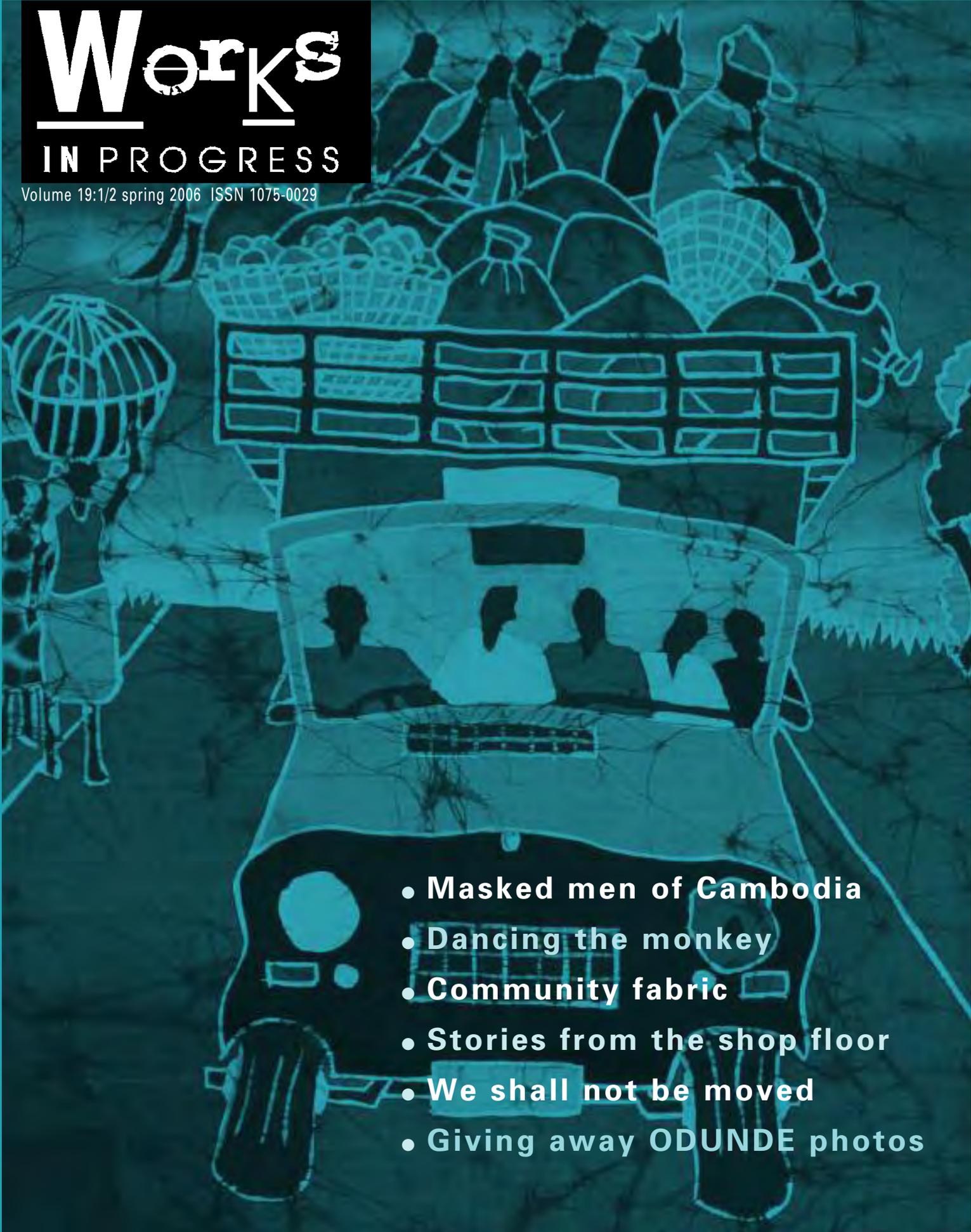


Works

IN PROGRESS

Volume 19:1/2 spring 2006 ISSN 1075-0029

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- **Masked men of Cambodia**
 - **Dancing the monkey**
 - **Community fabric**
 - **Stories from the shop floor**
 - **We shall not be moved**
 - **Giving away ODUNDE photos**

Works

IN PROGRESS

Works in progress is the magazine of the Philadelphia Folklore Project, a 19-year-old public interest folklife agency. We work with people and communities in the Philadelphia area to build critical folk cultural knowledge, sustain the complex folk and traditional arts of our region, and challenge practices that diminish these local grassroots arts and humanities. To learn more, please visit us: www.folkloreproject.org or call 215.726.1106.

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Front cover:
 Market truck.
 Batik by Paupau
 Awuklu. Photo:
 Will Brown

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On April 7, we at the Folklore Project lost our dear friend Rosemary Cubas to cancer. The last issue of this magazine described the fight against eminent domain abuse and the unjust takings of peoples' homes in too many Philadelphia neighborhoods. This fight was Rosemary's passion. With great sorrow, we lament her passing: we are among the many people who miss her dearly. It was a privilege to have known her.

Rosemary was here, in our new home, present even while she was battling cancer — her last battle, fought, like others, with courage, strength, humor and love, her eyes wide open. Her life was with others, in community, in struggle.

Rosemary treated people with real respect. She listened. And she truly heard: she knew enough about peoples' situations to put their stories together so that they began to add up. And she got people to listen to one another's stories, to create a kind of common wealth of experience, a community currency reckoned in a kind of value that people could know to be true, believe in, and build on.

Describing the process of learning to fight bureaucracies, Rosemary told me, "We had to unlearn writing and talking from the heart." Saying this, she was ruefully acknowledging how ordinary peoples' knowledge (and ways of talking) are too often disrespected: she was also describing what she liked about the idea of folklore: a way of valuing (and paying attention to) the terms in which people describe their own experiences. "I would have liked to have been a folklorist," she mused once.

