everyone, young and old, as performer or spectator, and

people from nearby villages as well. The perpetuation of tradition is perceived to carry the possibility of combating communal ills and re-establishing natural order.

After an elaborate offering ceremony in which Hindu gods, the Buddha and ancestral teachers and spirits of the arts are invoked, the performers take their places outdoors inside a wooden rectangular structure enclosed only at one end. Two or three narrators intone a recitation in alternation with the music of a pin peat orchestra (a mainly percussive ensemble that also accompanies classical dance) as the dancers—ogres, monkeys, princes and princesses, all masked—enact their tale.

In the 1960s, when Cambodia’s Royal University of Fine Arts was in its infancy, teams of artists from the school traversed Cambodia, researching and practicing traditional arts. Actors, musicians and dancers took what they had seen or learned



*Opposite: Em Theay, classical dance teacher and singer, dresses a lakhon khol performer backstage. Each part of the many-layered costumes must be wrapped, tied or sewn into place for every performance.*

*This page: Young monkeys get distracted by each other while guarding Prince Rama, who is, ultimately, kidnapped by the ogres, in "Veyreap's Battle." Photos by James Wasserman, 2004*

and, once back at the academy in the capital, proceeded to re-make and refine those arts for public performance on a proscenium stage. It was in this way that lakhon khol developed a professional, theatrical version – a version considered traditional enough (and important enough) to garner government support for its re-creation immediately after the ouster of the Khmer Rouge.

Lakhon khol, along with most other cultural and artistic practices, was threatened with extinction during the Khmer Rouge era (1975-1979) in which close to a quarter of the population perished from starvation, disease, forced labor and execution. In early 1979, surviving professional artists who had regrouped in Phnom Penh, the capital, estimated that between 80-90% of their colleagues in all fields of the arts had died in the less-than-four years in

which the Khmer Rouge had control of the country. Immediately after the ouster of the Khmer Rouge, the Department of Arts of the Ministry of Information and Culture, and some provincial

instruments.

The theatrical version is dynamic—athletic and acrobatic, without extended seated sequences in which narrators intone the storyline, as one finds in the

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offices of the Ministry of Culture oversaw the development of lakhon khol troupes. At the dance department of the School of Fine Arts (which is now once again the Royal University of Fine Arts), certain male students were selected to train in this technique. Support was also given to the village of Vat Svay Andet, to make masks and costumes and musical

village context. Because Phnom Penh’s lakhon khol performers also train in the fundamentals of classical dance, their postures adhere to a strict canon, though they are given more latitude for improvisation than are their classical dance counterparts. They also have more latitude than their village counterparts to elaborate on any number of episodes

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working with my father too. I didn't know. It was kind of hard to figure out which way to go. So I had to balance them even. Then in order to keep it up, I said, "What's there to do but go and join Kulu Mele?"

### Shineka D. Crawford:

A lesson learned  
(a true story)

It was 1993 or 1994 when my father Irvin Lloyd II had two important things to tell me. He wanted to lighten the mood and ODUNDE was coming up. He asked me to go with him to ODUNDE. "A what day?" was what I said. But I agreed. The day we were to go, I put on my tightest outfit, the highest heels, and made sure I put in a weave down to my butt. We met at my grandfather's house in North

Philly and he said, "Shineka, you can't wear those heels to ODUNDE because we will be walking a lot." I still wore my heels. When we got there I was disappointed at first. I didn't care about my heritage at that time in my life. I was considered a "hoochie mama." My dad showed me women with head-wraps and long frilly dresses and told me I should try it out. He told me I need to find myself before he dies. And then he told me he was diagnosed with full-blown AIDS. He told me he didn't know if it was from past drug use or sleeping with so many women unprotected or both. My dad told me I was a queen and I laughed so hard. Then he told me I was smart and my beauty wasn't between my legs. He told me my weave was horsehair and it was time for me to get my life together. I rolled my eyes

(but not so he could see me). He started pointing at women saying they looked good. My comment was, "Daddy, we ain't from Africa, those women need perms and it's too hot for all those clothes." I told my dad that they could never get a man looking like that. A year later, he died. He was always my best friend. I really didn't understand what he was talking about until two years ago. Now, with locks in my hair and a new style of dress, I am the Queen he always said I was. The poetry I have written since 16 now has more significance than before, and I will be attending ODUNDE for the first time since me and my dad had that talk.

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from the Reamker.

