

Phnom Penh Post - In the footsteps of a Hindu epic



The seven cast members of the Mahabharata. Their silk costumes, which remain on stage throughout the show, are a part of the set and require the performers to change into different characters in front of the audience. SCOTT HOWES

In the footsteps of a Hindu epic

Japan's devastating 2011 tsunami and the subsequent Fukushima nuclear disaster drove a director to the immortal egos and cosmic chaos of the Mahabharata, India's great text. The resulting dance theatre piece - the first of three - was created in Cambodia with dancers from across Asia. Rosa Ellen writes.

A longside staging the Ramayana, taking on the Hindu epic the Mahabharata presents one of the most daunting tasks for a theatre director.

Eighteen books long, covering many years of war in a misty, faraway time, the Sanskrit poem is sometimes said to be the longest epic in world literature, an exhaustive saga of birth, death, sex, calamity, greed and love. In the Mahabharata, a virgin gives birth to a ball of flesh, from which 99 babies are sculpted; power is won and lost in a game of dice, lessons dispensed and frivolous gods decide the fate of hapless mortals.

'Whatever is here, is found elsewhere,' says Book One of the Mahabharata, 'But what is not here, is nowhere else.'

With a plot that is lengthier and more circuitous than the Bible or any Homeric epic, few choose to perform the entire tale on stage (the most famous attempt was British director Peter Brook's critically-acclaimed 1985 stage play. It took nine hours.)

In a fluorescent-lit rehearsal studio behind Phnom Penh's Center for Circus and Performing Arts, director and choreographer Hiroshi Koike watches intently as a group of six dancers embark on a one-hour twenty-minute retelling of part one of the Mahabharata.



Koike and his team arrived from Tokyo to Phnom Penh two months ago to start work on his ambitious 'pan-Asian' project, which slices the Mahabharata into narrative chunks between wars and features a cast from Cambodia, Malaysia and Japan.

Next year, the second stage of the epic will be told with a different cast of dancers in India, where the play originated. The saga will conclude with a final production in 2015 in Japan, as his own company is based there. He chose Cambodia after his dancer Koyano connected him to Amrita performing arts and the dancers there.

Like the deities and heroes they play (each dancer inhabits up to five characters in the performance) the seven figures on stage embody a spectrum of body types and physical prowess.

There is petite and animated Sachiko Shirai, a former ballet dancer who transforms into a hunched old man or a greedy Shakuni at the switch of a mask; graceful Chumvan Sodhachivy ('Belle'), Cambodia's well-known contemporary dancer, who devolves from a carefree princess to an ape-like demon, greedily gorging on fruit; wild-eyed Tetsuno Koyano, a broad-chested 42-year old Balinese mask dancer from Japan, lythe and elegant Khiev Sovanarith and the bewitching Lee Swee Keong, a sinewy Butoh dancer from Malaysia, whose face freezes mask-still and whose bad prince 'Duryodhana' emits a driven, mirthless laugh, like a kung-fu movie villain.

"If we just look at [the story], it's normal and funny and then suddenly there's just fighting -- and then back to love and separation," says Belle at the end of a full dress rehearsal, just three days before the show opens. "But if you think more deeply, the meaning is [greater]. When I play it and read the script again, I feel that there is some-

thing more important.”



As the seven dancers stand before the audience, in cottony white undergarments, a box of masks slides across the stage and the performers jostle for an identity to take on. The random grabbing of the masks – which are comically exaggerated and custom-made by a Balinese mask-maker who specialises in the Hindu pantheon– could symbolise the random

choosing of destiny.

“Yes, yes, yes,” agrees Koike. “Everybody changes [when they put on] a costume and by the many kinds of masks we take... Because we have a lot of elements but gradually we change by the atmosphere, the environment. The environment makes us different characters, new characters.”

Two years ago, off the north east coast of Japan, the environment unleashed a sudden and devastating change not just on the population and landscape, but the national psyche. The 8.9-magnitude earthquake sent a crushing tsunami towards the inland city of Sendai, sweeping whole coastal towns, including in the Fukushima prefecture, and killing an estimated 18,500. The disastrous Fukushima nuclear meltdown that followed, when a loss of power stopped the plant’s cooling system from working and caused the reactors to melt, dealt a second blow. The tragedy led to widespread reflection on the nuclear question and the culpability of Japan’s nuclear energy industry.

“The Japanese on March 11 2011 faced the big crisis...the Fukushima problem, the nuclear plant problem,” Koike says. “What kind of philosophy do we have? This is the most important thing.”

