

Press : *The CAMBODIA DAILY* Date: 20-21 Aug 2011

Reporter: Michelle Vachon and Kuch Naren Key Word: Khmeropédies III

MONKEYING AROUND

A classic role with a contemporary twist

BY MICHELLE VACHON AND KUCH NAREN • THE CAMBODIA DAILY

For choreographer Emmanuèle Phuon, the dance “Khmeropédies III,” which will be presented on Friday in Phnom Penh, is a return to the origins of the monkey role in Cambodian male classical dance.

But seeing the seven dancers perform it is nothing short of a revelation: Suddenly one becomes aware of the extent of men’s classical training in Cambodia, of the talent and skills these dancers possess and rarely have a chance to use.

This work-in-progress starts with a male dancer in sports clothes staging the dramatic stances of Khmer male masked dance Lakhaon Kaol as two dancers next to him play traditional monkey roles.

Then, the codified movements of classical dance’s tableaux are replaced by fast and fluid movements in scenes that vibrate with energy.

And yet, the link to classical dance is unmistakable and the movements reminiscent of those of Lakhaon Kaol.

“It’s the same language but with other movements,” Ms Phuon explained.

Born in Cambodia, Ms Phuon studied Khmer classical dance in Cambodia and Western classical dance in the mid-1970s in Bangkok, where her mother was helping Cambodian refugees fleeing the Khmer Rouge. In the mid-1980s, she studied Western classical dance in France, followed by jazz in Montreal, Canada, and contemporary dance in New York. For seven years in the US, she was part of the dance company of Mikhail Baryshnikov, who is considered one of the 20th century’s greatest classical dancers.

This is the third time that the 44-year-old choreographer has worked on contemporary dance projects for Amrita Performing Arts. The first time she developed a dance with one Cambodian female classical dancer, and the second a dance with one male and three female dancers.

Working with male dancers trained in the monkey role seemed to her the obvious next step, their very specialized training becoming the basis for a new performance created during an intensive workshop.

“They have this ability to move a certain way, to do certain things that nobody else can do,” Ms Phuon said.

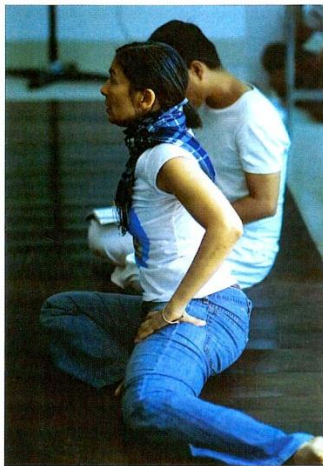
No dancer trained in Western classical ballet could perform those movements, she said.

KHMEROPÉDIÉS III

WHEN: The performance is at 6:30 pm, on Friday, Aug 26.

WHERE: The Sport Club; Street 508, off Monivong Blvd.

COST: Admission is free.



“For the stance of the monkey, the legs are bent. It’s terribly hard: I don’t think any one of us could last five minutes. And they, from an early age on, work on that six hours a day, building strength to be able to sustain the bent legs and the torso that’s a little bit leaning forward.”

The idea for the piece was “Going back to the origins of the monkey dance, which is what the first masters did: They looked at gibbons, at macaques and came up with all the movements they do in the masked dances” as giants and monkeys clash in epic tales, Ms Phuon said. “So we’re doing the same thing. And because of science, the Internet and everything, we add monkeys from other continents.”



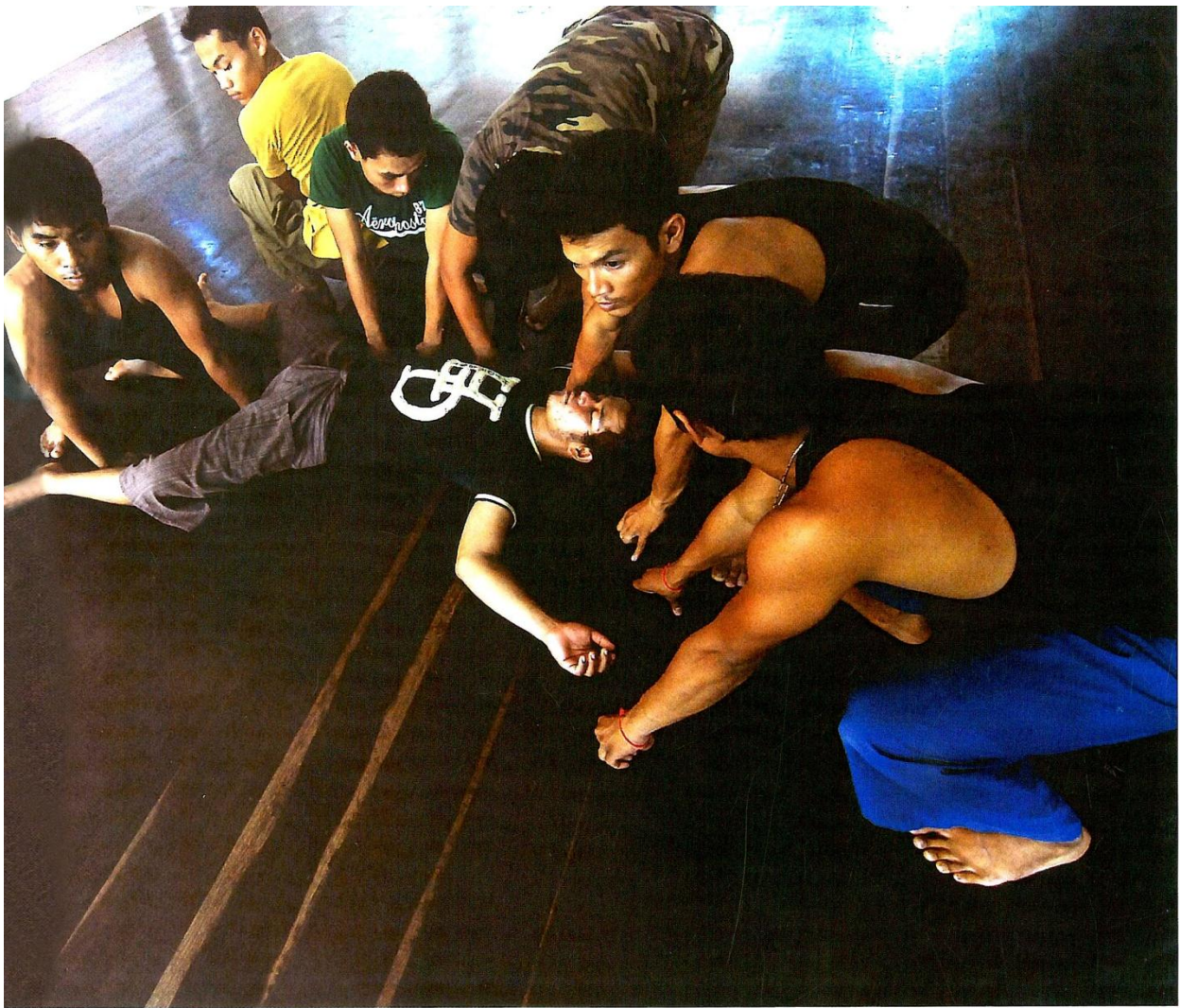
Photos by Lauren Crofters/The Cambodia Daily