"You are one," I insisted.

Rosemary's brand of activism and folklore involved carrying a vision of justice grounded in respecting ordinary peoples' capacity to name and righteously change their situations. She consistently acted as if basic human rights, freedom and justice, started with listening to people, paying attention to the stories behind the stories, and assuming that respect was everyone's due. She will be greatly missed. And her voice and example will be in our minds, hearts and actions.

• • •

Four examples of recent work fill this issue. Lakhon kohl, all-male Cambodian masked dance drama, is danced today by artists who are the first generation to bring the genre back to life after the genocide of the 1970s in Cambodia. Only a handful of dancers in the U.S. know lakhon khol, and the performances that will occur as part of PFP's Dance Happens Here weekend program, on May 26th and 27th, represent a small effort to invest in the life and development of this art.

Suzanne Povse is a top skilled tool and dye maker. Her stories, shared at one of our artist salons, represent her first attempt to go on record with her experiences as the only woman on the shop floor for most of her 28 working years. Her writing is a contribution to occupational folklore, offering a window into the realities of working women's lives. And it is a reminder that culture is not only a matter of ethnicity, but of work life as well.

We recently gave away Tom

Morton's beautiful photographs of ODUNDE (which had been on exhibit in our first-floor gallery), trading them for peoples' stories about the images. In doing so, we stimulated a process where people talked together about who should own goods that were in many ways community property. We were tutored by people who shared what they knew: knowledge, stories, lived experience. Giving away photos— or, more properly, exchanging them, returning them, keeping them in circulation— multiplied value: the process deepened relationships between and among those who have participated in ODUNDE, including PFP staff, built knowledge, stimulated stories (making more powerful art) and good history-telling. Ultimately, it brought people together to share what they cared about.

Our newest exhibition, "Community Fabric" is also an experiment, just as the offering of photos was. We accepted work from everyone who applied and our gallery walls are filled with a stunning variety of pieces claiming various connections to community traditions. Excerpts in this issue from interviews with two participating artists represent some of the stories behind the creation of these objects.

What is truly remarkable is how all of the people included in this issue have persevered in exploring what have been minority traditions, difficult paths. We are honored to be allies in their efforts.

— Debora Kodish



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.

[Continued on next page →]



“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.”

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

“Actors, musicians and dancers took what they had seen or learned and, once back at the academy in the capital, proceeded to re-make and refine those arts for public performance on a proscenium stage.”

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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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."

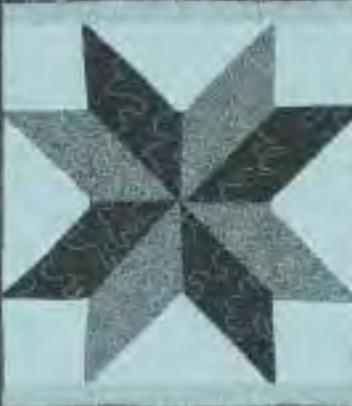
Cambodian culture, and perhaps the dance in particular, has a history that reminds me of Hanuman's experiences. Over the centuries, war and revolution have threatened the dance's survival. As recently as the late 1970s, the leadership of the Khmer Rouge regime (in power from 1975 to early 1979) officially 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.

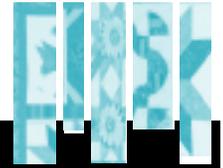
I was born and raised in Cambodia, where I started studying dance at the School of Fine Arts (currently the Royal University of Fine Arts) in 1980. I was part of the first generation to try to re-create the dance and music

[Continued on p. 24 →]



by debora kodish

Community fabric



Works in Community Fabric exhibition (l-r) by Rose Miller, Yekini Atanda, and Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk Sikoun. Photos by Will Brown

During a gathering of artists at the Folklore Project, Betty Leacraft commented, “I come from people who always worked with cloth.” Relatives said to have been craftspeople included her great-grandmother, a professional seamstress who sewed for wealthy white people in Vance County, North Carolina. Had some of those families preserved as treasured keepsakes any of the christening gowns or wedding dresses made by her great-grandmother? Betty wondered. If she could find some of these pieces now, having spent a lifetime finding her own way as an artist, she might be able to see what her great-grandmother had done, and how she did it. She might be able to retrieve some stitches, practices, knowledge, from the work itself.

The situation she describes relates to a key concern of PFP: how traditional arts are passed on, acquired, or reclaimed—especially where there is unequal access to resources. Not everyone has access to traditions of craft: even those who are descended from craftspeople of skill and distinction cannot count on following a path made easier by a knowing and loving mentor.

Like Betty, many other

participating artists in our new “Community Fabric” exhibition have continued to work in particular folk and traditional art forms despite daunting challenges: war and repression, silencing and opposition, personal loss and economic hardship, and the difficulties of mastering hand-made minority and alternative traditions when older mentors are gone and knowledge seemingly lost. Some artists have been able to do their work because of community support; still others have had to single-mindedly pursue their own paths, painstakingly researching specific family or regional craft traditions, or developing their own approaches to mediums to which they are drawn. And for yet others, work has been a place for pleasure, and creative expression. The small gallery contains only 29 works, yet suggests lifetimes of effort and dedication.

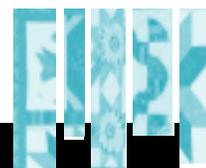
I knew Ayesha Rahim’s crocheted hats (“crowns,” people call them) by sight before I knew her. I saw them—distinctive, beautiful, each suited to its wearer—at ODUNDE, community festivals, neighborhood activities, on Saturday grocery shoppers at the Reading Terminal Market (where, it turns out, she had once worked at the Amazulu craft

stand). I couldn’t help myself. I’d ask total strangers, “Is that one of Ayesha Rahim’s hats?” I knew that we wanted to include her crochet work in this exhibition.

