

<p>Angkor Dance Trope, Inc. The Angkor Dance Troupe-Company Biography</p>

The Angkor Dance Troupe is nationally recognized as one of the most experienced and accomplished Cambodian dance ensembles performing today. The Troupe was formed in 1986 by refugees of the Khmer Rouge holocaust who resettled in Lowell, Massachusetts. The 70-member ensemble performs a diverse repertoire of elegant and courtship rituals from rural Cambodian. The Troupe has appeared at venues including First Night Boston, Yale University, The national Folk Festival, The White house, JFK Boston, Long Island New York, Johnson State College, and Quick Center for the arts in Connecticut.

The company takes its name from the great Angkor civilization, between 802 and 1432Ad, when Cambodia was a dominant empire in Southeast Asia. Dance, music, and drama have always prominent in Khmer society, but these ancient traditions were nearly eliminated when the Khmer Rouge controlled Cambodia in the 1970's. Artists were among deliberated targeted for execution, it is estimated that close to 90% of the country's tradition bearers perished.

Angkor teachers and performs a body of work developed at the Royal University of Fine Arts (RUFA) in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, considered the world's cultural source and standard bearer for traditional Cambodian arts. Angkor Artistic Director Mrs. Phousita Huy is master teacher and former faculty member of the Royal University of Cambodia and toured internationally as a principal dancer with the Classical Dance Company of Cambodia. Angkor is hosting two masters from RUFA, Mr. Sophea Sek and Mrs. Yom Peng, for extended residencies in 2001. These important teachers will appear with the Angkor Dance Troupe at performances throughout the year.

In 1999, the Angkor Dance Troupe was among a select group of 10 organizations from across the country to receive the prestigious "Coming Up Taller" award from the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts. The award is the nation's top honor for exemplary arts programs that serve at-risk youth. Angkor's artistic excellence was again recognized by the NEA in 2000 with a grant from the "Creative Links: Positive Alternative for Youth" initiative.

Cambodian Classical Dance

Classical Cambodian dance has been connected to the sacred rituals of Cambodia for more than one thousand years. During the great Angkor civilization, dancers performed blessing ceremonies to bring prosperity to the Kingdom. More recently, classical dancers lived and performed in Cambodia's royal palace. Elegant and refined, Classical Dance combines highly stylized positions with gentle movements. Once reserved exclusively for Cambodia's elite, Classical dance is now performed for audiences around the world and has become a central symbol of the beauty and spirituality of Cambodian Culture.

Cambodian Folk Dance

Cambodian folk dance is rooted Cambodian and depicts rituals of everyday village life. The dancers honor skills are typically undervalued in the rush to westernization, such as fishing and rice farming. Dance motifs are commonly based on local legends and inspired by themes of natures as well as ceremonies and customs that shape the lives of the Khmer people. Just as classical dance is rules by a strict form and prescribed language of movement, folk dance is spontaneous, created for emotional expressions. Costumes are very colorful and reflect the traditional dress of the particular province or ethnic group within Cambodia where the dance s originate.

Angkor Dance Troupe, Inc.

The Angkor Dance Troupe provides an essential service to the community not met by any other organizations. The Troupe is the only nonprofit cultural group in Lowell, MA, whose soul mission is to preserve the traditions of Cambodian performing arts. The Angkor Dance Troupe develops and teaches Cambodian dance, promotes an understanding and appreciation of Cambodian culture, and provides a positive social and educational outlet for Cambodian youth.

The Drive to Preserve Traditions

The Angkor Dance Troupe was formed in 1986, in Lowell, MA, by Mr. Tim Chan Thou, Angkor's Program Director, along with a small group of dancers who learned traditional Cambodian dance in refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border. They brought with them to the United States a strong desire to practice and perform Cambodian dance and a passion to teach others.

Dance and its associated rituals and beliefs have become a way for Cambodian people to reconstruct a sense of community and culture, particularly for refugees who have resettled in other countries. Between 1975 and 1979, when Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge controlled Cambodia, more than 90% of the country's artists perished or fled. Today as Cambodia struggles to emerge from decades of war and poverty, the people look to the rebirth and recreation of dance as testimony to the endurance of their culture.

Classical Dance - A Treasured Symbol of Cambodian Culture

Classical or court dance is considered by many to be a universal symbol of Cambodian culture. It is a source of national pride for Cambodians, representing the beauty and spirituality of Cambodian people. The dance form is particularly meaningful for postwar Cambodians as they work to reclaim and rebuild a treasured heritage. Many first practiced or saw the art form in the refugee camps. For children born and raised in the camps or in other countries, it has become a connection to the past and a way to experience revered ancient traditions.

Folk Dance - A Celebration of Traditional Ways of Life

Folk dances are a way for displaced Cambodians to remember their homeland and to teach their children about the regional, agricultural, and social forces that shape the lives of Cambodia's rural population. From folk dances, young Cambodian-Americans learn about geography and a daily life

in Cambodia that they have never experienced.

