

## Section II: Twenty-First Century Dances

### *Preah Sothun Neang Monorea*

Many of the classical dances performed today were created in the mid-twentieth century under the guidance of Queen Kossamak Nearyrath. It was her vision that episodes of lengthy dance-dramas be shortened and that “pure” dances, those without a dramatic story-line, be created and presented together on a proscenium stage in a program that would last about two hours or so. (Sacred dances performed as part of a *buong suong* ceremony are, for the most part, a separate category.) Modeling this innovation on Western theatrical practice, she proposed thematic ideas to dance teachers at court, who then developed the choreography in consultation with the Queen. Thus, relatively recent innovation lies behind some of the works considered “ancient” by today’s audiences.

When surviving dancers gathered after the end of the Khmer Rouge era and started to piece together elements of their artistic heritage, they worked not only on these dances of Queen Kossamak’s era, but also on those lengthy dance-dramas that enacted mytho-historical tales, spoke of love and war, and explored human nature and human relationships with fantastical creatures such as giants and celestial beings. These dramas included the *Reamker*, the Cambodian version of the Ramayana, and many others.

In order to be able to stage these works, dancers who specialized in one particular role would labor with others who had practiced different roles, hoping to be able to tweak each others’ memories. Cambodian classical dances are populated with four main character types – the ogre or giant, most often on the side of evil, who moves with a wide, bold gait; the prince or male divinity who appears graceful and strong; the princess or female divinity, tracing no hard angles in her fluid gestures; and the acrobatic and

mischievous monkey, the only role reserved for men. (Queen Kossamak introduced that innovation, too. Before the 1940s, women danced all the roles.) Monkeys are most often on the side of good, a companion and loyal servant of the princes. Additional characters (hermits, certain animals, etc.) are found in any number of dramas.

To this day, dancers at the Royal University of Fine Arts dance department, and at the Ministry of Culture's Department of Arts, speak of not having recovered all the old stories, yet. Of needing to recreate so as to preserve for fear that, otherwise, meaningful components of their artistic heritage will be lost forever. They speak of being driven to remember each gesture and movement, each embroidered pattern in traditional costuming, each line of poetic text, so that others who come after will have access to this vast reservoir of knowledge (**illustrations 5, 6, 7, 8**).

In 2003, while Princess Norodom Buppha Devi was Minister of Culture and Fine Arts, dancers undertook the revival and expansion of the Preah Sothun Neang Monorea dance-drama. It premiered in December of that year. It was performed for a wider audience, including the foreign funders who supported the effort, in February, 2004. The work is just over an hour long. (Oral histories and other records indicate that in the beginning decades of the twentieth century, dance-dramas could last for hours.)

A synopsis of the story of Preah Sothun Neang Monorea, adapted from the program notes, follows. (See selected lyrics in **Appendix 1**.)

Neang Keo Monorea and her six siblings, all sisters, reside in the heavens with their parents. One day their father allows them to visit earth. Each wearing a scarf with magical powers granting them the ability to fly away from their celestial abode, they promise their father to return home as soon as they hear the ringing of the gongs. When they reach earth, they go to bathe in a lotus pond (**illustration 9**).

Unbeknownst to them, however, a hunter leads Preah (Prince) Sothun to watch the celestial visitors clandestinely. Upon the ringing of the gongs, they

prepare to take leave of earth, as they had pledged. But Neang Monorea's magic scarf has disappeared. Unable to join her sisters as they departed, she cries herself unconscious. Taking advantage of the opportunity presented him, Preah Sothun offers to help. He and Neang Monorea fall in love, return to the Prince's palace, and marry (**illustration 10**).

One day, Preah Sothun's country is invaded. His father orders him to go to war to save the country. While he is away, the prince's mother summons a fortune-teller to interpret a frightening dream she has had. Being cruel, he lies, explaining to her that because of sins the Queen committed in a previous life, Neang Monorea must be killed to avoid the continuation of war, and the certain death of Preah Sothun. The King and Queen send Neang Monorea into exile, rather than to her death. On her way back to the heavens, Neang Monorea meets a hermit and offers him her ring so that should Preah Sothun ever search for her, the hermit could show the ring to him.

