

CONFLUENCE *

By Larry Strange

Confluence: the coming together of two or more streams or the place where this occurs; coming or flowing together; a meeting or gathering at one point

Lyon, France's second city, and Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, both lie at the confluence of great rivers. Over two weeks in May a cultural confluence linking these two great river cities occurred at the Opera de Lyon - a production of composer Igor Stravinsky's operatic melodrama *Persephone*, with text by Andre Gide, directed by the highly acclaimed theatre and opera director, Peter Sellars, and featuring four Khmer dancers from Phnom Penh-based Amrita Performing Arts. This production of *Persephone*, originally staged at Teatro Real du Madrid in 2012, was presented on a double bill with Tchaikovsky's *Iolanthe*, with the Orchestra of Opera de Lyon conducted by Martyn Brabbins, and set design by George Tsy-pin. *Persephone*'s only two speaking roles were played by French actress Pauline Chevallier as *Persephone*, and American tenor Paul Groves as *Eumolpe*, the blind Priest, who is the narrator. The Khmer dancers, Sathya Sam (Sathya), Sodhachivy Chumvan (Belle), Chan Sithyka Khon (Mo), and Narim Nam, play the respective dance roles of *Persephone* herself, *Demeter*, *Pluton*, and three male roles of *Mercure*, *Demophon*, and *Triptoleme*. Female, male and children's choirs completed the cast.



© JP Maurin

Stravinsky's *Persephone* has a rich history and an unusual format, described when performed with the Los Angeles Philharmonic in the 1960s, as 'a hybrid theater work of song, choral singing, dance, instrumental music and speech' with *Persephone*'s role spoken in declamatory style rather than sung. Stravinsky described it as a 'masque and pantomime with sung and spoken text'. The work was commissioned by wealthy Parisian Russian émigré Ida Rubinstein in 1933 as a personal vehicle for her own performance aspirations. She asked writer Andre Gide to approach Igor Stravinsky to explore a collaboration on a 'symphonic ballet' based on Gide's poem *Hymn to Demeter* interpreting the ancient Greek death and resurrection myth in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*. A difficult relationship began.

In Homer's original narrative of the myth, *Persephone*, daughter of *Demeter*, goddess of the cornfields, is picking flowers in a meadow. She is dazzled by the beauty of a narcissus flower. As she picks it, the earth opens up and *Pluto*, God of the Dead, emerges and drags her down into the Underworld. Her mother, *Demeter*, desperately travels the world in search of her, finally resting in the home of the king of Eleusis. His son *Triptolemus* reveals that *Persephone* is in Hades with the knowledge and consent of *Zeus*. *Demeter*, outraged, refuses to grow any vegetation until *Zeus* apologizes and her daughter is returned. *Pluto* then agrees to release her on the condition that she does not taste the food of the dead. But

she is tricked into eating pomegranate seeds which means she will have to return to Hades. However a compromise is reached so *Persephone* will stay in the world of the living for nine months of the year from spring to autumn, but return to Hades for the winter.

In Stravinsky and Gide's version, *Persephone* is recreated as a more compassionate figure, having willingly picked the narcissus after she has looked into it and seen the hopelessness and sorrow of those in the underworld, her descent bringing some of the hope of spring to the underworld and wintry waste to the earth above. After eating the pomegranate seeds she again longs for the earth and to gaze into the narcissus. She is then dramatically rescued, completing a cycle of a cycle of birth, death and rebirth as reflected in the three stages of Stravinsky's orchestration, and the rousing celebratory climax involving soloists and mass choirs.

Despite their agreement on variation of the myth, Stravinsky and Gide's collaboration did not go well. When he heard Stravinsky's music Gide left Paris, refusing to attend rehearsals or performances, feeling that the music had ignored his poetic rhythm. The musicologists have written much about whether Stravinsky's score realizes the plot, drama, and poetry of Gide's text, but the ultimate effect in contemporary performance is a gripping and poignant, if very declamatory, textual and musical narrative. The dance roles and choirs play a very significant role in conveying the changing



© JP Maurin



© JP Maurin

emotions and moods of *Persephone* and the other mythic characters.

Sellers first visited Cambodia in 2008, but as Kang Rithisal, the Executive Director of Amrita Performing Arts explains, his relationship with Cambodia goes back many years to the 1970s when, as an 18 year old, he and his mother moved from the United States to Paris and seeing Cambodia dancers perform made a deep impression. Rithisal says, ‘In 1990 as Director of the Los Angeles Festival Sellers invited the Classical Dance Company of Cambodia to perform. But the real deepening of the relationship began when Fred Frumberg, who had worked with Sellers for almost two decades, came to Cambodia as a United Nations Volunteer to work as the Performing Arts Specialist at UNESCO. Fred then founded Amrita in 2003 and led it until 2013 when I succeeded him. In 2006, as Director of Vienna’s New Crowned Hope Festival, Sellers had also commissioned Sophiline Cheam Shapiro and her Khmer Dance Troupe to choreograph and produce Pamina Devi, a re-interpretation and cultural re-casting of Mozart’s 1791 opera *The Magic Flute*, which was performed to great acclaim. It was only at the Vienna Festival, as company manager of

Sophiline’s troupe, that I first met him.’

