

# Dance in its natural state

Emilie Boulenger

**N**O COSTUMES, just Cambodian dancers on a stage showing what they have learnt so far in a workshop with German choreographer Arco Renz. The show will be performed live in a public rehearsal on Saturday December 11, at 7pm at Chenla Theatre.

Produced by Amrita Performing Arts in collaboration with the Singapore Arts Festival, Kobalt Works (Arco Renz's Belgian dance company) and the Goethe Institute in Jakarta, the contemporary dance performance will premiere on May 14 during the Singapore Arts Festival.

In a tiny studio located on Street 240, seven dancers work alone or in pairs in the middle of the room and show their part to the choreographer. Jerky movements follow linked steps while Arco Renz watches carefully and takes a few notes.

When the music stops, he immediately relays his thoughts to the dancers, helped by one of them who acts as a translator.

Sitting in a corner of the

room, Fred Frumberg, director of Amrita Performing Arts, an international performing arts production company with US non-profit status and based in Cambodia, considers the progress the dancers have made so far.

"Arco makes them think a lot about the structure of the dance and makes them learn new dynamics," he says.

The two men met a year ago in Taiwan and Frumberg has already fallen in love with *Heroin*, an enchanting solo dance choreographed by Renz.

"I was amazed by how he managed to create an exciting composition even though the dancer almost never moves her legs for one hour," he says, adding that he feels Renz has succeeded in creating a new vocabulary of dance.

Until now, Amrita Performing Arts had only collaborated with Asian choreographers. This time, with Renz, who has worked a lot in this continent, Frumberg decided it was time to "step out of the box".

And the dancers seem ready for it. "He insists on techniques and energy and it is important



Strike a pose: A dancer practices at the studio on Street 240. PHA LINA

for us to learn where we want to put our energy," says Belle, one of the dancers.

The dancers are grateful to Renz for his paying attention to their culture. "I like it because it's modern, but connected to classical dance. He uses our

techniques to transform them," says dancer Moly.

"It is important to contribute to their development, so I try to make a work they can digest and transform later," explains Renz, who visited Cambodia three times to get to know the



Arco Renz, the man behind the capital's latest contemporary dance performance, seen in rehearsal. PHA LINA

dancers and their environment before this workshop.

Despite this, Renz says he does not aim for a fusion of styles - he wants to "create an idiosyncratic physical language and discourse via the parameters of dance accessible beyond the borders of Cambodia and Asia".

Renz has always been fascinated by Asia. "Maybe because the invisible is often more important than the visible," he says. "In Cambodia, it is also more about flow and continuity and I am introducing disturbances in that."

Some aspects of the production are yet to be defined. Still, the performance

will explore the unfolding individualisation of a new generation of young Cambodians and will physically investigate what drives this generation as it emerges from isolation towards integration into the complexities of today's global world.

After the public rehearsal, Renz hopes he will have a better idea of how to shape the performance before starting two months of intense rehearsal in March and April. It is hoped the audience, too, will be able to get an idea of what the show could become. ☐

Free passes are available at Amrita Performing Arts, 128-G9 Sotheavos Blvd, or on the door.

DATE: 09 May 2011  
 PUBLICATION: The Wall Street Journal – Life & Style (Page 10)  
 SUBJECT: He lets the body speak through dance



# He lets the body speak through dance

Choreographer Arco Renz studied Cambodian culture, helped create Crack, now on world tour

**[ The Moment ]**

By Bastiaan Aas

Arco Renz never seems to stop moving.

The 38-year-old choreographer has just arrived in Singapore, where he is preparing for the debut of *Crack*, a contemporary dance production commissioned by the Singapore Arts Festival, which opens Friday and runs until June 5.

He will then take the show to Europe, before returning to Southeast Asia and then finishing off the tour in Australia.

His performative bent has prepared him well for a life on the go. Mr. Renz, who was born to dancer parents in Germany, studied theater in Berlin and Paris before heading to Brussels to study dance.

Although his artistic production company, Etoile Works, is based in Brussels, Mr. Renz spends much of his time in Asia. *Crack*, which is about how Cambodia is extracting itself from the shadow of the Khmer Rouge, features an entirely native cast drawn from the Phnom Penh-based Aurélien Performance Arts.

Mr. Renz spoke to *The Wall Street Journal* about delving into dance in his career and how he sees the contemporary dance scene in Asia.

