



**Khmeropedies 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**

### **KHMEROPEDIES III: SOURCE/PRIMATE**

Emmanuele Phuon and Amrita Performing Arts  
Esplanade Theatre Studio/Tuesday

#### **Lisabel Ting**

Through the prism of monkey behaviour, *Khmeropedies 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 *lakhon 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?



**Man or monkey?: Khmeropedies III: Source/Primate attempts to tease out the notion of humanity through monkey behaviour.**  
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