

# Royal Ballet of Cambodia

Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts



Royal Ballet, Apsara Mera 2012.

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Ynav & Bosba, Lakhaon Festival 2009.

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**R**enowned for its graceful hand gestures and stunning costumes, the Royal Ballet of Cambodia, also known as Khmer Classical Dance, has

been closely associated with the Khmer Court for over 1,000 years. Performances would traditionally accompany royal ceremonies and observances such as coronations, marriages, funerals or Khmer holidays. This art form, which narrowly escaped annihilation in the 1970s, is cherished by many Cambodians, and was inscribed in 2008 on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Infused with a sacred and symbolic role, the dance embodies the traditional values of refinement, respect and spirituality. Its repertoire perpetuates the legends associated with the origins of the Khmer

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people. Consequently, Cambodians have long esteemed this tradition as the emblem of Khmer culture. Four distinct character types exist in the classical repertoire: Neang the woman, Neayrong the man, Yeak the giant and Sva the monkey. Each possesses distinctive colours, costumes, makeup and masks. The gestures and poses, mastered by the dancers only after years of intensive training, evoke the gamut of human emotions, from fear and rage to love and joy. An orchestra accompanies the dance, and a female chorus provides a running commentary on the plot, highlighting the

emotions mimed by the dancers, who were considered the kings' messengers to the gods and to the ancestors.

The Royal Ballet almost ceased to exist under the genocidal rule of the Khmer Rouge, who eliminated almost all master dancers and musicians. Immediately after the dictator Pol Pot's defeat in 1979, dance troupes re-emerged and performances of the ancient repertoire resumed. The ballet has regained much of its former splendour thanks to efforts of H.R.H. the Princess Bopha Devi and the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts. 