Scenes in “Khmeropédies III” recreate monkey behavior, which can be rather surprising at times. For example, in the scene about the discovery of a dead monkey, dancers surround the body in silence, probe and smell it carefully, the session ending with one monkey charging and hitting it as to state death. This near ritual is repeated each time some species of monkeys find a dead comrade, Ms Phuon said.

Work for the dance has included bringing in a specialist, Eric Sargis, who teaches anthropology and primatology at Yale University in the US and specializes in bio-mechanics. With him, dancers discussed monkeys’ movements and behavior.

They also observed primates in wildlife television documentaries and at the zoo, said Phon Sopheap a dancer and teacher at the Secondary School of Fine Arts who performed in Ms Phuon’s quartet dance and has served as Ms Phuon’s assistant on this project.

“In our classical monkey roles, there are three types: the wild/natural monkey, the clas-



LEFT TO RIGHT: Emmanuèle Phuon sits next to her assistant, Phon Sopheap, during a rehearsal. Dancers Heng Seng Hong (on the floor), Khon Chansityka, Chey Rithea, Nget Rady, Khiev Sovannarith, Noun Sovitou and Khon Chansina rehearse a scene from 'Khmeropedies III.'

sical monkey and the Battambang monkey," he said. After studying monkeys from various continents, Mr Sopheap said, "We decided to pick the natural monkey role as having the best movements and attitudes to develop into a contemporary dance."

"It's been quite difficult to create a contemporary dance based on classical dance's monkey role because our dance has specific and clear movements for legs and arms and bodies," said dancer Khiev Sovannarith, who also teaches at the Secondary School of Fine Arts.

"Even though we have faced a lot of difficulties in this workshop, it has given us a rare chance of expanding our skills with new movements for the monkey role," he said.

"[Ms Phuon] is an open-minded woman who has never forced us to do something based on her own needs," Mr Sovannarith added. "Working as a group required mutual understanding. Otherwise we would not have

been able to create a performance."

"Our training is so different that it would be useless for me to try to have them do what I do, or me to try to do what they do. So it's really an exchange and a conversation," Ms Phuon said.

Such an attitude has become a prerequisite for allowing foreign choreographers to work with Cambodian classical dancers, said Amrita's Fred Frumberg, who has been involved with the country's dancers for nearly 15 years.

"For me, the process is crucial: I need to see how the choreographer dialogues with the dancers," he said.

At this early stage of dancers attempting to develop their own Cambodian style of contemporary dance, Mr Frumberg said. "The dancers are still very vulnerable. And the last thing we want to do is to have them learn one specific school of [Western] modern dance. What's beautiful about our dancers is that

everything they do is based on the fact that they trained since six years old as classical Cambodian dancers and that's what makes them special."

The next step will be to have Cambodian classical dancers choreograph productions of international standards, Mr Frumberg said.

This may not be so far off. Dancer Chey Chankethya is now working on her master's degree in choreography at the University of California in Los Angeles, and in November three choreographers from the US will give an intensive choreography workshop to four Cambodian classical dancers, he said.

In the meantime, Mr Frumberg is looking for funding to produce "Khmeropedies III" as a full-fledged work in the near future.

The performance is at 6:30 pm on Friday and will take place at the Sport Club on Street 508, off Monivong Boulevard. Admission for the performance is free.

Press : **The Phnom Penh Post**

Date: 02-08 Sept 2011

Reporter: Eléonore Sok-Halkovich

Key Word: Khmeropédies III

SEP 02 - 08, 2011 7DAYS THE PHNOM PENH POST

Culture **5**

New dance show goes all male, all monkey

Eléonore Sok-Halkovich

AT the door of the Lyla Lagoon Sport Center, an empty building hidden at the back of a garden court, choreographer Emmanuelle Phuon welcomes her audience.

On August 26, the elegant 44-year-old Khmer-French woman unveiled *Khmeropédies III*, an all-male contemporary dance show centered around the role of the monkey, one of the four principal characters in classical Khmer ballet.

The result of a six-week workshop with seven male dancers, *Khmeropédies III* is a twist on the traditional Cambodian ballet formula, where nearly all the roles, (except the monkey), are played by women.

