



Thavro Phim and masks— all representing characters in the Reamker. Photo: Toni Shapiro-Phim

by **Thavro Phim**

Dancing the monkey role



There's an episode from the Reamker, the Cambodian version of the Ramayana epic of Indian origin, in which Hanuman, the monkey

general, flies too close to the sun. The sun's power is so strong that Hanuman disintegrates. (There is a lot of magic in Cambodian epics and legends. Monkeys can fly and can also dive to the bottom of the ocean. Giants battle princes. Celestial beings descend to earth to play in lakes and forests.) In the Reamker, the sun god notices that a bit of the monkey remains. His essence is floating about. The sun

god brings Hanuman back to life from that "essence."

Cambodian culture, and perhaps the dance in particular, has a history that reminds me of Hanuman's experiences. Over the centuries, war and revolution have threatened the dance's survival. As recently as the late 1970s, the leadership of the Khmer Rouge regime (in power from 1975 to early 1979) officially banned arts that had spiritual or court (royal) ties. They introduced a whole new genre of dance and music to Cambodia—revolutionary arts that glorified peasant and industrial labor and that criticized previous regimes and ways of life. Dance as we Cambodians had known it was no longer

practiced or performed.

But in 1979, immediately after that regime's overthrow, even though between 80 to 90 percent of the country's professional artists (dancers, musicians, actors, poets, playwrights, etc.) had died from starvation, disease and execution under Khmer Rouge rule, the essence of Cambodian dance had not been destroyed. Enough of it remained so that it could be brought back to life.

I was born and raised in Cambodia, where I started studying dance at the School of Fine Arts (currently the Royal University of Fine Arts) in 1980. I was part of the first generation to try to re-create the dance and music

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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.

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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