

The Advisor

Dancing for the gods



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Dancing for the gods Sovannahong

In a nation whose historic 'high culture' was all but obliterated thirty years ago, last Friday's luminous, one-off performance of the Khmer ballet 'Sovannahong' must rate as a milestone.

The ballet is about a trying game of fate being played out upon a royal family. So, too, is the story of its long-awaited production.

Choreographing the ballet began in 1955 by King Sihanouk's mother, Queen Kossamak - who trained her granddaughter, Princess Buppha Devi, to perform the lead. Cambodia's turbulent modern history helped ensure the work was never completed. [See box.]

But that history has now come full circle - with Princess Buppha Devi herself, now 65, staging the first production of 'Sovannahong' half a century on.

That Cambodian classical dance survived at all was a close-run thing. Proeung Chhieng, a distinguished advisor to the Princess (and in the Royal Ballet's golden age, one of its

most important 'monkey dancers') painfully outlines how the two-millennia-old form reached the brink of extinction:

'The Royal Ballet had 300 masters, dancers and musicians before the Khmer Rouge,' he says. 'After them, we had around 30 dancers and musicians left, and 10 or 12 masters. Only around ten percent survived.'

The Khmer Rouge also destroyed the Royal Ballet's costumes and musical instruments.

'After 1979 we had to revive everything step by step,' Proeung Chhieng says. 'Some dancers started this in the Thai refugee camps. Others regrouped in France. Here in Cambodia, we found a few old instruments and costumes. In 1980 we re-opened the Fine Arts School, near the Royal Palace.'

For centuries the 'keeper' of Cambodian classical dance was the Royal Ballet - which the French sculptor Auguste Rodin saw in Paris in 1906, observing: 'These Cambodian women have given us everything antiquity could have

contained... There is only this and the Greeks.'

Friday's audience of 600, in a packed Chaktomuk Conference Hall, seemed no less enthralled. 'It was definitely one of the better performances of Cambodian classical ballet,' says Swedish photographer Anders Jirås (whose shots of the evening grace these pages).

Frenchman Alain Daniel, who saw performances of the Royal Ballet in the 1960s, said: 'You could see how happy the dancers were to be recognised for doing something important. And it is important - the ballet is one of the highest expressions of Khmer civilisation, comparable to Angkor. Only Angkor is static. No-one is building more temples there. This ballet is present and alive.'

'Sovannahong' tells of a princess who mutates into a man, in a desperate quest to bring her slain princely lover back to life. Princess Buppha Devi and her cast - students and teachers from Phnom Penh's Secondary School of Fine Arts - spared little effort to bring the production up to international standard.

The performance was produced by the Phnom Penh-based international NGO, Amrita Performing Arts, with financial backing from the Rockefeller Foundation.

'Our participation,' says Amrita's Fred Frumberg, 'allowed for extensive research, supported artists through a full rehearsal process, built new costumes, and presented last Friday's one public showing.'

Why only one performance?

'It's all we had budget for!' Frumberg says. 'This was only ever intended as a project geared towards creating new repertory. It was a collaborative effort between the Princess, a group of elder masters, and young performers.'

So what is the future of this ancient form?

Frumberg believes Amrita's usefulness to classical dance will lie in 'building more repertory, thus strengthening the form itself. And now that this work exists, it is up to us to find other donors to help present future public performances, unless the Ministry of Culture is able to do that, which is rare.'

'Since the war,' Frumberg adds, 'the emphasis was more on revival and preservation of previously lost repertory. The Princess was not concerned with creating new repertory until she felt a healthy momentum had been achieved in reviving the old. This is the first time we have created a work that had only been started, but never actually finished.'

Proeung Chhieng, Princess Buppha Devi's dance advisor, says that the Princess is now looking to reconstitute another work, 'Inav Busba' - like 'Sovannahong' a legend concerning a prince and a princess.

'Our teachers are dying,' he says. 'We have to recreate everything before they leave us. So we are gathering that story together now. We have 22 or 23 of the 55 parts so far. In addition, each year we train about 60 students.'

'Few people understand the importance of this tradition to Cambodian civilisation,' says Alain Daniel. 'The girls work very hard. This classical dance takes six years to learn. But right now classical dance here doesn't even have its own stage, or any resources.'

'The Cambodian people should realise they have a very good chance here to create a truly great company. These dancers are so good because they become the characters. They are not dancing for spectators - for tourists. They are dancing for the gods.'