Instead, the male dancers in Phuon's show take centre stage, performing an adaptation of the epic Hindu poem *The Reamer*, starring the monkey god Hanuman and his simian army.

"For this piece, I wanted to look again at the natural monkeys as a new departure for a contemporary dance," she explained.

To achieve this, Phuon worked with a primatologist from Yale University in the United States, Professor Eric Sargis. Over two weeks they studied the behaviour of chimpanzees, gorillas and bonobos, scrutinising their stances and walking rhythms with the aid of documentaries and a visit at the Phnom Tamao Zoo, outside Phnom Penh. Sargis then demonstrated the gestures to her students, introducing new dance moves they soon replicated.

Perhaps dancing with controversy, Phuon said *Khmeropédies III* is also a balletic response to the creationist debate, with the choreography intended to show the audience how closely monkeys are related to humans.

In the dancing room, which has a capacity of just 50 people, space is at a premium - but a mix of expats, Khmer dancers, relatives, dance enthusiasts and onlookers packed in last Friday.

At 6:30pm, the light softens and the show starts. Seven dancers wearing gym clothes arrive on stage.

Assembled on both sides of the stage they begin to undress, until they are clad only in shorts and tank tops. Emmanuelle says she planned this "in order to show that they are humans playing monkeys."

Soon the body transformation starts. The dancers crouch and walk, dragging their arms along the floor like a monkey, mouths in an O shape, all in complete silence, before starting



"I wanted to look again at monkeys for a contemporary dance"

to run rapidly in a diagonal line across the stage uttering monkey cries.

These movements are extremely physical and require specific training that Khmer and Thai ballet dancers learn, starting at the age of six.

"It's a very interesting work because in traditional dance, they have to learn the same movement by heart - in contemporary dance they are free," said Phuon.

"Cambodian dance is sometimes very two-dimensional, in the sense that it involves a lot of poses and doesn't make use of space so much. It's a bit like looking at Egyptian hieroglyphs. In contemporary dance, performers have to use the whole stage, and it is the movement that is important, not the pose."

Khmeropédies III quickly unfolds in eight sequences, designed by Singapore-based dramaturge Howngean Lim.

After an initial birth sequence comes childhood. The dancers peel off and line up opposite one another, before mirroring the gestures of their partner, as if each monkey was look-

ing in a mirror.

The dancers then pass into adolescence and start gyrating in a primitive dance accompanied by a percussion rhythm, fighting and attempting to dominate the other dancers on stage.

The next sequence - grooming and playing - makes the children in the audience laugh. But the giggles cease soon after, when dancers enter into a ritual of death. One lays down on the stage and pretends to stop breathing, while the other monkeys pay their tribute one at a time, smelling and caressing the prone dancer.

At the end of this sequence the monkey comes back from the dead, and in a frightening white mask he begins a final dance of re-birth where he turns into the monkey god Hanuman.

The show ends with a thunder of applause. Most of the audience stays in the room after the performance ends, feeling the need to talk about what they have just seen.

"I really liked it", said Anders Jiras, a Swedish photographer in the audience. "It's the best show of Emmanuelle Phuon I've seen. It is very integrated. The monkeys are international but in the same time, very Cambodian. And with all this energy!"

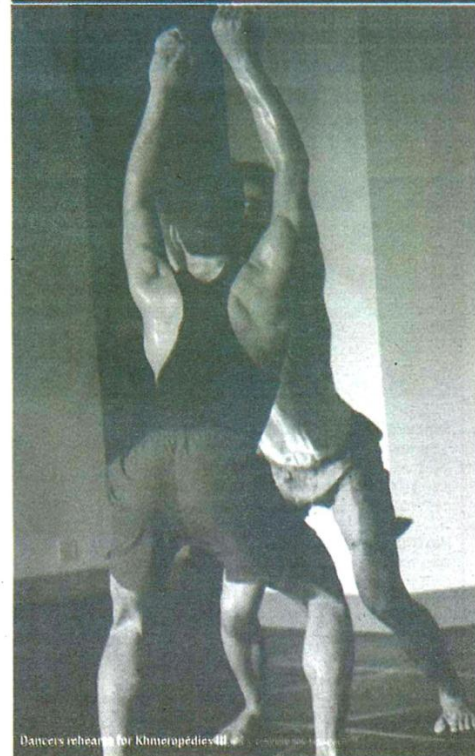
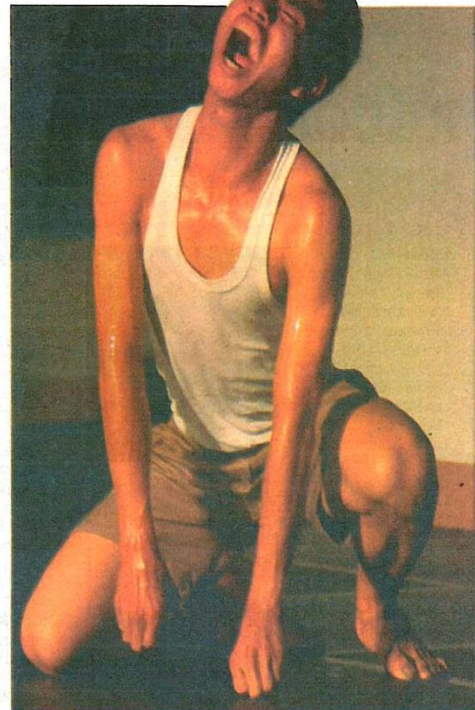
Chi Lina, a 19-year-old audience member, called the performance "strange."

"I have never seen a dance with only boys, and they look so similar to monkeys. But I liked it," she said.

She is not the only one to be deeply shaken by the performance. Belle, a famous classical Cambodian ballet dancer who collaborated with Phuon for *Khmeropédies I*, confides that she cried during the death sequence.