And as it turns out, some of her hats were already in our gallery: pictured in our recent exhibition of Tom Morton’s ODUNDE photos. In several photographs, Yoruba Orisha priest Bob Thompson wears one of these delicately crocheted hats. Others are in the possession of musician Omomola Iyabunmi and dancer Dottie Wilkie, also pictured in that show. It seems especially fitting that one exhibition in our new gallery flows into the next in this way, and that in tracing some of the threads of community fabric, we follow Ayesha Rahim’s work—already embraced by a community of people.

Except from interviews with Ayesha Rahim and Betty Leacraft follow. They are among 19 artists featured in “Community Fabric” at PFP through September. More information is available on our website.

“My inspiration is usually based on textiles and garments and adornments that are part of the ritual traditions of the African diaspora and people of color.”



Betty Leacraft: I know that my people always worked with cloth

My maternal grandmother Sadie Artist Wills was the first to put a needle and thread in my hand. And I was about five then. Her mother, my great-grandmother Betty Artist, was a professional seamstress in Vance County, North Carolina, probably around the late 1800s. My grandmother's aunt, Laura Green—my mother told me that Aunt Laura used to hold quilting bees at her house in Henderson, North Carolina, in Vance County. And my mother's job as a kid was to separate the colors of cloth that the women would use. And she remembers my aunt saying, “Send that red down the middle.” I'm not sure whether she meant down the middle of the quilt, or down the middle of the quilt block.

And my grandmother told me that when she was a young girl,

when her mother's legs would get tired working the treadle of the sewing machine, part of my grandmother's job was to get down there and push the treadle with her hands.

I am sure that there is somebody somewhere that my great-grandmother had sewn for, in that community—because anybody who was a good dressmaker in that time used to sew for a white person who had money. And I used to wonder if there was someone, some family down there, that still had in their possession something that was sewn by my great-grandmother—say a christening gown or a wedding gown, or a garment that represented a rite of passage, the kind of heirloom that families would keep.

My grandmother told me that her father, Nathan Artist, a bar-

ber and a cane rush weaver, made chair bottoms. I remember Nanny telling me, “I am sorry that I didn't learn to do that so I could have shown you, because I know you would have done something with it.”

A female head of the household, my grandmother was good at making things that brought money into the house. She made hair pomade that she sold to local beauty parlors and jewelry accessories that I helped her make. I remember her braiding stockings and sewing them together into oval braided rugs.

I do remember my grandmother having made these little jumpers for myself and my first cousin and my sister, all trimmed with rickrack. Rickrack was something that she evidently was fond of. (In one of the pieces in the PFP show, I used

the gold rickrack because it calls up the memory of a trimming I remember Nanny using a lot.)

All of us learned how to sew, as a result of my grandmother. I remember cutting up and hand-sewing four squares, sewing two of them, and calling it a straight skirt for a doll. The other two squares, I thought were supposed to be a blouse. That's the first thing I can recall trying to make. I was around five. Actually, the first things I ever sold were potholders from a loom that my grandmother bought me, and I realized that people would actually buy them.

And I think my grandmother may have taken notice of my efforts and thinking maybe I was trying to do something, she bought me a little cross-stitch kit. That's the first thing I can remember her showing me how to do.

And my grandmother told me that when I was young, I always would find a scissors, no matter where she hid them. And that when I found scissors I would for some reason start cutting up photographs. And once I remember cutting the whole side of a bedspread fringe off.

My second grandmother, Monay Wills, who was from Trinidad, was the other person in my life who really understood that my ability to sew was more than just a passing fancy. She would tell me about different kinds of fabric. And she paid for me to go to Parsons School of Design for a summer, in the 1970s. Being from the Islands, she comes from a tradition of going to people to get their clothes made,

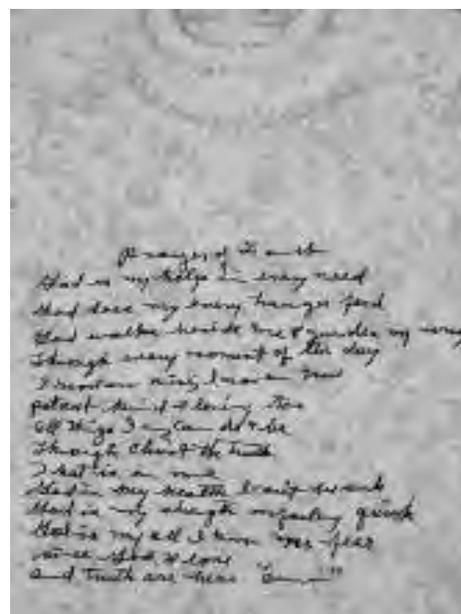
so it was something that she was very used to. It was by way of my maternal grandfather, Albert C. Wills, a native of Georgetown, Guyana, that I got my exposure to world cultures. The first Africans I ever met, a married couple from Ghana, lived on the third floor of Granddaddy's house in Camden.

My grandmother's sewing machine was a Brother, with a knee lever—the first machine I

won some trophies in national competitions of the National Association of Fashion and Accessory Designers, as a member of the Philadelphia chapter. I have learned by self-directed apprenticeship.

I like to create works that blur the lines between quilts, wall hangings, wearable arts, sculpture and installation.

My inspiration is usually based on textiles and garments and adornments that are part of



ever sewed on.

My mother didn't sew but was artistic. So that gift of sewing skipped a generation and came to me. I really feel that the ability to do this kind of creative work was there before me and it gets through to whoever has the capacity to carry it.

I have made custom clothing for many years. I worked at Fabric Workshop, as head fabric construction technician (1980-1986) facilitating the work of artists in residence. I

the ritual traditions of the African Diaspora and people of color. All those influences together helped to shape my cultural frame of reference. Much of the work I create is inspired by traditional sources and realized as contemporary expressions.