Pic: Anders Jiras

វិទ្យាសាស្ត្រ

នៅក្នុងពិភពលោកមួយដែលមានប្រវត្តិវប្បធម៌ដ៏ប្រព្រួញបានបំផ្លាញអស់រយៈពេល៣០ឆ្នាំ។ ថ្ងៃសុក្រ គឺជាថ្ងៃដែលមានសិរីសួស្តី ដោយមានការសំដែងរាំខ្មែរមួយឈ្មោះ (សុវណ្ណហង្ស)មានការរីកចម្រើនដ៏មិនធម្មតាដ៏វែងឆ្ងាយ។

រត់ទៅរកការបង្ហាញវិធីវិសាសនាស្រាវជ្រាវរបស់ខ្មែរ វាជាប្រធានមួយដែលគេរំពឹងអោយកើតមានអស់រយៈពេលជាច្រើនមកហើយ។

ការរៀបចំតាក់តែងក្បាច់រាំ បានចាប់ផ្តើមឡើងនៅក្នុងឆ្នាំ ១៩៥៥ ដោយមាតាព្រះបាទសីហនុ ម្ចាស់ក្សត្រី ព្រះកុសមៈ ដែលបានបង្រៀនចៅស្រីរបស់ព្រះអង្គ គឺព្រះនាងម្ចាស់ បុត្រាទៅជាអ្នកវិទ្យាសាស្ត្រនៅក្នុងក្រុមវិទ្យាសាស្ត្រ។ ប្រវត្តិថ្មីនៃវិភាគលោកល

របស់ប្រទេសកម្ពុជា បង្ហាញថាវាមានការរីកចម្រើន។ រហូតមកដល់ពេលនេះ ព្រះនាងម្ចាស់ បុត្រាទៅបង្កើតអោយមានទូរស័ព្ទសុវណ្ណ ហង្ស ជាលើកដំបូងនេះនៅតាក់តែងលើស្រទាប់ដីនោះ។

រត់ប្រពៃណីរបស់ខ្មែរវិលត្រឡប់មករកភាពដើមដំបូងកាលពី ពីរពាន់ឆ្នាំមុន ហើយរត់ព្រះរាជគ្រូមានការថែរក្សាជាងគ្នាបំប៉ននៅក្នុងពេលបច្ចុប្បន្ននេះ។

មនុស្សមិនចង់ទៅថ្ងៃ សុក្រ នៅក្នុងសាលាមហាស្រុកពុទ្ធមុនីមានការស្រឡាត់ស្រាវជ្រាវនេះ។ បុរសមិនចង់ទៅ តាកិរ Alain Daniel ដែលបានឃើញការសំដែងរាំព្រះរាជគ្រូ នៅក្នុងទសវត្សរ៍ ៧០ បាននិយាយថា " អ្នកអាចឃើញវិភាគលោកលោកយើងរបស់អ្នកវិទ្យាសាស្ត្របានគេស្គាល់ក្នុងនាមពេលសំដែងរាំសំខាន់នេះ "។ វាមានសារៈសំខាន់ណាស់។

ព្រោះ រត់គឺជាការបង្ហាញនូវវប្បធម៌ ដ៏ខ្ពង់ខ្ពស់របស់ខ្មែរ ហើយដើមនិយាយទៅលើប្រាសាទអង្គរវត្ត។ មានតែប្រាសាទអង្គរវត្តប៉ុណ្ណោះដែល ស្ថិតស្ថេរ និងមិនមានការផ្លាស់ប្តូរ។ គ្មានអ្នកណាម្នាក់សាងសង់ប្រាសាទផ្សេងទៀតនៅទីនេះទេ។ រត់នេះនៅតែមាន និងរស់រវើក។

នាំទៅរកភាពដើមដោយអង្គការអន្តរជាតិក្រៅរដ្ឋាភិបាល ដែលបានបោះទិសដៅទៅក្រុងអ្វីពេញ Amrita Performing Arts។ ព្រះនាងម្ចាស់ បុត្រាទៅ ជាមួយអ្នកដើរត្រឡប់ និងក្រុមរបស់គាត់ដែលមកពីអន្តរជាតិឡើយឆ្លុះឆ្លាយទៅក្រុងស្រុកនេះបានចំណាយនូវកិច្ចការ