"There was something which really connected us to these monkeys," she said. "In Cambodia, some people think that contemporary dance is a crazy thing and that it destroys our traditions. That's false. It's another way to express ourselves. We can do something new, but we stay Khmer."

This is what is important to Phuon. "The dancers learned to unlearn, in order learn a different language," she told *7Days*. ■



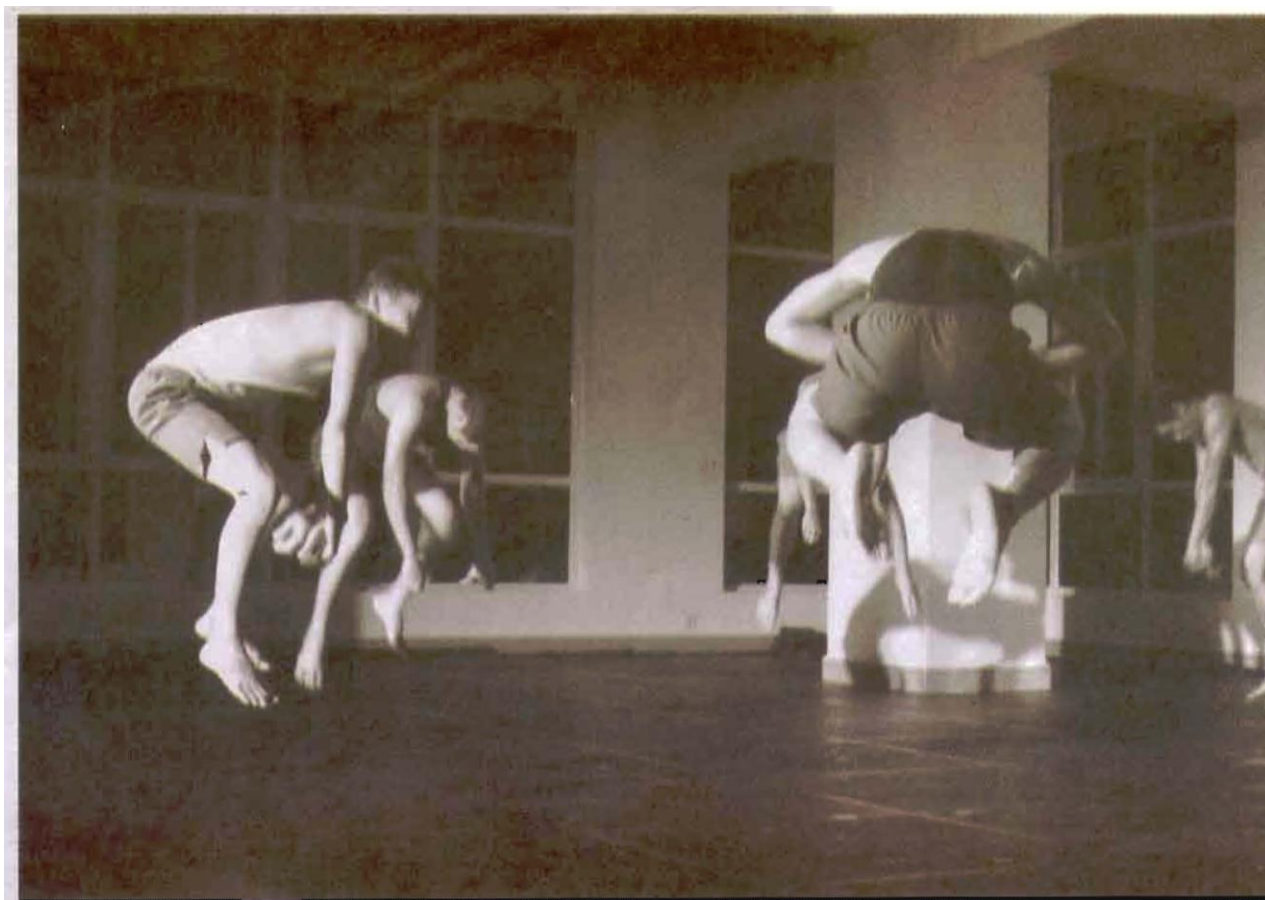
Dancers rehearse for *Khmeropédies III* at the Lyla Lagoon Sport Center.

Press : **The Phnom Penh Post**

Date: 02 Sept 2011

Reporter:

Key Word: Khmeropédies III



There's no business like monkey business

Dancers rehearse their monkey-like maneuvers for *Khmeropédies III*, a contemporary take on Hindu mythology choreographed by Emmanuelle Phuon. *Khmeropédies III* follows the life of monkeys, from birth, to death, to spiritual reunion with monkey god Haruman. The play was organised by Amrita Performing Arts, and was held in Phnom Penh on August 26. For a full report of the night, see page five. Amrita's next scheduled performance is *A Thin White Line* with Australian choreographer Paea Leach, to take place tonight at 6:30pm at Sovanna Phum. PIC: ELEONORE SOK-HALNOVICH

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Dance is all monkey business for experimental performers

Bennett Murray

S EVEN young men prance on-stage, jumping and climbing on each other. They move gracefully on their hands and feet like monkeys on the move, periodically letting out melodic howls.

The performance is an inventive reinterpretation of traditional Khmer dance. The dancers have spent the past three weeks perfecting their routine at the Circus Centre and the Department of Performing Arts, for *Khmeropédies III: Source/Primate*, a new dance performance piece produced by Amrita Performing Arts set to go onstage in Phnom Penh on March 1 and New York in April.

Choreographer Emmanuele Phuon said she decided to focus on the role of the monkey in traditional *Lakhaon Kaol* dance for the final instalment of three shows which blend modern and traditional performance.