Two pieces ("Every goodbye is not gone," and "Prayer of faith") from the Ancestor series, by Betty Leacraft, 1999. Photos: Will Brown, 2006

“Spirit comes and spirit talks. Spirit tells you where to put this color, this shell. So that’s basically how the hats were made.”



Ayesha Rahim: Spirit Talks

I had not a clue. I am just figuring out how images are in the atmosphere and they come from God. How else could they come? I see them in my sleep. I was a designer and I made the clothes that I saw in my sleep. I didn’t have the money to make the outfits that I saw and I would go to my cousin. It only took a dollar for fabric. And all I ever needed was a measuring tape and pins. I never made a pattern. And I came out of high school being “Best Dressed”—Gratz High School, 1955. I got scholarships to Moore College of Art. When I got there, I went on and I applied myself because my attitude was, “I was an artist.” I didn’t care about money and I didn’t care about what they thought I should care about.

I was concerned with people. And how people were poor and they were miserable, unhappy. And I knew that at a very young age and I always wanted to make a difference. I didn’t even

know what I could do but I had a sense of something being not right.

I went to Moore, and at that time my mother was doing day work for six or seven dollars a day. My father wasn’t giving us money to support us. I used to feel so guilty asking her for dollars for bus fare. I didn’t have anyone encouraging me, mentoring me. Moore was only 10 blocks from my house, at Broad and Oxford. And I didn’t even realize it.

I was already making clothes. People said, “Remember when you made me this?” “Do you remember you made this sorority outfit?”

I was already making clothes for artists, for people who sang. I was doing all right. Before I went to Moore I was making neckties. I was doing fabric design. I was designing shoes and dyeing shoes.

But when I went to Moore, they took—it was like rape.

Because they were telling me that what I was doing was wrong. And I became very insecure. And I had to start using patterns when I wasn’t using patterns. I was discouraged.

So I dropped out. I was not giving up. I was not going to let them tell me how to make anything. I refused to let that happen again. I refused to let them make it a job.

I had no knowledge of crochet. My mother was creative. This house. Same house as I live in now. My mother had creative ability. She made my prom gown and she made rugs. She was immaculate. She came up from Virginia.

My mother did not do crochet. But I knew people who did crochet. People helped me out. My hands—they never showed me how to hold my hands. I don’t know one stitch from another. I just make the stitches.

I started off making a kufi for



Ayesha Rahim wearing one of her crowns. Photo: Debora Kodish, 2006

the Muslims. I remember I made a bigger one for my own head.

Charita Powell, from the stand Amazulu, in the Reading Market, saw it and said, "Oh!" We became friends. She said, "Did you make that? Could you make me one?" She has the very first one.

The thing about it, it's like spirit work. I was over at Temple University selling the hats and I was impressed because they were telling me what part of Africa they were

from. Spirit comes and spirit talks. Spirit tells you where to put this color, this shell. So that's basically how the hats were made. Spirit talks so much—I had one hat, I had to cover it up at night. The talking at night kept me up! Not all of them are like that. Some of them are really special. But if you try to do it on your own, they'll make you take it out and take back up where you left off. It's quite an experience. I have had a special life because of the

creativity—and it puts you in a meditative state. It's a place that you go, you are so in the spirit. You won't really withdraw, but you don't really want to come back.

>artist* profile<

stories from the shop floor

Suzanne Povse outside
PFP, 2006. Photo:
Debora Kodish

by suzanne povse

Suzanne Povse has begun writing about her experiences as a tool and die maker. She says, "During my twenty-eight years as a blue-collar woman in a nontraditional skilled labor job, I've worked as a machine operator, an apprentice, a journeyman tool and die and model maker, and, presently, as a helicopter transmission mechanic. I've stood in unemployment lines and walked picket lines. I've worked in union shops and in small job shops where the only benefit was free coffee. Except for a brief period during my first year, I have been the only female in the shops I've worked in." Her stories give us a window onto the occupational folk culture of women workers: they focus on how she made the workplace human for herself without alienating male coworkers, how she learned her craft despite obstacles, and how she learned to change the workplace. Suzanne writes for herself, for other women who, like her, were among the first generation of women after WWII to work on the machine shop floor, and for women who are just entering skilled labor jobs. She writes as a blue-collar woman, claiming the importance and legitimacy of her work. Suzanne was featured at a PFP Artist Salon on May 6th.

FIRST DAY/HOW I GOT THERE

When the elevator doors opened on the sixth floor, my knees were shaking and I was assaulted with a wall of noise and unfamiliar smells. Looking straight ahead, I walked fifty feet to the wall with the pay phone and turned left past the break room, just as my friend had instructed me. I found

the superintendent's office door immediately past the break room door and on the right. Third goal complete. The first had been to find the appropriate parking lot and a space for my car close to the main gate. The second goal was to find the administrative office that was to issue my work badge, the entrance to the building that housed the machine shop, and the elevator to the sixth floor. The third was to find the superintendent's office once I reached the sixth floor. The fourth goal was to survive the day. I put my hand around the doorknob and entered. June immediately looked up at me from her typewriter and stood. "I'm Suzanne, the new machine operator," I said as confidently as I could. Of course I was thinking that I should have introduced myself some other way.

"We've been expecting you," she said, smiling with a hint of a smirk. She knocked on the inner office door and, opening it, announced to the person on the other side that the new machinist had arrived. There was a scrape of chair and through the door emerged a hulking 6'2" man with slicked-back hair and an angular face. "This is Suzanne, Nick." There was an absence of a handshake.

"Stan's going to be her boss. I'll page him."