Koike began his career in television but for 30 years ran a Tokyo-based contemporary dance theatre company called Pappa Tarahumara, touring quirky and experimental shows to more than 60 countries and attracting approving reviews in the New York Times. Sachiko Shirai was a member of the company for 23 years and says she understood how important philosophical underpinnings were to Koike and his theatre-making.

Taking some long-term collaborators like Shirai with him, Koike decided that post-

tsunami Japan demanded a change of direction.

“I managed and I directed Pappa Tarahumara for 30 years but after that affair [of March 11] I decided to dissolve the company ...I had to start a new direction. New direction meaning we should change our lifestyle and society and system. So everything had to change: my own company and my own ideas. At the time, I wanted to take two directions. One direction was to make [children’s writer] Kenji Miyazawa’s work... and one to make the Mahabharata.”

Koike began a new production company, the Hiroshi Koike Bridge Project, which on its website dedicates itself to “educating people who can ‘think through their BODY’ and create a bridge between the world, the time and the culture...”

Three or four years ago Koike saw several of the Cambodian dancers in the current Mahabharata production perform live, and decided that though they were still a little raw, he would like to work with them in a future work.

“Because this [production] has many characters and the mentality and intentions are so strong... I know [my own dancers] strengths better, so Tetsuro asked to work with me and [suggested we] work with Cambodian artists.”

Fred Frumberg, executive director of Cambodian performing arts NGO Amrita, suggested Phone Sopheap, Khon Chansithika, Khiev Sovannarith and Belle. After meeting with the artists and divining their individual talents, Koike got to work turning the story told through 100,000 poems into choreography and a script.

With so many characters to play, in a short amount of time, all of the costumes and masks remain on stage, meaning the performers are essentially performing non-stop for the whole hour and a half.

“It’s new for us, but also for me as a dancer and performer,” says Belle.

“If you sweat, the sweat runs into your eye - then what do you do? Close one eye.

“You have to look at the mask and then you move and you have to feel...When you wear [it] you have to imagine that my face is not mine, but the mask’s.”

With its Hindu origins, the Mahabharata has special resonance in many parts of Southeast Asia including Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia (although less so in Cam-

bodia, where the Reamker – the local version of the Ramayana – is the reigning narrative.)

The music, half mesmerizing electronic compositions and half live music by Cambodian musician Say Tola, mixes traditional and contemporary styles, while Japanese designer Misuzu Kubozono uses Cambodian silks to make her luminous Japanese-style robes.

The dancers too seem to come from similar cross-pollinations: Tetsuro Koyano, the only character who is mostly without a mask, sustains a grimace throughout the show that recalls the stylized Japanese Kabuki theatre, though normally he works as a Balinese mask dancer.

“I always wear a mask so for me it’s easier ... if I perform without a mask, that’s more difficult for me,” he says.

Lee Swee Keon combines his Malaysian roots with Butoh dancing, a kinesthetic performance art that originated in 1960s Japan and is typically performed in white body paint, exploring dark and existential themes.

“The characteristics [of Butoh] are questioning and about crisis... Somehow I can get a connection with the Butoh philosophy and as an artist or a dancer, when we portray the character we have a kind of reference and then make everything more sparkle...when you have a crisis.”

Finding those powerful themes beneath the gods-and-mortals drama was no more important for Belle, who believes there are comparisons between the Mahabharata and present-day Cambodian society.

“It’s about people feeling jealous, angry, hungry and fighting between families – brother and brother. If we compare with our normal life, it’s the same.”

In a white, red-lipped mask, Belle’s character Ganga, a beautiful queen, throws away her progeny (red cushiony looking dolls) onto the floor of the rehearsal space, laughing gleefully. The character is in fact a river goddess in disguise, who would rather drown her children than have them live as mortals. Finally agreeing to allow her final son to live, Ganga sprouts the roots for the complicated family tree that begins the epic tale.

Watching the performers, who sometimes change character by simply turning around to reveal another mustachioed mask on the other side of their head, it is easy to get lost in the physical humour and duets between the bodies on stage. With its curious mixture of English, Japanese, Khmer and gibberish spoken parts, and a screen of running subtitles, the tale's deeper message arrives after the performance has ended, when the mind tries to make sense of the myriad stories and human foibles presented in one short 90-minute show.

"It's not just a long story," says Koyano, leaving the rehearsal studio after dusk. "We want to create a theatre piece where the audience can feel the universe on the stage."

Mahabharata will be performed this Friday and Saturday July 12 and 13 at the Department of Performing Arts, 6:30pm. Tickets are available through Amrita Performing Arts, 023-220-424, and at the door. The group will also perform in Hanoi on July 16.