The monkey plays an integral role in *Lakhaon Kaol*, which gets its narrative from the *Reamker*, a Khmer adaptation of the Hindu *Ramayana* epic poem. Among the *Reamker*'s prominent characters is Hanuman, a deity in monkey form who helps the prince Rama rescue his wife Sati from the wicked Ravana.

Since Hanuman is depicted as having a large army of monkeys at his disposal, a large ensemble of monkey characters often feature in *Lakhaon Kaol* productions. Consequently, monkey behaviour proved to be a source of inspiration for early choreographers.

"The masters probably looked at how the monkeys behaved and moved. They took some movement and infused it in the role, and made it



Three dancers rehearse for *Khmeropédies III* at

something very codified [in dance]," Phuon said.

Phuon enlisted the help of a primatologist in order to incorporate monkeys and apes into the dance routine. As a result, chimpanzees, gorillas, bonobos and lemurs make an appearance.

"How can we infuse Western ideas into something classical and traditional? Can it evolve using Western ideas? That is the theme," Phuon said.

Khmeropédies gets its name, as well as inspiration, from the three *Gymno-*



at the Department of Performing Arts. RUTH KEBER

pedies piano compositions written by French Erik Satie in 1888.

"Satie's idea was to do three exercises on the same theme, and this is the same thing," Phuon.

The past two *Khmeropedies* also broke down choreography conventions, introducing Western classical music and rap.

Nget Rady, one of the production's seven dancers, said that he likes the approach behind *Khmeropedies III*.

"We've learned a lot about the monkey world, and we hope we can

combine this into our classic dance."

Rady and his troupe will be among 125 Cambodian artists flying to New York for the Seasons of Cambodia art festival. Organised by Cambodian Living Arts, the festival will showcase contemporary Cambodian art.

Khmeropedies III goes on stage at the Department of Performing Arts, located behind Sparks Entertainment Centre at 12304 Mao Tse Toung Boulevard, at 6:30pm, March 1. Tickets are \$2 and can be purchased at the door or from Amrita Performing Arts. ■

ress : **theAdvisor**

Date: 28 Feb 2013

Reporter:

Key Word: Khmeropédies III

theAdvisor

Edition No.63|February 28-March 6, 2013



FRI 1 Monkey do

Primatology: not something you'd normally associate with modern dance, but the study of monkeys is apparently being used to develop Cambodia's very own contemporary language in dance. *Khmeropédies III: Source/Primate* takes as its starting point the scientific observation of these creatures from Cambodian folklore, with advice provided by a professor of biological anthropology at Yale University, no less. Says French-Khmer choreographer Emmanuèle Phuon: "It is the encounter of a contemporary dancer, myself, with Cambodian dancers. In this process everyone learns from each other. *Khmeropédies III* takes its source in the study of monkeys, as did the old masters in the tradition of the monkey role. We follow the same path, adding modern resources such as video footage and scientific studies of primates. Dr Eric Sargis' expertise was especially useful when explaining how different primates move, stand and sit (he's a specialist in functional morphology and positional behaviour). He also helped in the construction of the different characters, providing the many details that make a character come alive such as attitudes, calls and motivations." The world premiere of *Khmeropédies* is slated for April 28 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, part of the Season of Cambodia Festival. See it here first. You know it makes sense.

WHO: French-Khmer choreographer Emmanuèle Phuon and Amrita Performing Arts

WHAT: *Khmeropédies III: Source/Primate* dance premiere

WHERE: Department of Performing Arts, #173 Phnom Penh 12308, behind Spark Club; 023 214127

WHEN: 6:30pm March 1

WHY: Witness the birth of a new language in dance

Press : **The New York Times**

Date: 29 April 2014

Reporter: ALASTAIR MACAULAY

Key Word: Khmeropédies III

It's Monkey See, Do and Dance



'Khmeropédies III' and Amrita Performing Arts at the Guggenheim

CheyRithea, left, and NgetRady of the Phnom Penh-based Amrita Performing Arts group at the Guggenheim Museum.

By ALASTAIR MACAULAY

Forty five minutes of monkey impersonations? Dressed only in undershirts and shorts, seven male dancers of the Cambodian Amrita Performing Arts institution held the audience's attention on Sunday evening at the Guggenheim Museum with unfailing skill and charm. The dancers are all specialists in the role of the monkey from the Cambodian classical masked dance known as LakhaonKaol; but here only one of them ever donned a mask, and then only briefly. The production, choreographed by Emmanuèle Phuon, was called "Khmeropédies III: Source/Primate"; I'm sorry I missed the chance to see parts I and II. And I wish we had been told, in person or program material, more about the centuries-old Cambodian monkey dance

tradition, to which the word “classical” has been applied and which has been the subject of much modern Cambodian dramatization. Still, even to those of us who live where monkeys do not roam free, the simian impression was immediate and sustained.

These men scamper across the stage on all fours at many different speeds. For much of the time, their torsos lean down from their pelvises, and — though nothing draws attention to their technique — the control and fluency of both spine and thigh is exceptional. One man pauses and allows one arm to swing loosely; three men become a clustered family, with one climbing over the others and all three locked in complete mutual absorption; two men jump in alternation and leapfrog over each other; several at times become, briefly, bipeds.

In several sections these men/monkeys sit still and groom one another. This is generally performed in pairs, with the quiet, steadiness and complete concentration that monkeys often show. One spellbinding scene shows three couples and a loner; the couples perform three sets of mirror actions, as if each had literally found his other half, but the seventh carries on, aloof and unfussed, as if making a point of not being jealous.

Certain athletic passages are breathtaking. Men spring high from crouched positions, never straightening limbs as in ballet but still effortlessly soaring and turning in midair.