"Where should she put her coat and what bathroom should she use?" June asked the boss's back. He stopped and made a deliberate turn. Looking directly at me, and with contempt in his voice, Nick said, "If she wants a man's job, she can use the men's room!" The office had waist-height windows that allowed Nick a panoramic view of much of the shop: a bank of benches with toolboxes and beyond that

Bridgeport milling machines, Milwaukee horizontal mills, and Hardinge lathes. This was my introduction to the machine shop. It was on the top floor of a block-square brick factory building from the early 1900s. A week before, I had had an interview in an office building adjacent to this one. The interviewer was a more refined man somewhat more cordial than Nick. When he spread the blueprint for a machine part on the table in front of me, I had no problem answering the questions on overall dimensions and hole dimensions. And when he handed me a machined part and a set of micrometers and verniers, I imagined that I did not fumble as I held the part in one hand and operated the gauges with the other. I hesitated only slightly as I studied the barrel to read the dimensions within tenths of thousandths. I knew that I wasn't the first woman they had interviewed and that they were interviewing me only because they were required to. Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin. And by 1977 the Women's Movement was pushing the bar. At the end of twenty minutes, he took off his glasses, looked at me without expression, and said, "Well, I can't think of any reason not to hire you. Report to the machine shop on Monday. Pick up your badge in Personnel first. Your shift starts at seven."

Two months prior to this, a friend who was a welder in this same machine shop had told me that the company was hiring machinists. I was looking for a job. A union election for shop stewards and chairmen was taking place at that time, and

[Continued on next page →]

campaigning in the shop was at its peak. The incumbent chairman and shop steward had come into my friend's welding booth to ask for his vote. When he assured them that their ticket was the one he intended to back, they shook his hand and said, "If there's anything we can do for you, let us know."

"As a matter of fact, I heard the company's hiring more entry-level machinists, and I have a friend who's looking for a job."

"Well, tell him to call and we'll make certain he gets an interview."

"Hey, thanks. One thing though, my friend's a woman." Tim had relished telling me this and describing the look on their faces. They had committed. What could they say? That afternoon, I was being schooled on reading blueprints and the art of handling a set of micrometers like I knew what I was doing. "Hold the anvil in your palm and place your thumb and index finger on the barrel and turn it down gently against the part you're measuring. No. Don't clamp down on the part like it was a 'C' clamp! Just touch lightly. You'll get the feel after a while." So, with coaching and a few white lies about my former shop experiences, I landed my first machine shop job. That was twenty-eight years ago.

JOB SHOP

Exit three-quarters of the way around a New Jersey traffic circle, a quarter-mile down a suburban street lined with 1950's one-story bungalows, make a right onto Lithrow. Feel and hear the crunch of gravel under the tires of the 1972 Impala that someone gave you. Pass the brick Cape Cod with a lawn jockey whose face has been painted white. The gravel road is only four houses long, and at the end is a long, low, flat-roofed cinderblock building and a line of ten vehicles. I turn 90 degrees

and back into a parking space so I will be pointed in the same direction as everyone else. Not calling attention to yourself is one of the keys to survival when you are the only woman in the shop. I pull and lift my gearshift into park, turn off the lights, and slide out into a cold, dark February morning. It's 5:45 AM. Locking my car door out of habit, I cross the gravel to the door labeled "office" in lowercase letters.

After eight weeks of "Job Transition Training" set up by the GE corporation because the government required them to do that when laying off large numbers of people at one time, I have landed a job in a ten-man nonunion shop which has picked up the exact same jobs that I had been doing two months ago. It's 1991, and Jack Welsh, the CEO of GE and trendsetter for corporate planning, has started his annihilation of the skilled labor force and unions by instituting the practice of "outsourcing." I would be working the very same jobs with the very same blueprints, only now I would be doing them for four dollars an hour less and a very weak health insurance plan. I'm a single mother with a ten-year-old son and a six-year-old daughter. During my interview the week before, I was handed a sheet of paper listing the benefits I would be getting at my new job. At the bottom of this sheet, the last benefit listed, number eight, was "free coffee." And you know what? I felt damned lucky. Many of the 100-plus men whom I had worked with at RCA/GE in Camden, New Jersey, had been unable to find jobs, let alone one that involved only a four-dollar-an-hour pay cut. And this wasn't just a production shop. It was a "precision machining" model shop. One-of-a-kind pieces and short runs. A job any machinist would die for.

The business had been started thirty-five years before by two brothers. And they had set up

with two lathes, two milling machines and a cut-off saw in their family garage. The garage was now their storage area for stock and machinery not in use, and the small family house had become the business office. One brother had bought the other out years before. Now he and one of his daughters took care of the books and paperwork at desks surrounded by filing cabinets on the first floor of the house. The second floor stored family and business items.

The three sons were the managers in the shop. One was general manager and job hunter, the second kept track of the jobs once they reached the shop, and the third was in charge of inspection. Sibling rivalry would ooze out onto the shop floor like machine oil. Part of the skill of my job became the ability to listen sympathetically with just the right amount of indignation—but not so much that you could be perceived as taking sides, because at some point that same day you would hear first hand or second the other brothers' side of the current hot disagreement.

Ruthlessness and paybacks set the tenor for the shop. One day I unthinkingly threw a comeback at one of the brothers for a comment he had made about me and my work. At the end of the day as I started up the gravel drive to the small road that led to the highway and home, I detected a hard clicking sound from a back tire.

The attendant of the gas station that I limped into with my flat showed me the bolt—one and a half inches long—that he had extracted from the tire. It was the old "put a bolt upright in front of the tire" trick. I never mentioned the flat, and became more careful about my witty responses.

One of the older men who had worked for the family for about fifteen years lived with his elderly mother. When she became so ill that she required a lot of medical care, the family laid him off. We

all knew that it was because his mother's treatment had caused the premiums for our health insurance to increase. More pressure: We and our families had to remain healthy.

On that first day, after reporting to the office, I backed my Impala up to the shop's garage door and unloaded onto a hand-truck the two toolboxes that I had struggled to load into the back seat very early that morning.