Sellers describes Amrita as ‘one of my favorite cultural organizations worldwide because it has been opening paths to new generations of Cambodian dancers who respect and deepen their classical training while at the same time explore new expressive and structural possibilities that reflect the world we find ourselves in today, but also the world that we’re in the process of constructing and reconstructing. In the case of Cambodia, reconstruction of much that was lost is crucial but as always human events and across human generations many things that were lost are irretrievable and have to be reimagined and reinvented in new ways and new contexts. The work of Amrita, in understanding that preservation is not just backward looking but also a forward looking activity and spiritual space, has sent a message around the world. And the new generations of Cambodian dancers emerging on the world stage thanks to Amrita’s cultivation and support is demonstrating that Cambodian dance not only has a past but many futures.’

But why the Amrita Khmer dancers in Sellers’ production of *Persephone*? Sellers explains, ‘*Persephone* was composed as a collaboration between the composer Igor Stravinsky and the literary figure, Andre Gide in 1933-34, very dark years for Europe. Stravinsky was an extremely famous, politically conservative White Russian in exile from the Bolshevik revolution while Andre Gide was perhaps the most prominent left-wing Communist intellectual in Europe and a public apologist and supporter for the Stalin regime. In 1933 the world began to learn of the show trials and executions of the Stalin Terror in the USSR, the vast gulag of concentration camps across Russia and the mass murder of millions of peasants and intellectuals. Both Stravinsky and Gide in *Persephone* write of this first premonition of genocide very delicately. The poetry and the music are gently perfumed but infinitely sad, with no direct reference to events in Russia. Unlike much of the in-your-face propaganda art of the ‘30s, Stravinsky and Gide, each for their own reasons, choose to behold the atrocity quietly and indirectly, through music and words of compassion, grace and regret. It is as if standard dramatic treatment of a subject this grave would be a spiritual violation.

So of course I thought of Cambodian dance with its particular late 20th-century history, moving through genocide to rebirth, and testifying to spiritual poise in the face of horror, and inner equilibrium in a time of unbearable grief. The refined humanity, and indeed the very humaneness of the art form which shows human beings touching the divine through patience, concentration, and almost superhuman hidden effort, gives classical Khmer dance a powerful and charged content that is unique among world

traditions. I imagined that the understated depth of feeling of the leading contemporary practitioners of classical Cambodian dance might find a sympathetic echo in Stravinsky and Gide’s strange and unloved project from the ‘30s.’

As *Persephone* declaims Gide’s poetry, the first Khmer dancer, Sathya, appears as the moods and emotions of *Persephone*, followed by the other Khmer dancers who, throughout the narrative, weave in and out of the stark set, between the front and deep back reaches of the set, and between the main characters and male, female and children’s choirs. They are in constant movement and reflect the changing actions, emotions and moods of the narrative. The effect is heightened by the stark dramatic set design, wide deep dimensions, large raised black obsidian blocks, and archways that frame the action, adding much to the richness of the choreography. Over the course of the narrative three choirs come and go - female, male, children, mass, all choreographed, and with a climax with all characters, dancers and massed choirs.

Of the relationship between the Khmer dance style and Stravinsky’s music, Sellers says, ‘Both the music of Stravinsky and Khmer dance have been extensively defined in terms of style but for me both the ballets of Stravinsky and the forms of Cambodian dance are more significant for content than for style, and it was in the realm of content that I felt the deepest connections could be made. Of course what we’re always interested in in art is a meeting which creates not just mirroring but counterpoint. What is always compelling is the dialogue across different cultures, across different art forms, and across different generations, and finally, between people. Let me give one example of refreshing difference. Stravinsky worked across his entire life with the extremely great, unequalled choreographer George Balanchine who knew how to translate every one of Stravinsky’s rhythms into a very precise dance gesture which would reveal the musical structure. The choreography and the music existed in a highly organized mirror continuum. By contrast, the movement of Cambodian dance is not placed in precise response to the music and the music and the dance frequently have separate patterns of flow and rhythmic accents. One of the revelations for me of seeing the Amrita dancers dance to Stravinsky’s *Persephone* was the unusual and liberating experience of hearing Stravinsky’s music without seeing a gesture on every beat.’