All of “*Khmeropédies III*” is copied from life — and several scenes are played in silence, or with the performers’ apish grunts and whoops. In one sequence a singer, Kamala Sankaram, walks around the auditorium, vocalizing in ways that evoke gibbons (and birds as well). The piece is always on the cusp between dance and mime — but in three sustained scenes the action is turned fully into dance by music and rhythmic musicality.

The eclecticism of the taped music is fascinating: a Steve Reich 1977 piece for pieces of wood, a series of African rhythms played by pygmies and music (“*Brao Legends Len*”) from an ethnic minority of Northeast Cambodia. As these choices reveal, “*Khmeropédies III*” is not meant to be solely a work of Cambodian heritage.

In a preperformance discussion with Stanford Makishi (the director of performances at the Asian Cultural Council) and Eric J. Sargis, a Yale anthropologist, Ms. Phuon related how she wished to give her Cambodian dancers some of the aspects of Western dance theater she herself had experienced as a dancer with Mikhail Baryshnikov, Yvonne Rainer and others. Mr. Sargis, who acted as a scientific adviser to the group, spoke of how he recognized certain of their movements as specific to the orangutan, which has not inhabited Cambodia for many centuries; and how he had worked with the dancers to give them further movement ideas.

In one episode, one “monkey” appears to die; and nothing is more marvelous than the individual characterizations with which each other monkey reacts. There is no overt display of emotion, but the long, steady, unflinching gaze of one man into his colleague’s dead face —

while others tenderly, coolly examine the lifeless limbs and feet — is a most moving image. Then, when left alone, the corpse comes back to life as if galvanized by spasms.

“Khmeropédies III” came to us as part of the current Season of Cambodia festival showcasing the arts of the country. I must add that a few sections of this work outlived their welcome simply by doing the same kind of thing too long; and that the moments when the dancers all turned their faces to the audience offered the wrong kind of cuteness.

But the dancers were rightly cheered. This piece has mimicry, charm and virtuosity throughout; sometimes its spell goes deeper yet.

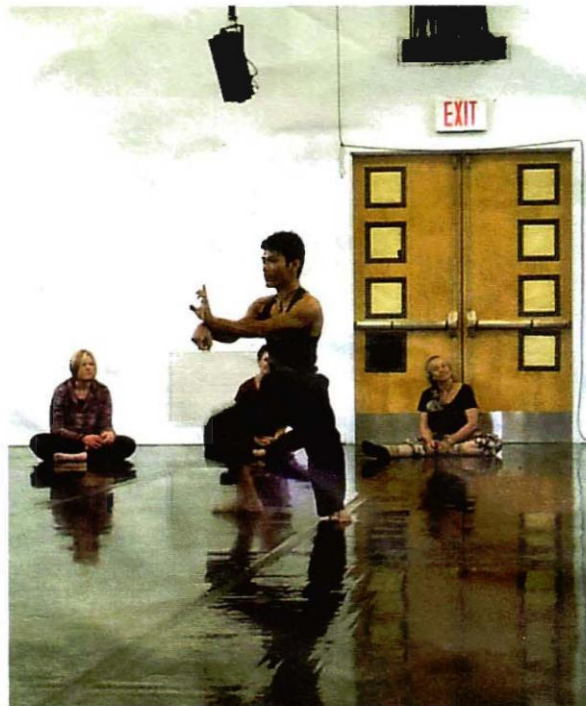
Press : *The CAMBODIA DAILY* Date: 11 May 2013

Reporter: Denis Hruby

Key Word: Khmeropédies III

A Dancer in the Big City

After traveling the world to showcase contemporary Khmer dance, Noun Sovitou joined scores of Cambodian artists in New York this past month



Denise Hruby/The Cambodia Daily
Noun Sovitou at the Mark Morris Dance Group Khmeropédies III workshop last week.

BY DENISE HRUBY • THE CAMBODIA DAILY

BAREFOOT. Noun Sovitou opened the door of a large apartment building in Manhattan's Little Italy, on the edge of this city's bustling China Town. New York City, the 24-year-old dancer from Kandal province said, is very different from home.

"It's busy, and a bit chaotic, and everything's very big and modern," Sovitou said last week, as he passed the shiny front desk to enter the elevator leading to a spacious two-bedroom apartment, which he was sharing with four more artists during the Season of Cambodia festival.

Organized by Cambodia Living Arts to showcase the country's cultural heritage at major venues in New York, the Season of Cambodia festival began at the start of April.

The two-month-long festival for the first time brought 125 Cambodian artists to New York, including Chapei musician Kong Nay, visual artist Sopheap Pich and artist Leng Seckon. Photo exhibitions, rattan art, Cambodian documentaries, shadow puppet plays and dance performances by Amrita Performing Arts were showcased as well as the Royal Ballet. The festival has been acclaimed in U.S. media, which highlighted Sovitou and his colleagues at Amrita Performing Arts, describing their performances as "breathtaking."

As one of Sovitou's roommates slurped noodle soup for breakfast, the dancer, a specialist in the monkey role in the classical male dance of Lakhaon Kaol, talked about his experiences over the past few weeks.

"There's such a routine here. On the weekdays, the streets are busy and everybody seems stressed, and there are just so many people," he said.

A major change comes with Friday evening, Sovitou said, as people are more relaxed, walk slower, and flock the parks with their friends to enjoy the spring weather.

Last month, Sovitou performed in the contemporary "Khmeropédies III" by choreographer Emanuele Phuon and Peter Chin's "Olden New Golden Blue," both productions of Amrita Performing Arts. But he has also found some time in recent weeks to explore the city with fellow Cambodian dancers and artists.

Wrapped in warm jackets, thick scarves and beanies, they have crossed the Brooklyn Bridge, taken a ferry to see the Statue of Liberty and stood in the middle of Times Square, amazed by the bright and ubiquitous advertisements.

"It's not that hard to get around because we always got a map, or we ask people for the way. Usually they are very friendly. If we do get lost, we just see it as a detour," Sovitou said.