Carrying on the Tradition: Engaging our young people

The Troupe holds weekly rehearsals. For four hours every Sunday, members gather to practice. The method of teaching is practiced as it has been done traditionally, by watching, imitation, and assistance from teachers to achieve the correct postures and movement.

Cambodian tradition prescribes a particular relationship between student and teacher, a relationship that is repeated between children and parents, young people and elders. Students are respectful of teachers and of the knowledge they possess. They appreciate the chance to learn and understand their responsibility for carrying on their culture.

The young people in the Dance Troupe, most of whom were born here in the U.S., have increasingly been asking for background on the dances and the history of Cambodia. In the recently-published book *Fractured Identities, Cambodia's Children of War*, a young Cambodian-American man from Lowell suggests his primary source of information about Southeast Asia has been popular movies:

“I saw Good Morning Vietnam with my uncle two or three times. We don’t learn anything about the history of Cambodia in school here. Just Columbus...who discovered America...stuff like that it just doesn’t go in my head.”

In response to the clear need for meaningful educational opportunities Angkor’s Artistic Director, Phousita Huy, develops and presents workshops on Cambodian culture as part of her ongoing instruction. To encourage attendance and participation by the Cambodian community, these workshops will take place at sites within Lowell’s Cambodian-American community. They are publicized via Khmer-language materials and media as well as through traditional forms of promotion.

The Need for Master Teachers

The technical mastery involved in Cambodian dance is considerable. Students must perfect an estimated forty-five hundred basic gestures and movements to perform certain dance pieces.

Because of the losses suffered during the Khmer Rouge, the transmission of traditional knowledge is a crucial yet challenging process, particularly in communities that have resettled far from their homeland.

Dr. Sam-Ang Sam, a master musician and director of the Apsara Ensemble in Arlington, VA, writes:

“The break in oral tradition has resulted in the loss of more than half of the oldest pieces that had previously been passed from generation to generation. In the US today there is a shortage of professional and knowledgeable artists...this has endangered the preservation of technique, style, and repertory.”

Masters of Cambodian Dance - A Way to Build on Past Successes

Phousita Huy and the other dance masters who work with the Troupe have specialties that allow the Troupe to develop dance forms not currently being taught to performance level. Say Seuar, for example, a professor at the University of Fine Arts, is considered one of the best instructors of the Monkey Dance in the world. The Monkey is a role in the Riemkee, Cambodia's version of the epic Indian tale, the Ramayana, from which many dances are derived. There is one particular dance called *Swva Pol*, which is performed by young boys. Because of its lively acrobatic style, it is a hugely popular dance at performances. However the lack of students skilled in the dance precludes its inclusion in many of the Troupe's performances. As part of his master residency, Mr. Soy has held a series of classes on the monkey dance.

Training by dance master Phousita Huy has greatly expanded the Troupe's technical abilities as well as the dancers' understanding of the spiritual and ritual functions of dance in Cambodian culture. The power of the dance is in its cultural connection and the meaning behind the movement fundamental aspects of the art form which are not always comprehensively taught here in the U.S. Through her years of experience at the University of Fine Arts, Ms. Huy developed high standards of training and performance, as well as extensive knowledge of repertory, dance history, and cultural context.

The Angkor Dance Troupe performed in April 1997 for a large multi-ethnic audience at a Cambodian New Year celebration at the Sheraton in Lowell. Because of the special expertise and teaching of Phousita Huy, the Troupe was able, for the first time, to present a performance of the Apsara Dance. The Apsara is a revered classical dance steeped in spiritual tradition and based on the sculptures that adorn the walls of Angkor Wat. After the performance, Cambodians in the audience approached members of the Troupe to express how deeply moved and impressed they were by the Apsara Dance and how grateful they were to be able to experience this type and caliber

of traditional Cambodian dance.

The responsiveness of the community to the idea of partnering with master dancers is evident in the reaction to a major public event sponsored by the Lowell Cultural Council presented by the Troupe in May 1997. The Troupe hosted dance masters from around the U.S. who joined members of Angkor Dance in an elaborate public performance. The event was enthusiastically received by the community and is still being re-broadcast on Cambodian cable stations around eastern Massachusetts. The Troupe experienced a surge in membership after the performance and, for the first time in its history, had to create a waiting list of young people interested in learning to dance. For several years, The Angkor Dance Troupe has been selected for inclusion on the New England States Touring Roster, administered by the New England Foundation for the Arts to help build support for New England's best performing artists. Additionally, the Troupe was selected for participation in NEFA's Ford Foundation-funded Newcomers Project on the basis of its artistic excellence and its potential for acting as a key Cambodian arts organization among the network of Cambodian communities throughout the region.

Sources

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