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A new season in Cambodia

On the encounter between tradition and contemporary dance in Arco Renz's *Crack*

The Khmer Rouge almost succeeded in destroying the thousand-year tradition of Cambodian dance. Almost. The fall of the regime in 1979 was followed by a slow reconstruction. A lot has been achieved over the last fifteen years at the instigation of Fred Frumberg, who not only breathed new life into the country's classical dance, but also set in motion the development of contemporary dance. One of the tangible results of all this work is *Crack*, a dance piece that choreographer Arco Renz made with a new generation of Cambodian dancers. The production opened at the Singapore Arts Festival last May and now, in 2012, can be seen at several places in Flanders and Europe.

On 17 April 1975 the army of the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh to turn Cambodia into an agricultural state under their leader Pol Pot. The ideology of the Khmer Rouge states that everyone is equal and no one has any private possessions. Everyone is to work on collective farms for the benefit of *Angkar*, the 'Organisation'. At the same time, the old regime was exterminated, root and branch. Cities were rejected as 'places of inequality'. There was systematic persecution of all senior officials, officers, intellectuals, students and teachers. Without trial. Artists were also targeted. They had after all been the backbone of the culture of King Sihanouk and the former elite. Only ten percent of the country's artists survived the Khmer Rouge's urge for destruction. Only seven masters of dance (an older teacher of classical dance) and about ten dancers were left. A tradition of more than a thousand years of courtly dance was all but obliterated.

CHEY CHANKETHYA - 'KETHYA': 'It was a very critical period, because we wanted to assemble as much dance material as possible before it was lost forever. We wanted it to live on. All of us here felt responsible for it.'

The international community and UNESCO also offered help. And there was Fred Frumberg too, an American who had made his reputation in the opera world. He arrived in Cambodia as a volunteer in 1997.

Fred Frumberg

FRED FRUMBERG: 'When I arrived, I immediately started visiting artists. I went to the School of Fine Art and the National Theatre. But I was so terribly naïve. I had no idea at all how badly damaged this country was and had never imagined things could be so bad. I thought

they just needed someone who could teach them something about stage management. But there was nothing there, literally nothing. After a year I decided to stay another year. And another one after that, so it soon turned into four.

In the fifth year I started to realise that it was becoming serious. I appealed to the Rockefeller Foundation and in 2003 I received ample financial support. That's when Amrita Performing Arts was set up.

In the first place I continued to underpin the classical work, but I gradually started to see the opportunities for contemporary dance.

At that early stage it was important for the young Cambodian dancers to be given the tools they needed, because that is what they were lacking. I knew it would be wrong to teach them classical ballet, as then they would lose the link with their natural way of moving, whereas that is precisely what makes their work so beautiful. So I invited people who would encourage them and nourish their natural instincts. First a Thai choreographer, then an Indonesian, a Frenchwoman with Cambodian roots, a Canadian with Chinese roots, and so on. And that's the stage I had reached when the whole business with Arco Renz began. Working with Arco was a symbolic turning point for me.

Arco Renz

ARCO RENZ: 'When I went to Cambodia, I first wanted to meet the people, without deciding beforehand to do a project together. In my view, the last thing countries like Cambodia need is some kind of artistic missionary who comes to show them how they have to do it. It was absolutely crucial for me that this was not on the agenda. Not from my side, but not in the Cambodians' expectations either.

I was immediately enchanted and enthusiastic, because the dancers are quite exceptional young people, eager and hungry. Not just to work on this sort of international project, but above all to use it for their own development. They are very conscious of the fact that ultimately they want to do their own thing and not just perform the work of one or other choreographer.

Even now you can still sense the havoc wreaked by the Khmer Rouge in every aspect of life there. The dancers themselves did not witness it, but they have heard the stories told by their parents, who were in the middle of it. The way it was dealt with afterwards was quite a problem. There was a lot of silence, and hardly any legal proceedings. Many murderers were never convicted. It was terribly traumatic for the people who lived through that period. Afterwards you don't know who did what. So many people died. And what about the survivors? Who was on which side? That has never been cleared up.

Classical dance and music became almost literally extinct. This had a powerful impact on this young generation. They are aware of it and learn from the few surviving 'masters', and have a marvellous, fine and moving sense of responsibility. They know it is up to them to keep this tradition alive. They have and feel strong ties with their tradition, which is very precious and important. Because it's on this basis that they are able to find their own identity.

We conferred on the theme of the production. I was able to make links between themes I was concerned with in my own work and what is going on in Cambodian society today.

Topics like freedom and individuality, and the way they correspond. It is a completely new chapter for this generation and at the same time incredibly important for them. How can you claim your individuality and freedom within your traditional culture? How do you find true freedom and individuality in this specific context? How can you consolidate these things? I wanted to examine all these issues with them.