Coming from a family of rice farmers with four children in Kandal province's Kien Svay district, Sovitou didn't always have the self-confidence he showed in New York.

"Growing up, there was little money and a lot of constraint," he said, recalling how he was sent to live with his grandmother in Phnom Penh at a young age.

To help support their living, after school Sovitou would balance a big basket on his head filled with his grandmother's cakes and walk the city's dusty roads to sell them. He worked hard and studied, but never thought that he'd be able to better his life—or get the chance to travel abroad, to stand on the world's biggest stages and bow to the applause of hundreds of people.

"Before I moved to Phnom Penh, I didn't know anything about the arts. I didn't know what it was, or how people could make a living through it," he said.

It was his uncle, a dancer and mu-

Just like the military protects our country's borders, artists protect our culture," Sovitou said.

Traveling abroad also gave him the chance to experience other cultures, which has helped him progress as an artist.

"I dance traditional Khmer monkey dance, but a lot of it is contemporary, and by watching artists from other countries, I can learn from them," he said.

"The older I got, the more I realized how important my work is. Just like the military protects our country's borders, artists protect our culture."

In New York, however, people were eager to learn from Sovitou.

The Royal Ballet and other dancers held workshops around New York, among them the Mark Morris Dance Group, where Sovitou and eight others taught a Khmeropedies III workshop. Usually, students at Mark Morris practice ballet or contemporary Western dances in a translucent tower in Brooklyn. But last week, they had to adopt the movements of monkeys.

As an introduction to the Khmer monkey dance, Sovitou ran through the studio on all fours, stopped and rested his straight upper body on his legs before wildly scratching his head. The about 25 Americans who had joined the workshop started to giggle. Undeterred, Sovitou continued, and it soon became clear that even if the motions looked haphazard, the dance was structured and coordinated.

Over the following two hours, Sovitou fought against inflexible fingers and awry backs, and clearly enjoyed his role as teacher and the interest the students from all age groups showed.

"The workshops are fun, and I think people really enjoy them, but of course in the little time we have, they can only learn basics," he said.

The work is rewarding for Sovitou, but even more so for the intrigued questions of New Yorkers who had paid up to about \$40 to see dance performances at the Guggenheim Museum and the Abrons Arts Center.

"During the receptions, I met many Americans. They all came to say hello and ask so many questions. Some ask how hard it is to train, because it requires so much energy, and they ask personal questions, about my experience

and background, or how hard it is to switch from traditional Khmer dance to contemporary," Sovitou said, adding that the interest made him feel proud and appreciated as an artist.

The dancers and singers performing on streets, subways and in parks, the sights and the cities' massive buildings and the mix of cultures and languages were inspiring, he said, and just days before leaving late last week, he made up his mind about his future.

"I want to find a school to study dance in New York," he said.

(Additional reporting by Mech Dara)



Top: Noun Sovitou, left, and fellow Amrita Performing Arts dancer Khon Chansina rehearse a scene from in Khmeropedies III in Phnom Peah in 2011. Bottom: Noun Sovitou in front of the Mark Morris Dance Group building in Brooklyn, New York.

Press : **TODAY**

Date: 16 Oct 2013

Reporter: Mayo Martin

Key Word: Khmeropédies III

da:ns Fest 2013: Going ape in Khmeropédies III: Source/Primate



SINGAPORE — What is it with monkeys and dance? SeptFest had one about gorillas, now da:ns Fest has Khmeropédies III: Source/Primate.

Actually, there's also a link to last week's we're-warming-up-but-it's-actually-the-show show by Ming Poon and Scarlet Yu — here's another performance that strips down and interrogates performance.

French-Cambodian choreographer Emmanuel Phuon and Cambodian group Amrita Performing Arts craft a wonderful, energetic show based on monkey movements and behaviour — like how the folks back then created the traditional Khmer “monkey dance”. Except this time around, there's more stuff to pick and choose from, like videos, scientific material and erm, zoos.

At the start, we're given a frame of reference — two dancers mimicking monkey movements flanking a dancer performing elements of the traditional monkey dance. It's brief but somewhat enough to get us into a "same same but different" mindset, before we plunge into the jungle, so to speak, without David Attenborough tagging along.

I'm slightly joking of course (and in no way being sarcastic — who doesn't heart David Attenborough and documentaries?!) but the show *is* more about the monkey bit than the monkey dance bit.

I know more about (and see more) real monkey stuff on television than traditional Cambodian dance onstage (whether that's tragic or not, I'm not sure) and with the relative absence of the latter, it's not hard to read it as mainly about monkeys—especially if that's what you see for the most part.

To some hypnotic, intricate wood/piano percussive sounds, the dancers artfully monkey around onstage — a series of scenes of them bounding around on all fours and exhibiting simian behaviour.

Some scenes are directly inspired by specific incidents, like an experiment in the '70s where monkeys interact with their own reflection, seen here as dancers mimicking each other. There are moments that touch on sex, death and territorial aggression (although it doesn't quite reach the vicious heights of a band of chimps hunting down other monkeys and eating them — probably the most disturbing Attenborough docu episode I've ever seen).

There is variety, too, in the types of monkey behaviour. The group didn't stick to one copying just one kind. This attention to difference brings me to my next point — while *Khmeropedies III* touches on commonality via a "source", there is the unavoidable aspect in which it simultaneously and, perhaps, pointedly underscores difference.

The dancers mimicking monkeys is far from being natural — it's physically regressive from an evolutionary standpoint, course. Everyone is aware of this. Once they step out of the boundaries that define the stage space, they immediately snap out of it. But then again, sometimes the distinction isn't clear within that space, too. They're obviously "doing" monkey but sometimes they're in sync, sometimes they do something that's obviously too clean to be mere animal gesture — choreography is in the mix.