Q: Working with the first generation of Cambodian dancers trained in classical dance who are now exploring contemporary dance and what it can mean.

A: I was working in theater in Paris when I decided I wanted to be a choreographer. I realized that as an actor, I couldn't say what I want to say. I had studied dance since I was young and I started to choreograph in my 20s. [When choreographed,] I experiment with taking the text away and saying things with the body. [His



Arco Renz, left, is a dancer and choreographer who studied with renowned choreographer Anne Teresa De Keimaker. Bottom right, an artist performs at Kratiwhal Theater in Kerala, India, where Renz became fascinated by the local arts.

work is] about what you can say if words did not exist.

A: I was asked to go to the Performing Arts Research & Training Studio in Brussels to study with Anne Teresa De Keimaker. I was very open-minded. I learned a lot about the multiple relationships between dance and music, which can be very complex and

structured and rich and yet also sensual and emotional.

A: In 1994, I made my first trip to Asia when I went to visit India. It was a trip I had planned for a long time and it was very important in my development as a choreographer. I went to the Kathakal theater in Kerala and saw this very local performance. It must have

been four hours long. I was absolutely fascinated although I had no idea what it was about. What struck me most was the energy that the performers sent out. It got me wondering how the performer generates this energy. I went on to study Kathakal in Kerala and other traditional performing art forms in Indonesia in order to try and understand how to

communicate with such energy.

A: I don't know if you can say that there is one contemporary dance scene in Asia. It is completely different in Cambodia when you compare it to Indonesia. [But] what is important is that it differs itself differently from European contemporary dance.

A: We tried to study the legacy of Asia and understand Pol Pot and how the Cambodians are trying to deal with the trauma. But the project interests me more. Indian has a history and when I work with dancers, you see the culture (the mystery of the dance form). I got to touch with the history of the culture that has been transmitted to them by past generations. In such a project, I try not to manipulate because the experience is very sensual.

A: *Crack* is about dialogue. I work with them [actors] performing arts as performers but also as people, so our dialogue is on an equal level.

A: We're both dying in unknown territory because although two years before in Asia, I had never been to Cambodia before I was approached to do *Crack*.

A: I know very little about Cambodian dance and culture but they also did not know about contemporary dance. It was an important moment where two white pages met empty.

A: I honestly try not to think about life in terms of success or failure.

A: Life is an ongoing process and I try not to be greedy in success or dejected in failure. I'd rather think about life in terms of moments, some are difficult and some are enjoyable.

A: I have been able to build a production structure in Belgium that allows me to do research and work with great people for 20 to 22 years. It has been an entirely enjoyable career.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JONAS MEYER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



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URL LINK: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703992704576306301127042020.html>



The screenshot shows the top of the Wall Street Journal website. The header includes the logo 'THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. THE MOMENT' and a 'GET 2 WEEKS FREE' subscription offer. Below the header is a navigation bar with categories like 'World', 'Asia', 'Hong Kong', 'China', 'India', 'Japan', 'Business', 'Markets', 'Tech', 'Life & Style', 'Real Estate', 'Personal Finance', and 'Opinion'. A secondary navigation bar highlights 'Asia' and 'Asia Innovation Awards'. The main content area features a large article titled 'He lets the body speak through dance' by Kristiano Ang, with a sub-headline 'Choreographer Arco Renz studied Cambodian culture, helped create Crack, now on world tour'. The article is dated May 8, 2011, at 10:17 A.M. ET. To the left of the article are 'TOP STORIES IN World' with thumbnails for 'Pakistan-U.S. Rift Widens', 'Libya Tribal Appeal to Rebels Falls Flat', and 'Taliban Assault Kandahar'.

By **KRISTIANO ANG**

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He will then take the show to Europe, before returning to Southeast Asia and then finishing off the tour in Australia.

His peripatetic youth has prepared him well for a life on the go. Mr. Renz, who was born to dancer parents in Germany, studied theater in Berlin and Paris before heading to Brussels to study dance.

Although his artistic productions company, Kobalt Works, is based in Brussels, Mr. Renz spends much of his time in Asia. *Crack*, which is about how Cambodia is extracting itself from the shadow of the Khmer Rouge, features an entirely native cast drawn from the Phnom Penh-based Amrita Performing Arts.

Mr. Renz spoke to The Wall Street Journal about defining moments in his career and how he sees the contemporary dance scene in Asia.