When he returns to the palace victorious, Preah Sothun is devastated by the news of what has befallen his princess. He asks for permission to search for her. On his search, he meets the hermit and receives the ring she had left for just this purpose. Overcoming many obstacles along the way, the Prince eventually makes it to her world. When he observes royal maids collecting water at the pond, he uses a magic spell to cause one of the maid's water jars to become too heavy to lift. The prince appears just then, to offer his help. While pretending to assist the maid with the pot, he drops the ring inside it.

As the maid bathes Neang Monorea, the ring spills onto her hair, where she finds it. The maid tells her the story of the helpful stranger. Neang Monorea runs to the pond, and there she finds her beloved. Neang Monorea's parents grant them permission to remain in the heavens as a married couple.

The story itself involves the meeting of beings from two distinct worlds. This is a theme in Cambodian origin myths in which a foreign man joins with an indigenous woman to create the Khmer people. Here, however, the couple first lives in the man's home, and then in the woman's. Neang Monorea, the outsider, bears the brunt of the fortune teller's deceit. None the less, the implication remains that good things will (eventually) come from the union of Preah Sothun and Neang Monorea, as they end up together, still in love.

Princess Buppha Devi is the granddaughter of Queen Kossamak. The recreation of the dance-drama was dedicated to the late Queen who had overseen the

choreographing of a excerpt of this very story in the 1960s. (The complete story of Preah Sothun Neang Monorea, though well-known in Cambodia, had never been staged as a dance-drama.) The program notes read: “In continuing the tradition of Queen Sisowath Kossamak Nearyrath . . . ., Samdech Preah Ream Princess Norodom Buppha Devi, Minister of Culture and Fine Arts, is committed to implementing a cultural policy based on the preservation and promotion of the national cultural heritage of the Kingdom of Cambodia....” Later, the notes continue: “It is in this spirit that HRH Princess Buppha Devi chose to remount the story of “Preah Sothun Neang Monorea” as a full length classical dance performance....., as a means of preserving the national heritage of the glorious Angkor Civilization and to augment existing repertory.”

“Glorious Angkor,” the symbol of all that once was, and all that might be, was evoked. The message here, perhaps, has something to do with the contribution a restaging of an ancient tale in a classical form could make to a recapturing of some of the country’s lost glory. The story itself emphasizes the benevolence of the King and Queen, who spare their daughter-in-law from death, and at the same time, seem to protect their son and their kingdom. (One dancer offers a different interpretation. She sees very selfish rulers who put the prediction of a fortune teller above their responsibility to their son and daughter-in-law.) Directed by a princess, and claiming a continuation of the work of Queen Kossamak Nearyrath, the realization of this complete story in dance reinforces the relationship between royalty, traditional stories, and dance in Cambodia, while at the same time making a space for something new, set within prescribed symbolic and actual parameters.

### *Veyreap's Battle*

Queen Kossamak Nearyrath had been so inspired by the “monkey” dancers in a troupe from a village across the river from Phnom Penh, that, those dancers being male, she decided to bring men and boys into the palace troupe to dance that same role. The Vat Svay Andet Village troupe she had seen at an annual festival on the palace grounds featuring crafts, foods, and performances by people from all across the country, was quite different from the troupe associated with the Queen and her family. Not only did males perform as “monkeys,” they performed as princes, giants, and princesses, too. The all-male masked dance-drama tradition which they practice is called *lakhon khol*. The Vat Svay Andet troupe, still in existence, is the only *lakhon khol* troupe known to have survived the war.

*Lakhon khol's* sole repertoire is based on episodes of the *Reamker*, the Cambodian version of the Ramayana epic, which the Vat Svay Andet troupe enacts each year at New Year time. Even though these days the ritual extends just three nights, instead of the traditional seven before the war and revolution, it remains a complex, multilayered fusion of various spiritual trajectories. Through performance, villagers seek to propitiate ancestral spirits for the sake of the well-being of the village as a whole.

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 giant, Reap (Ravana), ruler of the land of Langka, plays a trick on Preah Ream and is able, as a result, to kidnap the princess and whisk her back to his island abode. Preah Ream, overcome by grief, calls upon his monkey soldiers to help rescue her.

Numerous adventures ensue – with magic, battles, tests of loyalty, and tests of endurance between and among an array of monkeys, giants, mermaids, princes, and other beings. Eventually, after constructing a causeway across the sea, the monkey soldiers and Preah Ream, along with Preah Leak, arrive in Langka, engage in a huge battle, and defeat the giants. Though Neang Seda is reunited with her husband, the story doesn't end there. Preah Ream literally puts her through a trial by fire, so distrustful is he of the woman he loves as she has been in captivity in the giant's palace for years.