The switches underscore the very nature of performance itself and so the idea of a "source" implodes. Here are classically trained dancers-as-monkeys-doing-something "contemporary" (or

at least non-classical). The lines blur.

It's all encapsulated in the fantastic finale. A "monkey", who has died, is now convulsing and seemingly in the process of resurrection—and evolution—as he slowly starts to stand up on his hind legs.

To be honest, I was expecting it to be cheesy, as the part where the piece neatly links monkey and classical dance together. Instead, it turned out to be the clearest, most visceral elaboration of artistic transformation I have seen.

The dancer/monkey/man literally embodies the struggle (it certainly was no Cinderella moment, with the eerie chanting and the awkwardness of movement) and the whole moment acknowledges the unknown.

Because you never see the complete transformation, what you cling on to is the performance of it, and the layers involved — first, when a monkey mask is placed over the dancer's face, and finally, when darkness engulfs the entire body.

In our eyes, the transformation will never be complete.

Khmeropedies III: Source/Primate continues tonight, Oct 16, 8pm, Esplanade Theatre Studio.

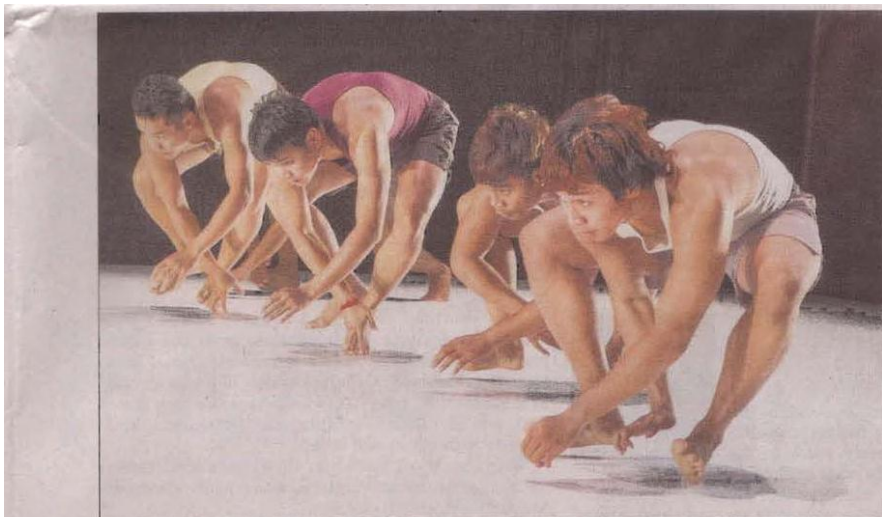
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Man or monkey?: Khmeropédies III: Source/Primate attempts to tease out the notion of humanity through monkey behaviour.
 PHOTO: ESPLANADE - THEATRES ON THE BAY

Going ape on stage

Review Dance

KHMEROPÉDIES III: SOURCE/PRIMATE
 Emmanuele Phuon and Amrita Performing Arts
 Esplanade Theatre Studio/Tuesday

Lisabel Ting

Through the prism of monkey behaviour, Khmeropédies III: Source/Primate conducted an assured, unflinching exploration of the notion of humanity. The result was a hard-hitting performance which was at times frightening and at others humbling, but always thought-provoking.

To create the show, French-Cambodian choreographer Emmanuele Phuon and seven male dancers worked with hours of video footage, teasing out characteristically primate moves such as the baring of teeth and their distinctive loping gait.

Phuon then appropriated the monkeys' body language to compose vignettes which explored different aspects of the primate body and psyche. Aside from physical attributes such as locomotion and sex, Phuon also tackled weightier issues such as social interaction, self-perception and death. It was during the latter segments that the richness and complexity of primate behaviour was employed to its full potential.

An alpha male charged at his weaker counterparts in a display of aggression, bounding across the stage with surprising speed. In response, the other dancers bared their teeth, and began to howl, wail and hoot with abandon. While the vocalisations were startling, the primal behaviour strangely seemed a little too human for comfort.

The segment on death evoked a similar visceral reaction. The programme booklet states: "One of the most hotly debated issues in primate behaviour is whether monkeys such as chimpanzees mourn for their dead and understand death and loss like humans."

Under Phuon's deft guidance, the dancers

approached their dead companion with a mixture of subdued curiosity and dim comprehension. As the ensemble dragged a limp body across the stage and attempted to shake him into movement, the audience shared their despair as the futility of their efforts dawned on them.

In contrast, the segments where Phuon explored locomotion and the contrast between the stylised monkey character in Cambodian dance and actual monkeys felt hollow.

While watching seven dancers loping across the stage with the easy grace of the untamed was a thrill at first, the repetitive movements coupled with the incessant clacking of wooden sticks as a rhythm felt overdrawn.

The start of the show was also slow, as Phuon juxtaposed the behaviour of actual monkeys against their counterpart in classical Cambodian dance, the lakhaon kaol.

Two contemporary dancers flanked their stylised counterpart, mimicking his movements with a natural looseness. While it was an interesting introduction to the production, the obviousness of the choreographer's intent and their repetitive movements began to grind.

While the show may have begun with a whimper, it ended with a bang. A lone dancer lay sprawled in a dim puddle of light on the floor and was slowly brought to life. In spurts, his body jerked as if an electrical current had passed through it, his back abruptly arching and his fingers splayed helplessly. As a melancholic chant droned in the background, he began to stagger upright, swaying unsteadily as he forced himself to his feet.

As another dancer slipped a monkey mask over his head, his motions began to transition from the natural to the stylised hands and the ramrod straightness of the classical Cambodian dancer.

When his transformation was complete and the lights faded, it only left one question for the audience: Was the evolution from monkey to man a rebirth or a death?