I began setting up my bench while two of the maintenance men went out to the storage garage to pick out an adequate Bridgeport milling machine that would be mine. They drove it in on a forklift, leveled it, and bolted it to the cement floor. The boss gave me the blueprint and the stainless steel for my first job. I was given no extra material to cover errors in the machining process. Perfection was required. Errors meant exceeding the estimated cost of the job. They wanted to know who was cutting into their profit margin. That was one big difference between a union shop and a job shop. For the next three years, this 5x7 corner of the shop was the location of my eight-and-a-half-hour work day. That day included a strictly enforced ten-minute break in the morning, a half-hour unpaid lunch break, and a second ten-minute break in the afternoon. Include a couple of hurried bathroom breaks in that day.

The bathroom was another experience. It was strikingly different from the bathrooms in the large unionized shop from which Jack Welsh had banished me. If I had not learned the lesson before, I knew it now. Without unions in production jobs, we would all be taking a piss outside the back door of a shop or, if a man, in a can beside our machines. The bathroom for

the shop and office was in the family house, which was a short walk out the back door of the shop and up a dirt walk. Open the back door of the house, make a right immediately upon entering, and before you was the door to the bathroom. Halfway through my first bathroom break, I focused on a door that was directly in front of me. I had heard a slight clearing of a throat, the shifting of a body in his chair. On the other side of the door, directly in front of me, was the father's desk. I could proceed no further. Rule: Hold whatever as long as possible. Keep an eye out for when the father makes a short visit to the shop, and then take a fast walk up the path to the house.

Lunch break in this job shop was another unique experience: eventually it seemed normal. Lunch was at 11:00, four and a half hours into our workday. We were allowed to wash up at 10:57. We had to punch out, be off the clock, for that 30-minute period. The "old timers" in the shop were the men who had worked there before the owners hired the lucky former GE employees. Some of these "old timers" were friends of the "Old Man," the father and original owner of the company. Some had been with him for over twenty years. At least one of these men got his son a job in the shop, and this son had put in at least eight years there. At exactly one minute before lunchtime, the old timers, a couple of whom were in their late twenties, magically pulled out and unfolded cots, and at exactly 11:00 all the overhead shop lights and individual bench lights were doused. It was nap time. Those of us who chose not to nap, namely all the newly hired GE people, pulled up our shop stools and huddled around one of our benches, talked quietly, and

ate. Warm weather brought relief. The owners furnished us with a picnic bench under the trees behind our parked cars.

On my first day in the job shop, I found out that of the six former GE employees hired, I was the only one who had been designated a "trainee," even though I had thirteen years experience in the machine shop and had completed a four-year apprenticeship program in tool and die and model-making. Because of the large numbers of workers laid off by GE in Jack Welsh's push for record profits, the government had set up a program encouraging small businesses to hire laid-off workers and train them. The government would pay the wages of these trainees for six months. I was this small shop's free labor for half a year. I guess the owners thought the government would find training a woman to become a machinist more credible than training a man. So, the question in my mind was this: "After a six month period of free labor, would I become a paid employee?" The answer was, "No," After six months, I was laid off for four months. I would be hired back for long periods of time as their workload required. This pattern of being laid off and called back lasted for three years. It seemed that when they needed to downsize, I would be given a difficult job that they had underbid and my performance would be questioned when I couldn't do the job in the estimated time. I later found out that at least one of my fellow workers would create a scene by angrily refusing to do some of the difficult close-tolerance jobs. It would have never have occurred to me to refuse a job. There was no union and no recourse for the questionable treatment I received.

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Tell us your **true** story

> pfp * program <



Stories for pictures: giving photographs a good home



An interesting thing kept happening at our exhibition of Tom Morton's photographs of the ODUNDE festival, taken over a remarkable span of 30 years. Gravitating to photos of themselves, of family members, of old friends, people shared stories and recollections. Often they seemed unable to tear themselves away from particular images. Viewers got a certain look in their eyes: transported by the photos, they returned to other times, places, and people. One person's story prompted another's. People shared details, pieced together histories, named what (and who) needs to be remembered, collectively lined out history.

The PFP is in the business of supporting vernacular habits and practices—such as community storytelling around family photos like these. These habits and practices, in turn, work to sustain folk and traditional arts grounded in visions of equity and justice. ODUNDE and Tom Morton's photos are all about freedom of expression, about claiming and enacting the right to self-definition. And we are well aware of the common experience of community people: often pictured, seldom in control of their own representations. So when it came time to close the exhibition, we decided (without knowing exactly how we would do it) that we wanted to get these photos into places where they would keep stimulating the kind of storytelling that was happening in our gallery. Storytelling often needs to be prompted, and Tom's

powerful photographs were obviously good tools for evoking narratives.

And so we announced a storytelling contest, inviting people to send in their memories. We printed the poster to the left, with a clip-and-send form on the back. We asked for letters and email. We posted the whole show on line, where it remains (www.folkloreproject.org). Most important, we invited people in and recorded open storytelling sessions at the PFP office, led by ODUNDE founder Lois Fernandez and her daughter, Oshunbumi Fernandez-Ogundana. Of course, people usually tell stories to others, not in isolation, so we sought out people pictured in the photos and recorded their accounts. We received (and heard) deeply moving recollections and thoughts on a wide range of topics: about beloved individuals who have been part of 30 years of culture-making, about particular years at ODUNDE, about what the event has come to mean, about moments when people claimed the right to call themselves African, about the struggle for self-definition. It quickly became clear to ODUNDE and PFP that this needs to be part of a larger project.

We don't yet know the next steps. But we do know a few things. In trying to return photos to places where they are known and appreciated, we stimulated a process where people talked together about who should own goods that were in many ways community property. We were tutored by people who shared

what they knew: knowledge, stories, lived experience. While this seems simple, it requires revising assumptions that the best place for museum-quality photos is in museums. Or that a work of art belongs to the person who pays for it. Or that value is best reckoned in dollars. These first steps in giving away photos—or, more properly, exchanging them, returning them, keeping them in circulation—multiplied value: the process deepened relationships, built knowledge, stimulated stories (making more powerful art) and good history-telling, and it brought people together to share what they cared about. It is a good reminder that no one owns culture, and that sharing resources, and keeping photos in the community, in private homes, is a way to keep them active and present.