The first Khmer version of the Ramayana story appeared in the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century. The manuscript was most likely a libretto for *lakhon khol* performance, recited by a narrator, and accompanied by the music of the *pin peat* orchestra. The *Reamker* has inspired artistic creation in sculpture, painting, and dance-drama for centuries. Carvings on ancient temples show episodes from this epic.

The episode most critical for performance at New Year time in Vat Svay Andet is that of Kumbhakar and the release of the waters. Kumbhakar, Reap's brother, 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. Hanuman, the chief of the monkeys, becomes a crow feeding on the dog's carcass. Kumbhakar's frustration and disgust mount as he, unsuccessful at driving off the two animals, becomes overwhelmed by the unbearable odor. He must, at last, jump up to try to attack them. As he leaves his position, he releases the waters.

For the residents of Vat Svay Andet, the performance of the release of the 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 in mid-April, the height

of the hot season. Water is the lifeblood of the countryside, and performance of this episode becomes a kind of magic act, assuring fertility of the land as it is believed to bring the rains just in time for the beginning of the next planting season.

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 profession. However, as New Year, or some other special occasion nears (the funeral of an important monk; a need to combat an epidemic; even, more recently, to ask for peace, for example), they will spend evenings practicing, preparing for the event which 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 as carrying the possibility of combating communal ills and re-establishing natural and social order.

In preparation for the performance, offerings of food, candles, and incense are placed in altars around the village temple grounds, or near the designated performance space. Additionally, an elaborate *sampeah kru* ceremony is held, with performers squatting before a display of the masks and accoutrements they will be using when enacting the drama, arms lifted, hands together is a gesture of prayer (**illustration 11**). During the *sampeah kru*, not only Hindu gods, but the Buddha and ancestral teachers and spirits of the arts are invoked. Mediums resident in the village may become possessed by the spirits of those worshipped at the altars, and then enter the ceremonial space, making declarations about the ritual as it unfolds.

Strong associations exist between the palace and the Vat Svay Andet troupe, with some village elders claiming a royal lineage for the *lakhon khol* tradition. (There is some historical evidence of a long history of male troupes, based at temples or provincial

governor's palaces, performing episodes from the *Reamker*. One ancient inscription lists the king as a dancer.)

Both *lakhon khol* and classical dance have *pin peat* accompaniment. But their relationship to the music and lyrics is quite different. Classical dance has choral accompaniment as opposed to the intoned recitation by two or three narrators for *lakhon khol*. Further, the large drums known as *skor thom* dominate the *lakhon khol*, marking rhythmic emphasis, and signalling transitions in musical sequences. Their use in classical dance is more discreet.

The village performance of *lakhon khol* takes place outdoors. Local residents construct a wooden rectangular structure enclosed only at one end, with wooden railings on either side. After characters enter a scene, and perform a short movement sequence, they move to the railings, upon which they sit, raising their torsos up for emphasis as needed, and gesturing with stylized movements as the narrators recite text about and for the performers.

In the 1960s, when the Royal University of Fine Arts was in its infancy, teams of artists from the school traversed Cambodia, researching and practicing traditional arts. Actors and dancers took what they had seen or learned, and, once back at the academy in the city, proceeded to re-make and re-fine the art for public performance on a theatrical 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. The Department of Arts of the Ministry of Information and Culture, and some provincial offices of the Ministry of Culture oversaw the development of *lakhon khol* troupes. At the



dance department of the School of Fine Arts, certain male students were selected to train in this technique. The theatrical version is dynamic -- athletic and acrobatic, without extended seated sequences in which narrators intone the story-line, as one finds in the village context. Because Phnom Penh's *lakhon khol* performers also trained 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.

At the Department of Arts in the early twenty-first century, accomplished *lakhon khol* performers collaborated to develop a *Reamker* episode never emphasized in their repertoire before, that of Veyreap's Battle. Musicians, dancers, lyricists, and costume-makers worked in concert to create a production that involved a cast of more than forty (**illustration 12**). A synopsis of the story follows. (See selected lyrics in **Appendix II**.)