I'm working with the first generation of Cambodian dancers trained in classical dance who are now exploring contemporary dance and what it can mean.

I was working in theatre in Paris when I decided I wanted to be a choreographer. I realized that as an actor, I couldn't say what I want to say. I had studied dance since I was young but I started to choreograph in my 20s. [When choreographing], I experiment with taking the text away and saying things with the body. [My work is] about what you can say if words did not exist.



Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

An artist performs at Kathakali theater in Kerala, India, where Renz became fascinated by the local arts.

I was invited to go to Performing Arts Research & Training Studios [in Brussels] to study with Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. It was very experimental. I learnt a lot about the multiple relationships between dance and music, which can be very complex and structured and rich and yet also sensual and emotional.

In 1994, I made my first trip to Asia when I went to visit India. It was a trip I had planned for a long time and it was very important in my development as a choreographer. I went to the Kathakali theatre in Kerala and saw this very long performance. It must have been four hours long. I was absolutely fascinated although I had no idea what it was about. What struck me most was the energy that the performers sent out. It got me wondering how the performer generates this energy. I went on to study Kathakali in India and other traditional performing art forms in Indonesia in order to try and understand how to communicate with such energy.

I don't know if you can say that there is one contemporary dance scene in Asia. It is completely different in Cambodia when you compare it to Indonesia. [But] what is important is that it defines itself differently from European contemporary dance.

I've tried to study the history of Asia and understand Pol Pot and how the Cambodians are trying to deal with the trauma. But the present interests me more. Bodies have memories and when I work with dancers, you see the collective memory of the dance form. I get in touch with the history of the culture that has been transmitted to them by past generations. In such a project, I try not to analyze because the experience is very sensual.

Crack is about dialogue. I work with them [Amrita Performing Arts] as performers but also as people, so our dialogue is on an equal level.

We're both dealing in unknown territory because although I've worked before in Asia, I had never been to Cambodia before I was approached [to do Crack].

I know very little about Cambodian dance and culture but they also did not know about contemporary dance. It was an important moment where two white pages met exactly.

I honestly try not to think about life in terms of success or failure.

Life is an ongoing process and I try not to be proud in success or dejected in failure. I'd rather think about life in terms of moments; some are difficult and some are enjoyable.

I have been able to build a production structure in Belgium that allows me to do research and work with great people for 10 to 12 years. It has been an entirely enjoyable moment.

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# The <sup>Flying</sup>Inkpot Theatre *Dance*

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## Breaking Dawn

*Crack* is a highly sophisticated collaboration merging dance and multimedia synergies of sound, lighting design and video projection to create a very contemporary work with a human heart: a somatic piece that breathes through the pores, skin and soul of its six dancers.

The dancers emerge from darkness to appear in spotlights that relentlessly bear down on them during their intense, slow progress upstage in parallel, separate lines. Supported by the sounds of breathing, scraping and occasionally reprocessed Khmer words, they at first seem lost and isolated as they reach out then pull back into themselves. These are the tentative reaches of performers coming from a country grounded in classical dance traditions and ravaged by genocide and poverty.

The various episodes in the work form an abstract text with each dancer authoring the next phase through deeply felt metaphoric dance. The performers move fluidly in small groups with some of them engaging in powerful solos. Memories flash through the ever-present arched fingers, flexed feet and deep knee bends of classical Khmer dance, which are remarkably transposed with contemporary movement.

For instance, Chumvan Sodhachivy (Belle) seamlessly blends classical Khmer references with contemporary dance in the way she articulates through the centre of the body – a contrast to Asian classical traditions where the hands, feet and head lead the action and narrate the story. Meanwhile, Chey Chankethya finds a new inner rhythm as she moves slowly and decisively to Phanna Nam's break-dance beats.