Some examples of contributed stories follow. We continue to invite your contributions.

Saudah Amin

The Fernandez sisters: I call them sister soldiers. All three of them got ODUNDE together. I feel as if ODUNDE was the first thing that ever happened in Philadelphia to help the Negro and colored people know they were African. I remember when I was a child, seven years old, I couldn't wait until April and the Elks Parade. That was the one that made me want to dance to some drums. Because when I was a child, that was the only time you could hear the drums.

When I was about 12, the Puerto Ricans came here, and then you started hearing the drums. Then I started dancing to mambo, cha-cha, and merengue. I would go into the house and I would dance to what the Puerto Ricans were doing.

I met the Fernandez sisters when I was about 17 or 18. They used to be around the Queen Mother. She had a house here, down the Bottom. Everyone would come there for the teaching. When ODUNDE started, they were the ones that put Philadelphia on the map for learning we were African Americans.

Ayoluwa Eternity:

About Bob Thompson

In this photo he's a praise singer / a mediator between spirit and human / chanting sanctified words of anointment / offering fruits and flowers inviting the divine presence of Oshun / so she may bestow her blessings, healings and wisdom upon her children... these spirit warriors are gate-keepers of history ...

Nia Bey AlRasul

I grew up in South Philadelphia. And I loved the American lifestyle. And it had nothing to offer me. I just couldn't enter. ODUNDE came through ACAF [African Cultural Art Forum], through my work with ACAF. My first African introduction, they taught me. They groomed me. Around the 1970s.

Then we heard about ODUNDE. And we started doing the vending at ODUNDE. The vendors would come in sometimes the night before, and we would function as a family through the night. They'd come and park in front of the area. Sleep in the car or in front of your station. ODUNDE was new to me. I thoroughly enjoyed it. And I was a vendor. And as we moved on in life, I became a mother. Thereafter, we became ODUNDE people.

Of the children in the photos,

Ibn Daoud is now 21. One year, Mama Malikah taught him stilt-walking. One year, his little self—he was the only one, leading the procession. Mukhtar, in the picture, is Nadirah's son, and now he is in the Gambia, learning the language. He lived in a high-rise in Jersey before he moved there with his father's people, and he couldn't run around. He went there to Gambia, and he said to his mother, "I'm free!"

[About Lois Fernandez:] I saw her on the street, wearing bracelets all up her arm. I said to myself, "I want to know who she is." And through ODUNDE I came to know her. And that is a request granted by the Creator.

Did you know that she is the one responsible for getting the word "illegitimate" removed from birth certificates? So we love her so. I am thankful and grateful to be able to say that I am one of her daughters.

Katrina Hazzard Donald

When we were marching back from the bridge, that's when my grandmother said to me—and I was very surprised, I had no idea—she said it was like Mardi Gras in Mobile when she was growing up. And she was born in Mobile. You know Mardi Gras began in Mobile. It didn't begin in New Orleans. And she talked about how much ODUNDE reminded her of Mardi Gras. She said, "You know, Mardi Gras began in Mobile." And she said it reminded her of marching in the line in Mardi Gras.

Benita Brown

This is a shot of Benita Brown as I was part of ODUNDE festival from the time I was a little girl. My mother used to take me to the ODUNDE festival when I was like six, seven, eight years old, but I never knew I would eventually become a part of the celebration until I joined Kulu Mele back in 1984-85 and I danced with Kulu

Mele before I left, and now I teach dance at Virginia State University and I teach traditional African dance that I learned from Dottie and Baba and Wilkie, and also I try to teach about the Orisha and the movements of the Orisha, and I learned this from attending ODUNDE and being involved with the Philadelphia dance community.

Arisa Ingram

Tell you more history about this picture here. This picture here is a picture of my late father, Baba Ishangi. That's my father there. He was the Egungun there for quite a few years—10 to 20 years. And, of course, I'm here, but I'm in the front, guiding the masquerade. That was my job, to guide the masquerade and to guide the whole entourage down to the water and protect the masqueraders, the Egunguns, from being touched. This picture here, when I look at it, it just brings back very, very good memories because I used to go down all the time. And this is something that ODUNDE always represents. I think this picture was probably back in '89, '90 because, of course, I helped make the costumes. That used to be something I had to do all the time, in order to keep it up.

I've been going to ODUNDE for about 20 years. Kulu Mele used to open. And the Ishangi family used to close. Faithfully for about 10 years. Strong.

I used to watch Mama Dottie. That was my thing. After we finished with the Egungun, then I used to watch Mama Dottie. I used to watch Kulu Mele perform, Dottie and Wilkie and everybody. I used to think, "Hmm, I like that group, I like that group." Then my father'd say, "They're good people." And I'd say, "Yeah, I know. Yeah I know." Now, I've been with Kulu Mele about 10 years. For a while I was working with Kulu Mele, and then

stories for pictures/continued from p. 22

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.

Masked men of Cambodia/continued from p. 7

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

It was time for me to find another job. The company was also having financial difficulty. One day, we found out that we no longer had health insurance because the company could no longer afford the premiums. For weeks, on the day before payday the brothers would call a meeting and ask who of us could afford to go without a paycheck for a week. A couple of the oldtimers whose families were grown would volunteer. When free coffee was the only item left on the benefit sheet we had been given when we were hired, I took a day off to apply for a job at an area company. I had interviewed there before. This time, I was hired into their tool and die shop. I found myself working with some former GE employees who had also applied after we were all laid off. Although these men had less experience than I, they were the ones hired three long years before. I was shocked. I was indignant. And damned happy to have a job, benefits, and union representation.