Reap, King of Langka, had been defeated in a series of battles with Preah Ream. He orders his servants to invite his brother Veyreap and the army of giants to help him in his pursuit of the prince. Veyreap, who rules a land under the sea, agrees.

Preah Ream, in his own camp, has an upsetting dream and requests that the fortune teller interpret it for him. Pipaek, a giant who has switched loyalties, predicts that Preah Ream is in terrible danger and must be protected. Only when Sirius (the brightest star) appears in the sky will he be free of danger. The monkey warrior Hanuman enlarges himself so that he can hide Preah Ream in his mouth until the danger has passed (**illustration 13**).

When Veyreap arrives at Preah Ream's locale, he sees soldiers guarding every corner of the camp (**illustrations 14, 15**). He changes into an aged monkey and, in this guise, manages to learn not only about Preah Ream's hiding place, but also about the prediction. He blows a bright glass sphere into the air, thereby tricking the monkeys into thinking the star has appeared.

Preah Ream's troops are relieved, and they relax their guard, even to the point of dosing off. Veyreap's magic puts them into a deep sleep. He captures the Prince and returns with him to his city beneath the sea. When the monkey soldiers awaken from the spell, they discover what has befallen their leader. The monkey king Sugrib orders Hanuman and the monkey army to rescue Preah Ream.

Once back home, Veyreap commands his godson Machanub to guard the human prince. (Machanub is a half-monkey, half-fish, the offspring of the union of Hanuman with the mermaid Sovann Macha, who appears in another episode of the *Reamker*. Hanuman and Machanub have never met.) Hanuman arrives in the

undersea world, and a fight takes place between father and son (**illustration 16**). Baffled by their mutual show of strength, they discover that they are indeed father and son. Unable to continue, torn as he is between loyalty to Veyreap who has raised him, and the one who gave him life, he abandons the battlefield.

Hanuman spots the female giant Sara Kourn, Veyreap's sister, who is in tears. She explains that her brother plans to kill her and Preah Ream in a vat of boiling water. Together, they devise a ruse to get Hanuman to Preah Ream. Once there, he attacks the giants, throwing many of them into the caldron of boiling water (**illustration 17**). Successful in killing Veyreap as well, Hanuman heads back to the Prince's encampment, Preah Ream leading the way.

The production's director, Pok Sarann, was particularly creative in overseeing the design of costuming for undersea creatures (seahorses, crabs, and so on) (**illustration 18**). He was also instrumental in developing movement vocabulary for those creatures that, while based in the Khmer dance reflects as well each animal's naturalistic movement pattern through water. According to Pok Sarann, the experience of creating such an involved piece (about 80 minutes long) helped the artists re-connect with the subtleties and complexities of the *Reamker*, and expanded their performance repertoire. The presentation of a detailed story in a fast-paced, visually striking way that communicates through intoned and sung lyrics, body posture, gesture, and movement, melodies that signal a certain emotion or action, and distinct costuming by character (color, type of headdress, and so on), challenged them as choreographers, and deepened their resolve to continue to push for more of this kind of artistic effort.

He and others lament the lack of attention paid to *lakhon khol*, by Cambodians in positions of authority in the arts, and by the world at large, and regret that they haven't had the resources or support to develop more such work. "It will disappear if we don't do it," many say publicly. The classical dance, with bejeweled women dancing stories of celestial beings, receives the gaze of the outside world, and the majority of invitations to

perform abroad. This time, artists of the Department of Arts were able to undertake such an endeavor with support for rehearsals, costume and set creation, and production offered by the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh, a new kind of collaboration for both partners.

*Lkhon khol's* place in the popular imagination in Cambodia is very different from that of the court or classical dance, the latter referred to in speeches and literature as the soul of the nation, the heart of Cambodia. Innovation in a ritual context is one concern, where the proper practice is necessary to guarantee the intended outcome. But in a theatrical setting, the only limits to the artists' creativity in their work on this *lakhon khol* performance were their internal directives: wanting to expand within the structures that had been passed down to them.

### *Seasons of Migration*

We return now to classical dance, though with a new focus. Earlier we examined Preah Sothun Neang Monorea, a dance-drama whose story is familiar to many in Cambodia, told by grandparents to their children, and now, performed on stage. A distinct type of classical dance, the dance-drama enacts tales of humans and supernatural beings. Sacred dances, those reserved for ritual occasions, such as a *buong suong* ceremony, for example, may or may not have a story-line. The third type of classical dance, however, focuses on the expression of sentiments, and while it may evoke a sense of the sacrosanct, with dancers costumed as celestial beings, it does not fulfill a ritual function; nor does it follow characters through their adventures. *Seasons of Migration* fits into this latter category.