ទំនៀមទម្លាប់ដើម្បីឃើញមានការសំដែង នៅថ្ងៃសុក្រ អោយមានលក្ខណៈអន្តរជាតិ ។ ហេតុអ្វីបានជាមានការសំដែងតែមួយយប់ នៅថ្ងៃសុក្រ? " យើងមានវិការសំរាប់តែប៉ុណ្ណឹង " ស្ថាបនិករបស់ Amrita, លោក Frumberg និយាយថា " ហើយនេះគឺជីវិតដែលយើងចង់បានដែល។

ជាតំណាងមួយនៃអោយមានការបង្កើតនូវការប្រមូលផ្តុំថ្មី ។ នេះជាការសហការរវាង ព្រះនាងនិងក្រុមអ្នកមានបទពិសោធន៍ និងអ្នក។

សំដែងថ្មីជាមួយការបង្ហាញជាសាធារណៈតែមួយ។ ដោយសារតែឥឡូវនេះមានការងារនេះ វាអាស្រ័យលើពួកយើងដើម្បីស្វែងរកអ្នក។

ឧបត្ថម្ភគាំទ្រដើម្បីអោយមានការសំដែងជាសាធារណៈនៅពេលអនាគត ពុះប្រាណាតែក្រសួងវប្បធម៌អាចធ្វើឲ្យឆ្ពោះ ដែលវាជាការមួយដ៏តិរ "។

រត់ព្រះរាជគ្រូល្មែរគឺជាទំរង់មួយដែលគេស្គាល់ថាវា រត់ព្រះរាជគ្រូហើយមិនមានតាំងពីមុនសម័យខ្មែរក្រហម ឥឡូវនេះ

មានវិធីណែនាំការវិលត្រឡប់មកវិញ ដែលអោយនិងចាត់ចែង។ " វាមានសារៈសំខាន់ និងដឹងថាអ្នកវិទ្យាសាស្ត្រនេះ ត្រូវពិចារណាពួកគាត់និងអោយជាអ្នកសំដែង ពួកគាត់វាមិនមែនដើម្បីអ្នកទស្សនា ឬអ្នកមេសចរណ៍ទេ គឺវិទ្យាសាស្ត្រ "។ នេះគឺជាប្រធានរបស់លោក Alain Daniel។



Pic: Anders Jirås

Vuth Chanmoly playing Preahm Toe, the transformed figure of the giant who lives in the mountain.



Roth Chanmony playing Prince Sovannahong wearing Princess Keth Soryong's garland



Thong Kim Ann playing the King of the Giant Kingdom. The ten faces on the mask represent the king



Sin Sakada playing Princess Keth Soryong. In classical dance it is rare for a female to hold the bow.

Photographer: Anders Jirås, Sweden



Jirås has been a photographer since the age of 15, and he presented his first exhibition in 1965. Since starting his commercial business in 1969, Jirås has strived to help visual artists, sculptors, actors and dancers through his photography. He first visited Cambodia in late 2005 where he saw dance being performed in orphanages at Sovanna Phum in the Bassac slum and at the Les Nuits d'Angkor in Siem Reap. Upon return to Sweden, Jirås made two exhibitions of Cambodian dance before permanently moving to Cambodia. Jirås hopes that through his photography he can show the beauty of Cambodian arts.

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The Advisor would like to thank HRH Princess Buppha Devi, Anders Jirås, Fred Fromberg and the staff of Amrita Performing Arts for assisting with this pictorial.

The Advisor would also like to wish the troupe success in all their future performances.

Five minutes with HRH Princess Buppha Devi

Q: Did your grandmother, Queen Kossamak, have a particular 'vision' for the story - something she thought it was all about?

A: It was part of a larger mission to set to dance as many stories from Cambodian legend as possible.

Q: To you, does the story symbolise anything of relevance to present-day Cambodia?

A: Yes insofar as passing on the traditional dance heritage from my grandmother to the young generation of dancers.

Q: What prevented 'Sovannahong' being completed and presented in the 1950s?

A: Her Majesty The Queen worked on scenes of this work off and on throughout the years, but that ended with the coup in 1970 when the royal family was desposed.

Q: What does the production represent, to you? (i.e. getting the ballet staged, as opposed to the story itself.)

A: An opportunity to not only create fresh, new repertory, but to also bring unknown characters back into the repertory. The classical dance characters best known include the male

role, female role, giant and monkey. In this work, we introduced the role of the giant transformed into a human which has not been performed on stage in over forty years.

