

# MONKEYING AROUND

A classic role with a contemporary twist

BY MICHELLE VACHON AND KUCH NAREN • THE CAMBODIA DAILY

For choreographer Emmanuèle Phuon, the dance "Khmeropedies 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.

## KHMEROPEDIAS 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."



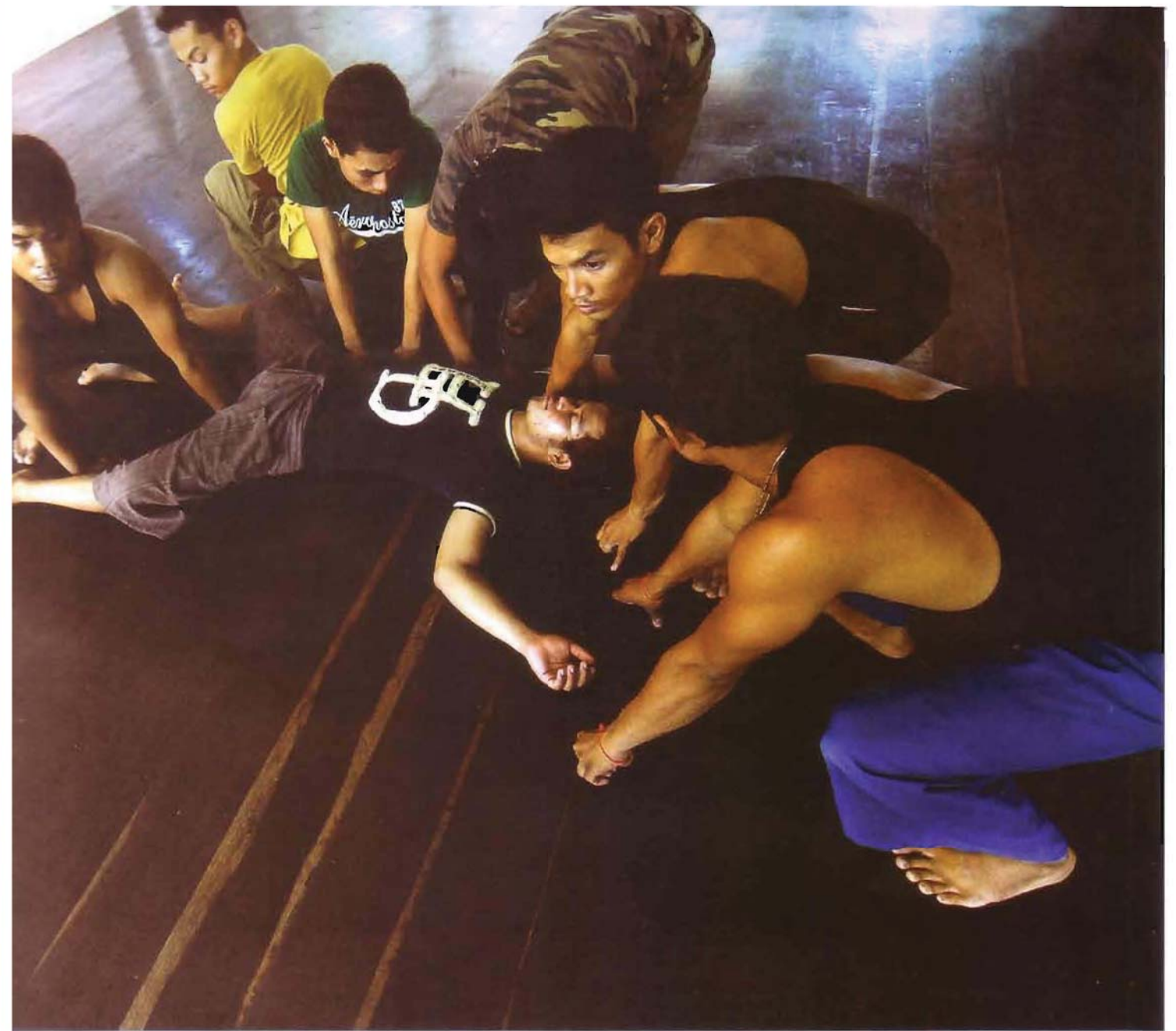
Photos by Lauren Crothers/The Cambodia Daily

Scenes in "Khmeropedies 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 Chansithyka, 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.