Sophiline Cheam Shapiro conceptualized and choreographed *Seasons of Migration*. She is the same choreographer who developed the Cambodian version of

*Othello* several years earlier. Based in southern California, she had trained as a dancer in Cambodia, where she was born and raised, beginning in 1981. Graduating from the School of Fine Arts (now the Royal University of Fine Arts) as part of the first generation of students following the Khmer Rouge era, she and her peers worked with surviving dance masters to reconstruct dances and dance-dramas of old. Upon moving to the United States, and enrolling in college and then graduate school, she absorbed new stories and new experiences, and longed to incorporate them into her practice and performance of Cambodian dance.

Seasons of Migration contains four sections, each portraying, according to the choreographer, a state of mind. The work mines her personal journey of psychological transformation as she adapted to life so far from her homeland. She chose to set the piece on dancers at Cambodia's Royal University of Fine Arts because of their technical skill, and because in Cambodia she could work with those revered teachers of hers who were still alive to make sure the dance, though new, was both developed and presented in a technically and aesthetically appropriate manner.

She was, once again, under intense scrutiny, just as she had been when she worked on her version of *Othello*. Considered a colleague, but also, in some ways, an outsider, she had to find a balance between the drive to innovate, and the threat such creativity represented to many (**illustration 19**).

In the opening section of Seasons of Migration, divinities (five female and five male, all danced by women) arrive on earth, full of excitement and anticipation about the new. Section two is a solo featuring a character recognizable to Cambodians -- Neang Neak, the mythological serpent. She begins with her mind open to the new, and then

dances out her eventual rejection of what she perceives to be burdens she has carried with her. She wants to extricate herself from her lengthy tail, a mark of her difference, as it sets her apart from those in her new surroundings (**illustration 20**). (See lyrics in **Appendix III**.)

The third section explores adjustment through the play of shadow and light, representing past and future. The spirit of the present comes to understand that shadow and light are equal parts of who she is and that to move forward comfortably, she must embrace both (**illustration 21**). In the final section, the divinities strive for balance. The choreography, performed in part in pairs, references the ancient Khmer deity Harihara, who combines the attributes of the Brahmanic gods Shiva and Vishnu, representing a sense of equilibrium and harmony (**illustration 22**).

In attempting to express a contemporary or personal experience (one with universal resonance, though), through classical dance, the choreographer was breaking new ground. She also approached the choreography and music from fresh angles. For example, during Neang Neak's solo, she asked for only two instruments to be played, the lower-pitched xylophone and the lower-pitched circle of gongs. This had never been done before. The dancer, swathed in a shimmering brocade ankle-length skirt, a stylized, serpent-headed golden tiara on her head, first acknowledges the beauty and importance of what she carries with her – symbolized by her tail (an intricately embroidered scarf reaching down her back and trailing about a yard over the ground) by studying it, stroking it. Eventually unable to reconcile the weight of the tail, her “difference,” her past, with her newfound reality, she attempts to tear it, and then rejects it by turning away

from it. The deep sonority of those instruments helped express the intensity of Neang Neak's inner struggle.

The choreographer experimented as well with the dancing itself, as she combined elements from the core gestural vocabulary of classical dance. Classical dances are created through an arrangement of distinct movement patterns and gestures that are all identifiable as part of the form's strict canon. However, she juxtaposed movement patterns in innovative ways, raising eyebrows among some of the older generation of dancers, and exciting others with the path this was blazing. As long as a combination maintained the classical aesthetic, and expressed the intended emotion, it was left in, with approval from the senior dancers.

The warnings raised by some focused on the loss inherent in not paying attention to what has yet to be recovered. How can we take scarce resources, be they local or foreign, and concentrate them on something new, when traditional knowledge is moving beyond our grasp each day, they asked. "If we change things, the original will disappear," one administrator announced. In the very attempt to embrace the dynamism of an art that, as history shows, is in constant flux, even while rooted in exacting tenets and standards, the choreographer confronts the perceptions of those who fear continued or irreversible loss.