It was a slow process. I wanted at all costs to avoid thinking only of the performance and only using things that worked well. In my view, that wasn't what it was all about. I saw the process and the result as equally important. Of course at a certain moment you have to give shape to the performance, but I think we succeeded in letting the form grow organically out of the process.

The Cambodian dancers' views on *Crack*

KETHYA: 'Compared to other pieces, *Crack* is the most intensive project we have ever done. It requires a huge amount of physical and mental energy from us, but we like that. *Crack* helps us to grow as dancers and as people. It is about self-discovery, reconsidering yourself, daring to re-examine our own rules. We are learning to be ourselves on the foundations of our own tradition.

Crack is about our society. How we want to move forward, how we want to make positive changes, how we will find the courage to do so. *Crack* gives us this energy and power from inside ourselves.

Most Cambodians see contemporary dance as something Western. They think we want to adapt to the Western world. But to me it's not a matter of other people's culture, rather the freedom to do things. It's about finding your own way of expressing yourself. Contemporary dance does of course originate elsewhere, but I want to make it mine. I want this culture to become part of Cambodian culture; not just by copying it, but by making it very Cambodian.

I love my traditions, and that's exactly why I want to engage in contemporary dance. I introduce different elements because I want to show what our own roots are. And how you can let your own roots and traditions grow and gain in strength. It's all about freedom, creativity and self-confidence. Because if you want to develop in a society you have to be creative and have to dare to be free. I want to introduce this to modern Cambodians. That's what I feel.'

CHUMVAN SODHACHIVY 'BELLE': 'Contemporary dance also allows us to be part of the global community. For us it is a way of saying that we are together with the rest of the world and don't only live in our own world. We are not isolated. It's about local and global at the same time.

The audience also has an important part to play and a responsibility to make contemporary dance endure. Five years ago we had only a tenth of the audience we reach today. But we keep on going and the audience keeps on growing. It's a positive sign.'

KETHYA: 'It's also a matter of time. People need time to get to know things. And we have to give ourselves time too.'

PHON SOPHEAP: 'We ourselves have to acquire the knowledge first, and then we can pass it on to the audience. That's the only way we can communicate with each other. We are all learning. Step by step, by trial and error.'

KETHYA: 'Cambodian society is very conservative. To grow in this society you must first and foremost integrate foreign cultures and make them part of the Khmer culture. This is important, so that the people can understand.'

In my view, 'contemporary' doesn't mean the destruction of a culture, it is, rather, about helping each other. Ways of enabling our own culture to evolve and helping the audience and society to see things in a new way.

To me contemporary dance is also inseparably linked to democracy, because in a democracy you are free to express yourself. And the audience is free to choose in a democracy too. We have now had a democracy for twenty years, so it is almost as old as we are. We are still learning how to do it, every day, and with us all Cambodians.

Which is why it's extremely important to me that there is contemporary dance in Cambodia. It spreads the idea that you yourself have to know what you want to do and feel. No one else and nothing else can impose that on you. I hope the audience don't see us only as dancers, but notice this too, and apply it to their daily lives.'

In Cambodia, contemporary dance is still in its infancy and its future seems uncertain. As a result of the worldwide financial crisis, in 2010 the Rockefeller Foundation decided not to support any more projects in South-East Asia. Since then it has been a constant struggle to finance Amrita's basic operations and fund-raising is one of its main worries.

Fortunately it doesn't end at Amrita. After so many years' work, Amrita has built bridges between young Cambodians and the rest of the world. There is now interaction through Amrita too. The dancers themselves, such as Belle and Kethya, have also set up projects. Without resources, but with the utter conviction that this is important for their country and their community. And although the Cambodian government does not provide any support, it does nothing to hinder it. Kethya is currently studying at the UCLA on a grant from the Asian Cultural Council. She is determined that, when she returns from America in eighteen months' time, she will share her knowledge with her compatriots. She will be ready to take over the reins and train people for the arts in Cambodia.

But that's not all. There is also the cooperation between dancers from Amrita and Peter Sellars on the opera *Persephone* at the Teatro Real in Madrid, there is the tour of *Crack*, there is a new production with Eko Supriyanto that will open in Singapore in July 2012, and in spring 2013 there is a major arts festival in New York called 'Season of Cambodia', with a focus on the performing arts, art and film.

ARCO RENZ: 'There's no going back, even though there are hardly any organisations and the audience is still small. When I see these people I have no doubt that this will form part of Cambodia's future. They are exceptionally powerful and enthusiastic dancers and have a clear mission. They will find their voice in contemporary dance and make it a part of their everyday culture.'

This article is based on interviews with Fred Frumberg, Arco Renz, Chey Chankethya and the other dancers, for whom Kethya acted as translator. The other dancers are Belle, Davi, Leak, Radi and Soupeap.

www.kobaltworks.be

www.caravanproduction.be

www.amritaperformingarts.org