© JP Maurin

Sellars describes the process of working with the Khmer dancers as ‘very enjoyable, collegial, and revelatory. Of course it was a collaboration with the dancers offering gestures derived from the tradition and with me proposing emotional colors or plot details that gave rise to new shapes and gestures. The dancers took the results of every rehearsal home with them every day and returned the next day with new refinements and many new ideas. The creativity of these four people is of course extraordinary: Sathya bringing the weight and power and depth of her lifetime of practice and her deep commitment to artistic creativity, and the young dancers bringing with them a range of references from their generation including folk art, film, and television. The emotional content unified all of our experiences and the musical and spiritual integrity of the Amrita dancers glowed in new ways in the surprising new contexts of Stravinsky’s music.’

At the conclusion of the Lyon production, as the Khmer dancers stepped forward to take their bows, there is a roar of appreciation from the Lyon audience. Sellars reflects on the other performers’ and audience reactions to the role of the Khmer dancers in the production, ‘What is so moving across the years that we have worked on *Persephone* together is to observe and feel the deep rapport between the Cambodian artists and the Western

singers and musicians. Rehearsals happen with seriousness of shared purpose and an ease of give and take that is quite natural, and everyone in the quite large production is really family. The way in which both movements and musicality are shared across cultures is quite poignant and is itself one of the most important messages for the time we are living in. In every performance, without fail, the audiences in Europe have reserved a special ovation for the dancers when they take their curtain call. For the Western audience, these dancers are not simply ornamental in the Orientalist tradition that the Diaghilev ballets could frequently be said to represent, but a soulful, eloquent presence that transcends stereotypes and cultural norms to speak urgently about an endangered humanity that we all need to protect, to cultivate, and to reimagine.’

The French music press described the production as ‘un spectacle exceptionnel’, ‘magnifique’, ‘une vraie réussite’, ‘un triomphe’, ‘lumineux’, ‘un spectacle de pure émotion’.

In Phnom Penh some weeks later, Amrita launched its 2016 Contemporary Dance Platform, a biannual programme that commissions Amrita artists to create new pieces of Cambodian choreography. The audience was packed with a younger generation of

Cambodians. It featured two works - *Departure* by Chey Chankethya in collaboration with the dancers, and *Somewhere* by Chy Ratana. *Departure* is a poignant work on themes of refugees, separation, death and uncertainty, reflecting the experiences of the choreographer and her family during the Khmer Rouge genocidal regime and its aftermath. But it also has a powerful contemporary political resonance in the current global refugee crisis.

At a follow-up panel discussion moderated by Peter Chin, Artistic Director of the Canadian interdisciplinary dance company Tribal Wind and an advisor to Amrita, Chin asked Chey Chankethya how she strikes the creative balance between darkness and suffering on the one hand, and light on the other, in her work *Departure*. As Stravinsky and Gide’s mythical *Persephone* sees the darkness and hopelessness of the underworld and feels a responsibility to bring some light, so Chey Chankethya spoke of the darkness and light in contemporary Cambodia and how she sees her artistic responsibility: ‘I have seen my family’s experience of war and genocide through newspapers, my family history, and the stories of other survivors. It is not my own memory but is still within my own family, and I feel their legacy of anxiety and the need for safety and security. It is like an inherited trauma. I ask myself as a young Cambodian artist, what do I do with that? I feel a responsibility to talk about it, acknowledge it, go deeper into it, and use my art in

the contemporary dance world to help get through it.’ ‘It is my job’, she says.

It’s a fertile time for dance in Cambodia. Along with the Amrita programme, the Sophiline Arts Ensemble has a new experimental classical dance work in development titled *Pka Sla*, or in English *Wedding Flowers*. Written and directed by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, with an original score for Khmer classical instruments by composer Him Sophy, it explores the multiple and complex responses to the trauma of forced marriage under the Khmer Rouge regime based on male and female survivor testimonies. *Pka Sla* will be premiered in January 2017 and performed in Phnom Penh and at least two Cambodian provinces as part of a larger programme of exhibitions, community, dialogues, research and documentary videos linked to the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge Tribunal.

As Amrita’s Kang Rithisal says, ‘We are now part of a classical and contemporary dance community in Cambodia well placed to bring the Cambodian story into a contemporary lexicon, with strong local and international collaboration, with respect for the old forms and traditional culture, but with creative re-interpretation. Khmer dance was once seen as ‘decorative’. The four Amrita dancers in Sellars’ production of *Persephone* have played an important part in ensuring that is no longer the case!’

A video of the original Teatro Real du Madrid production of Peter Sellars’ Persphone is accessible on Youtube. https://youtu.be/Fa_qpv4PA64

* An edited version of this original text was published in the November 2016 issue of the Mekong Review. See www.mekongreview.com.