In 2004, they created an evening-length work of an excerpt never emphasized in their repertoire before, one in which Preah Ream is kidnapped by the ogres, and the monkeys have to traverse the sea, encountering dancing sea horses and crabs along the way. This piece is called "Veyreap's Battle." In early 2006, they premiered what they are calling "contemporary khol" in which "monkeys" and "ogres" performed a site-specific work, first outdoors, on a dirt path and in a tree behind the practice hall of the Bassac Theatre—a once-glorious edifice that was gutted by fire in 1994—and then inside the tattered practice hall. As opposed to traditional lakhon khol in which everyone is masked and costumed in elaborate brocades and sequined velvet,

this new version saw performers in simple black tee-shirts and loose trousers, with no masks. And though this piece was loosely based on a part of the Reamker, the references to a story line were somewhat diffuse as the six dancers played with the basic movement vocabulary of the tradition, stretching possibilities as never done before.

Way back in the 1940s, the Queen made a radical change in the composition of the royal/classical dance troupe. Being royal, nobody questioned her. Today in Cambodia, debate is raging over what can or should be allowed to "change," and what needs to be preserved in the realm of traditional arts, given the country's extensive legacy of loss. The dancers and musicians who challenged the status quo with the new approach to

lakhon khol have been met with a combination of delight (by some peers) and skepticism and criticism (by some in positions of administrative authority in the arts.) These performers already have plans, though, for what might come next....

*The Philadelphia Folklore Project will feature a performance of lakhon khol by five men (Tonara Hing, Sovanthy Meng, Thavro Phim, Ra Soeur, and Say Soeur), all of whom are graduates of Cambodia's School of Fine Arts, in its May Dance Happens Here weekend at the ArtsBank. These five were among the first generation of artists trained after the fall of the Khmer Rouge. Specializing in monkey or ogre roles, each has toured internationally as a dancer. All are now resident in the U.S. The PFP program is supported by Dance Advance, NEA, PCA, and PFP members.*

repertoires, guided by the elder artists who had survived such great loss.

Cambodia has a number of forms of dance, some village-based, some with ritual significance, and others for fun or theatrical entertainment. Several of these dance forms are taught at the Fine Arts institution, including classical (or court) dance, masked dance-drama, and folk dance. After graduating, I taught dance (the monkey role in both the masked dance-drama and classical forms, and folk dance) at the University until I moved to the United States in 1993. As a dancer in Cambodia, I studied under the finest teachers, Yith Sarin, Keo Malis, Ngim Sorn, and toured Cambodia and the United States.

(2006) I will perform at the Arts Bank in a special show with former Cambodian dance colleagues who now live in Minnesota.

Though my art is considered “traditional,” it must remain dynamic. (Its dynamism and adaptability have helped it survive that history of war and revolution mentioned earlier.) Over the years here in the U.S., I have been the artistic director of several Cambodian dance performances for which I helped to re-stage some traditional pieces, and even re-choreograph some. I practice constantly on my own, and with colleagues (in Massachusetts, for example), whenever I can. I have been back to Cambodia a couple of times. During those extended visits, I worked with dancers

movements and gestures that are both graceful and acrobatic, that come from the martial arts as well as from court and temple dance. This is my way of contributing to the telling of stories that teach about myth, history, and social relations. This is my way of contributing to the continuation and regeneration of Cambodian culture.

**“Since I’ve been in the U.S., I’ve studied and performed Western modern dance as well. And though I love it, my main passion is for the Cambodian performing arts.” —Thavro Phim**

In the U.S., I have taught Cambodian dance in Ithaca, New York, San Jose, California, and Fall River, Massachusetts, and have just started teaching in an after-school program at John H. Taggart School in Philadelphia, in preparation for Cambodian New Year.

In 2001 I performed masked dance (called lakhon khol) with former colleagues at a conference on Buddhism at the University of Michigan. Also in that year I performed with my former troupe when the dancers from the Royal University of Fine Arts toured the U.S. and asked me to join them in their show at Zellerbach Hall in Berkeley, California. Since moving to Philadelphia in 2002, I have been a teaching consultant to a Cambodian dance troupe in Fall River, Massachusetts. This spring

(my teachers, colleagues, and students) at the Royal University of Fine Arts on technique development and on documentation projects. I also worked with a U.S.-based filmmaker to produce a documentary film on Cambodian dance, “Dancing Through Death: The Monkey, Magic and Madness of Cambodia,” that has been shown on public television stations across the U.S.

Since I’ve been in the U.S., I’ve studied and performed Western modern dance as well. And though I love it, my main passion is for the Cambodian performing arts. These arts have aesthetic, spiritual, and historical pulls for me. As a dancer of the monkey role, I feel best when I am both energized and exhausted under that mask, performing