Overall, *Crack* incorporates several well-worn devices and themes, such as having the dancers tentatively coming forward into the light and establishing themselves through many repeated phrases of movement. Some passages feel predictable and at times a little too slow. However, German choreographer Arco Renz's skill as an artistic facilitator imbues the piece in places. Here, he sensitively gives the dancers space to develop their own voices and reveal their embodied histories in innovative ways. Their intensity, focus and movement vocabulary work well without too much intervention from the choreographic and multimedia elements that have evolved independently, allowing it to build into a crescendo with the dancers. This shift in choreographic approach and the dynamics, phrasing and physical demands of western contemporary dance patterns are challenging for dancers trained in classical Khmer dance. In addition, dancing unmasked in street clothes to an abstract soundscape and projections is also a radical departure for them. Still, Phon Sopheap, in his exquisite movement references to the monkey god Hanuman, certainly leaves the audience wanting more. The same is true of the female dancers who suggest

**Production:** Crack

**Company:** Arco Renz / Kobalt Works and Amrita Performing Arts

**Reviewer:** Stephanie Burridge

**Date:** 14 May 2011

**Time:** 8.00pm

**Place:** School of the Arts Drama Theatre

**Rating:** 4 out of 5



*"A somatic piece that breathes through the pores, skin and soul of its six dancers."*

### Credits

Choreography: Arco Renz in collaboration with dancers from Amrita Performing Arts and Nuria Gulu Sagarra

Original Music: Marc Appart

Additional Music: Phanna Nam

Lighting Designer: Patrick Riou

Video Designer: Casey Lim

Dancers: Chey Chankethya, Chy Ratana, Phon Sopheap, Chumvan Sodhachivy, Nget Rady, Phon Sopheap, Yon Davy



apsaras with their flexed feet and fingers bent 90 degrees backward.

The choreography is polarising, splitting audience members between the nostalgic ones who wanted to see them perform more of the classical Khmer dance, and those who supporting the Phnom Penh dancers in their desire to embrace contemporary dance combining influences from the East and the West. Arco Renz has taken the dancers to another level, giving them space to let this new phase of exciting contemporary dance in Cambodia empathetically and artistically emerge. *Crack* metaphorically signifies the complexity of their world and how new directions ebb and flow along fault lines... sometimes things flow but obstacles abound. It is an intriguing journey.

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Productions are rated out of 5, based on practitioner's vision / reviewer's response:

5 = transcendent / rapturous; 4 = crystal / appreciative; 3 = transmitted / thoughtful; 2 = vague / unsatisfied; 1 = uncommunicated / mystified.

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## CRACK

Where: School Of The Arts  
Drama Theatre  
When: Tomorrow, 8pm and  
Sun, 3pm  
Admission: \$20 and \$45  
from Sistic (call 6348 5555 or  
go to [www.sistic.com.sg](http://www.sistic.com.sg))

Six young Cambodian dancers will interpret the tension between their country's past and present through this dance.

ST PHOTOS: LAU FOOK KONG

# Cambodian dance of youth

magdalena ng

When German choreographer Arco Renz (right) first started working on his latest project, Crack, in collaboration with Cambodian dancers, he knew little about the South-east Asian country.

But nearly two years later, his physical and evocative contemporary work will attempt to capture the energy of Cambodian youth, whose country's history is invariably intertwined with the cruel Pol Pot era from 1975 to 1979.

The 39-year-old tells Life! in an interview at the School Of The Arts: "I knew the basics, Pol Pot and the civil war that emerged, how it affected the Vietnam War later, but I did not know much about modern Cambodia."

He started collaboration on the project in 2009 and visited Cambodia the following year.



At last year's Singapore Arts Festival, he presented Heroine, a work that featured Taiwanese dancer Su Wen-Chi, which was well-received by reviewers.

On how Singaporean audiences will take to Crack, he says: "Here, audiences are very privileged and have many opportunities to be exposed to contemporary dances from the region, so they should be receptive as well."

This collaboration came about when Fred Frumberg, founder of Cambodian non-profit arts production company Amrita Performing Arts, approached him in 2009. The company has played a role in the reconstruction of Cambodia's classical arts after the Khmer Rouge nearly killed off a generation of performing arts masters as part of an ideological purge.

Renz believes this dialogue between Asia and Europe enriches his work back home in Belgium.

"Even though we are so different, we are also asking the same questions and dance is another language in which we can communicate," he says.

The six Cambodian dancers see this as a great opportunity to step out of their comfort zones. Dancer Chey Chankethya, 26, says: "This means a lot to us, to be able to show the energy of young Cambodian people, and to go beyond our limits."

All the movements on stage are improvised by the dancers themselves, through workshops held with Renz. They add: "Renz will tell us a phrase or an idea, and then let us explore through discussion and movements what it means to us."

The classically trained traditional dancer, who has been dancing for 15 years, points out that this tension between Cambodia's past and the present is captured in this dance.

She says: "We still want to carry on with our heritage. It is not about losing our identity and embracing everything that is new but we cannot explore new things without holding on so tightly to our tradition."

