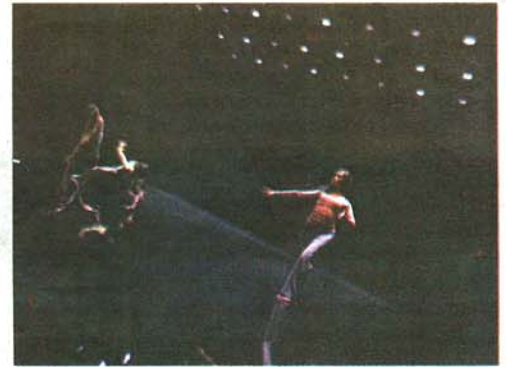


Performing arts heritage steps into a new future



Khmeropedies, produced in Singapore by Amrita Performing Arts. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PRINCE CLAUS FUND, AMSTERDAM

Crack, a contemporary dance work produced by Amrita Performing Arts. PHOTO COURTESY SINGAPORE ARTS FESTIVAL

Charles Amery

THE regime and the genocide of the fateful Khmer Rouge era, which devastated Cambodia and killed so many, is well documented, but it also laid waste to the artistic masters, the backbone of their traditional culture, theatre, dance and performing arts.

Ninety per cent of the artists died in those dark days. Just 10 per cent survived to revive, rebuild and maintain the preservation of traditional performing arts and build contemporary ones.

Those few who had survived were found and brought back into the cultural fold to renew their role as masters and teachers in renewing and reinvigorating those arts.

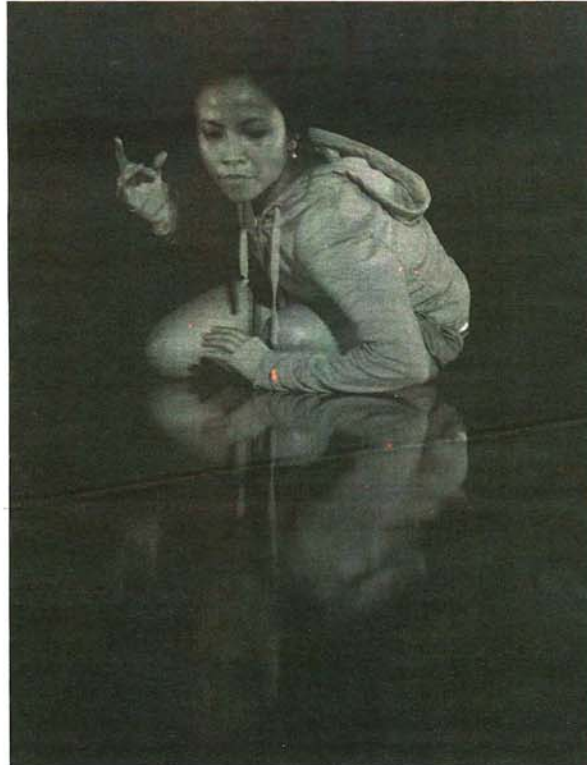
And from this new beginning has come much more, for contemporary arts has found

management. Since its formation in 2003 -- although some 14 years since its founder Fred Frumberg, an international production manager and assistant stage director, came to Cambodia -- it has significantly contributed to transforming Cambodia's performing arts scene as part of a community driven process, which has proven this country's propensity for cultural regeneration.

Coming here from Paris' "commercial opera" in the late 1997 in a UNESCO consultancy UN Volunteer post, his aim and goal was to help with the revival and preservation of traditional performing arts in the Kingdom.

He was, in the years that followed, to have a telling impact on the artistic way the country found its feet and then began to develop and grow by embracing contemporary and traditional art forms

"I was working in opera in Paris, a very



Crack, a contemporary dance work produced by Amrita Performing Arts, premiered in Singapore. PHOTO COURTESY SINGAPORE ARTS FESTIVAL

Committed to the creation of cutting-edge Cambodian contemporary dance and theatre.

a place alongside tradition and it has done so by the amazing commitment of numerous local and international organisations such as AMRITA Performing Arts.

Amrita Performing Arts is an International NGO based in Phnom Penh, with US non-profit status and is committed to the creation of cutting-edge Cambodian contemporary dance and theatre, responding to the creative drive of a young generation of artists who have taken on the task of ushering Cambodia's ancient performing-arts heritage into the future.

Their work is developed through workshops based on intensive exchange and dialogue with international collaborators, while all their efforts emphasise capacity building as they help in nurturing a new generation of Cambodian choreographers, directors and practitioners in all areas of arts

commercial theatre world, when I was told all about Cambodia and its arts revival," Frumberg says.

"So I moved to Cambodia in 1997 to spend what was to have been one year as a UN volunteer to assist in the performing-arts revival.

"I wanted to move away from them and set up my own independent organisation. The only reason that became possible was because I secured funding from the Rockefeller Foundation. At the time, we also added Mobitel, ANZ and Shell Oil as some of our corporate sponsors."

After five years, Rockefeller stopped funding culture in Southeast Asia, but now with the continued vision that has seen Amrita become pioneers in ground-breaking contemporary work -- often strongly rooted in the classical traditions -- Frumberg is

restructuring the funding, has restructured the board and is looking more to the business and private sector for financial backing.

An estimated 90 per cent of our artists died under the Khmer Rouge but the revival process began as soon as the war ended and through the surviving artists the classical culture did not remain a glass-enclosed artifact in a museum but rather became a part of the living, ever-evolving culture.

The adoption of contemporary dance and theatre reflects the shift in the Kingdom's artistic climate and in accomplishing new works they work with international choreographers and host international artists while presenting new works to the Cambodian audience and touring productions to a wide range of arts organisations worldwide.

As an international NGO based in Phnom Penh AMRITA works closely with the Ministry of Culture but the production company has also become a catalyst in helping young artists find their own voice and move their creative drive forward.

"They have the energy, the desire and the stamina, as well as enormous talent, having trained in classical dance since the age of six or seven. They want to work. They need to find their own voice, and they deserve a voice," Frumberg says.

"A remarkable momentum has been achieved in the mission to revive and preserve Cambodia's performing-arts legacy."

Fred Frumberg came first with UNESCO to assist this revival 14 years ago and now the organisation he founded, AMRITA, has sustained that remarkable revival and continued to build capacity in arts management among the Cambodians themselves.

It has been done with a small dedicated staff and two of those Cambodians he works closely with, he believes have been "the primary engine" in moving Amrita forward -- Country Director Suon Bun Rith, and Program Director Kang Rithisal, who just returned from a two-year master's program in arts management at the State University of New York as a Fulbright fellow.



A workshop session for a new contemporary dance piece. JOHN VINK MAGNUM PHOTOS