DRILL PRESS TO MACHINIST

I sat bolt upright. Either a few of the hairs that refused to be pulled back into my short ponytail were being drawn into the RPMs of the drill press spindle, or the punchline of Jayne's "Duke the Dog" joke had woken me up. Three hours of drilling the same holes in two hundred and fifty identical machined parts was putting me to sleep. Again this morning the three of us were lined up at the bank of drill presses next to the windows on the north side of the building. The radiators were complaining and it was snowing outside. After the first week of sitting beside each other drilling parts, we had agreed that every day each of us would come to work with at least one joke to tell. That way our heads would not get wrapped around the spindles when we were lulled to sleep by the repetitiveness of the job. Of

the many horror stories of machine shop accidents that the men were driven to tell us, one was of a young man who had had part of his scalp ripped from his head when his ponytail got caught up in the rotation of the drill press spindle. The visuals of this event were in my brain to stay.

It was after Paulette's second failed punchline that Stan, our drill instructor boss, walked up behind me. "I need you in the paint shop. We have parts piling up that need to be masked." I had been hired in October. It was now January. I had spent three months attempting to work my way from the back-room assembly area to the shop floor. I knew that if I went to the paint shop, it would take me three more months to get back to the drill press area, which was definitely "the shop floor." To me it represented the first step to becoming a machinist. "Are you telling me to go or are you asking me to go as a favor?" And I knew as I said this that I had declared war. I was going to fight for the ground I had gained. The union contract stated clearly that workers were not allowed to work outside their job classification. And the job description of a machine operator did not include masking parts to prepare them for the painters to spray-paint them. My question took him off guard. He sputtered, "I'm asking you!"

"Then, no, I won't go back to the paint shop," I said.

He scowled, whirled around, and retreated. My stomach was knotted, but I went back to drilling my parts, waiting for the inevitable punishment for my insubordination. I had just told Jayne what had happened when the boss came back. With a smirk he said, "Report to the shears. Bob has a job for you." I stood up and turned off my machine. "See you at lunch," I said to Jayne as I picked up my chuck key, my drift, and my mics and

headed for the toolbox, which was on the end of my lead man's bench.

I still didn't have my own bench for my tools, but George had allowed me to put my small box on the end of his bench, which was by the windows at the end of the drill press aisle. As I headed toward him I saw him flinch as he poured alcohol out of his squirt bottle onto the upturned palm of his hand. We used alcohol as a lubricant when drilling aluminum parts. He had been drilling a three-quarter-inch hole through a one-inch-thick piece of cold rolled steel. As he worked on this jig for a rush job that was supposed to hit him after lunch, a hot, blue, spiral chip had curled out of the hole, caught on the spindle, and spun around at about 400 RPMs. And he had done what he had warned me not to do: "Now don't be stupid and try to clean the chips from the spindle while it's running. They can slice you to the bone." I had felt a shiver go through my spine when he said this. I felt the same chill as I saw the slice on the palm of his hand. His jaws were clenched as he wrapped his hand with masking tape. Of course, going to the dispensary in the next building meant losing at least 45 minutes—and then the hot job he was getting after lunch would not get done on time. Thus the quick fix on damaged body parts with the help of masking tape—a must in the machinist's personal first aid kit.

"What happened down there?" He gestured with his clenched jaw to the row of spindles I had been working at.

"Stan wanted to send me back to the paint shop to mask parts."

"Yeah?"

"I asked him if he was telling me or asking me to go."

"Yeah?"

"Well, it's outside my job description and I knew it would

[Continued on p. 26 →]

take me weeks to get back on the floor.”

“Yeah?”

“He said he was asking me as a favor, so I said no.”

George looked at me with his steel blue eyes, then down at his hand, and with lips curled between a wince and a smile, “So?”

“He told me to see Bob, that he had a job for me on the shears.”

“Be careful. I know that job. It’s a heavy one—cold rolled slats about five feet long, eighth of an inch thick. You’ll have to trim them to size. Get some leather work gloves from the crib. So he put Jaynie in the paint shop?”

“I guess.”

“How the hell does he expect me to get these jobs done without help?” He jammed his hand in the direction of the rack of jobs. Then, lifting the small cardboard parts-box he had on the radiator behind his toolbox, he felt the now-exposed hot-dog-on-a-bun with his good hand. “Damn dog’s still cold.” Lunch was in ten minutes. “Well, see Bob now, he’ll probably start you after lunch. Don’t kill

yourself.”

By the end of that day I was physically exhausted, but I had found a rhythm to the job: Pick up a length of five-foot steel from the pallet beside the shear. Slap it up tight to the left-hand guide. Slide it a couple of inches under the shear blade. Hold the piece down and against the side guide. Step on the trip bar with your right foot. Wait to hear the “chunk” of the blade and the clang of the trim hitting the metal catch-all basket in the back of the shear. Still holding the now-squared strip, slide it farther under the blade until you feel it contact the break stop that’s been pre-set to the desired length. Step on the trip bar again with your right foot. (Balance is important.) And one finished piece hits the pan with a clamor. Toss the scrap that’s left in your hands into the scrap bin to your right. Begin the process again. So—swing back around, bend down, pick up the next five-foot piece from the pallet. When the counter on the front of the shear registers twenty, go to the back of the shear and stack the finished pieces from the pan onto a pallet. So the waltz

of my day was: Bend, grab, turn—slap, slide, step—chunk, clamor, slide—step, toss, turn. One more time. And again, and again, and again...

Although I was exhausted, finding the rhythm of the job was fun. Maintaining it was a dance. And it was the dance that helped me survive the monotony. Three days and many pallets later, I felt like one of the marathon dancers of the 1930s. But my punishment had been my success. I had learned the basics of another machine. After that I was never again asked to mask parts in the paint shop. Instead, I got a new boss who instructed my new lead man to set up jobs for me on the horizontal milling machine. I had become a horizontal mill operator.

—Suzanne Povse

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