"This dance really shows the vitality of Cambodian society. We are ready to go forward and grow."



## Poetic pauses, loose edit

review dance

### CRACK

Arco Renz/Kobalt Works & Amrita Performing Arts School of the Arts Drama Theatre  
Last Saturday

tammy l. wong

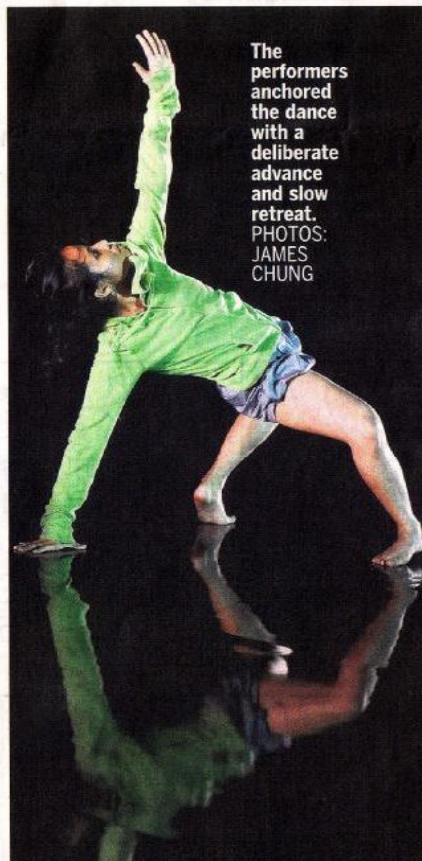
Crack by the Brussels-based choreographer Arco Renz in collaboration with Cambodian Amrita Performing Arts dancers has all the makings of a wonderful dance – terse tension, searing silences and poetic pauses.

If only Renz were stricter with its choreographic structure. If only he had dared to edit.

As an hour-long dance without intermission, and one that relied heavily on repetitive phrase work, Crack was a challenge for the small audience that gathered to watch last Saturday night.

The Singapore Arts Festival commission was born when Fred Frumberg, founder of Amrita, approached Renz in 2009 for a collaboration.

While Crack rambled on choreographically, the Amrita dancers proved valiant in their delivery of 21st-century contemporary dance vocabulary that saw them



The performers anchored the dance with a deliberate advance and slow retreat. PHOTOS: JAMES CHUNG

ness and then punching the darkened space with rapidly clenched shoulders, flailing arms and torsos.

Three female dancers unfolded in small sculptural shapes, slowly journeying downstage, only to return to their original places, in dim light.

This journey is revisited often, sometimes by a trio of men, who with their deep squats, firmly flexed hands and feet, resembled ancient warriors, awakening.

There is a continuous sense of ebb and flow, of deliberate advance and slow retreat that anchors the dance.

A classical Cambodian dance stance with knees touching, one leg and hands lifted, palms and foot flexed, was a recurrent motif. It seemed to suggest a memory that binds, even as one attempts to break towards the present.

Towards the end of the piece, blackouts on stage, a video projection and small shots of colour to the costumes by Claudia Kuhr were employed, perhaps to heighten the transition into the Now.

There were two strong female soloists who framed the final frenzied group movement.

The dance concluded with the more memorable female soloist surrendering to the earth, crouching, kneeling, rolling and then arriving as if almost in unresolved prayer, resting on her knees.

For a company of dancers born after 1980 and the tragedy of Pol Pot, hungry for the contemporary, these committed dancers truly made the evening.



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SUBJECT: Precision mingling of movement  
URL LINK: <http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2011/06/02/life/Precision-mingling-of-movement-30156826.html>



## Precision mingling of movement

By Pawit Mahasarinand  
Special to The Nation  
Singapore



### Classical Cambodian dancers 'Crack' into the contemporary at the Singapore Arts Festival

With the German-Belgian-Cambodian dance show 'Crack', the Singapore Arts Festival proves its worth once more. Apart from presenting works already staged elsewhere to acclaim, the festival - just ending - also commissions new pieces from across Southeast Asia.

In the contemporary dance "Crack", German choreographer Arco Renz and his Brussels-based troupe Kobalt Works collaborated with six classically trained dancers from Phnom Penh's Amrita Performing Arts.

On pathways defined by low lights, three women moved slowly downstage and back. Almost in the same line, they seemed aware of one another's positions. