Note to Instructors

This unit on Cambodia takes as its focus the tension between tradition and creativity, between moving forward and staying rooted in the past, as played out on the country’s contemporary dance stage. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the pull to the past and the lure of future possibilities remain in conflict. As a way of exploring this dynamic, this unit looks at the circumstances surrounding three major performance events that took place in Cambodia in February, 2004. All three of the performances stirred up debate about the role of the arts in preserving, challenging, and, sometimes, creating tradition. The aim is to encourage an understanding of the relationship of history to notions of “tradition,” and to foster an appreciation of Cambodian expressive culture.

The unit is divided into two sections. Each includes study questions. An annotated list of suggestions for further reading, along with references to relevant video material, precedes the appendices.

The first section provides an overview of the concerns some people in Cambodia have with innovation, in this case, in the arts. It “sets the stage” by placing dance and the dancers in an historical context, one that notes both the remarkable continuation and also the repeated rupture of tradition. The second section delves into specific examples of cultural conservatism and innovation by looking at three performances at the Royal University of Fine Arts Theater in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

One of the performances involved the re-staging and expansion of a classical dance-drama that hadn’t been performed since the royalty went into exile in 1970. The second was the presentation by an all-male troupe of an episode from a lengthy dance-drama with literary roots in India. Though the epic tale of the Reamker (the Cambodian
version of the Ramayana legend) has long been a core of the performance repertoire, dancers had not previously focused on this particular chapter of the story. The third event involved the choreographing of a completely new piece within the classical idiom, by a Cambodian dancer who had been residing in the U.S. for more than a decade. That dance also had its world premiere in Phnom Penh.

The appendices contain excerpts from the lyrics for each of these works, provided as an example of the verbal element in Cambodian dance. The words are not enough, though, to tell the story. Communication through the dance involves an interplay of gesture and movement, specific melodies and rhythms, and facial expression, along with the sung poetry or intoned words. Some dances are performed to instrumental music only. Khmer poetic texts that accompany classical dances are notoriously difficult to translate, steeped as they are in subtle metaphors, word-play, codified rhythmic and rhyming structures, and sometimes, royal vocabulary. The translations offered here, then, are rough at best, meant to give a sense not only of what is said, but also of what is not said, what is left for the audience to interpret from the other components of the dance.

There are several systems for the transliteration of Khmer words into English. Here they are spelled as generally presented in the literature on dance, and as written in program notes produced by the artists themselves. The term “Khmer” technically refers to the majority ethnic group of Cambodia. However, in common usage, the terms “Khmer” and “Cambodian” are interchangeable.