



TREASURES OF A NATION

A Forward-Looking Tribute to the Masters of Cambodia's Traditional Arts

With the opening of *Season of Cambodia* in 30 venues across New York City, Cambodian artists begin a celebration of decades of dedication to their form that has led to their emergence onto the world stage. Throughout April and May, many leading contemporary and traditional Cambodian artists will share, through their exhibitions, performances, humanities discussions, workshops, master classes and residencies, their distinctive expressions of Cambodian identity.

Season of Cambodia is both an international platform for an emerging generation of Cambodian artists and a continuation of a rich and resilient tradition of artistry and creativity in a country too often associated with death and destruction. During the 3 years, 8 months and 20 days of Khmer Rouge rule, an estimated 90% of the country's artists were killed or fled the country. This festival pays tribute to the struggles of the artists who kept these traditions alive.

At the center of *Season of Cambodia* are the masters of Cambodian arts—Her Royal Highness Princess Norodom Buppha Devi, who has gone from a prima ballerina to pioneer choreographer of Khmer classical court dance; Kong Nay, a beloved musician famous for his satirical rhyming verse and playing of the Chapei Dang Weng, a traditional Cambodia long-necked guitar; and Vann Nath, a painter and survivor who, until he passed away in 2011, captured both the suffering of Cambodia's past and beauty of its present—along with the generation that followed them, masters in their own right, which includes filmmaker Rithy Panh, choreographer Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, musician and ethnomusicologist Dr. Sam Ang-Sam, composer Him Sophy and artistic director and educator Proeung Chien.

HRH Buppha Devi is the living embodiment of the Royal Ballet of Cambodia, one of two Cambodian art forms listed by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage, along with Sbeik Thom, Khmer shadow puppet theater, which is also featured in *Season of Cambodia*. Along with Kong Nay, HRH Buppha Devi is also among 17 artists designated as intangible treasures by the Royal Government of Cambodia to ensure that the country's traditions are nurtured and remain a vital influence on the arts.

The masters are the foundation upon which Cambodia's bridge to the past is being built. Surrounding them in *Season of Cambodia* are more than

By bringing artists and audiences together to celebrate Cambodia's rich cultural heritage, this extraordinary festival reminds us that the arts are the foundation of a more open, creative and compassionate society.

— Kate D. Levin
Commissioner,
NYC Department of Cultural Affairs

125 dancers, musicians, visual artists, filmmakers and arts professionals who are actively constructing the links between the timeless traditions that are an integral part of Cambodian identity and the inevitable and thrilling emergence of modern and foreign influences that are giving birth to contemporary expressions of Cambodian culture.

Through the engagement of Cambodian artists with a global creative community, vitality has been restored to a population that was nearly wiped out by the Khmer Rouge. *Season of Cambodia* invites its audiences to rejoice in the beauty borne from decades of mutual support and inspiration between Cambodian artists and their global collaborators.

There is a great reverence for tradition among the contemporary artists featured in *Season of Cambodia*. Yet, their tribute to the masters is not being paid through replication, but rather by integrating essential characteristics of Cambodian arts—from the rich tone of the traditional instruments to delicate movements of the Apsara dancers—into their own art.

And if one looks and listens closely to the works in the festival line-up, there is also the beginning of a narrative about Cambodian artists who struggled to preserve their country's heritage in order to restore a culture of creativity in their country and become inimitable voices in the international arts community.

Cambodia is no longer a country that can be defined solely by trauma and ancient temples. Cambodian artists, as with their counterparts in New York City and around the world, have something significant to contribute to a global dialogue about the arts. With an intimate connection to their past, Cambodia's emerging artists are the eyes through which the world will view Cambodia's future.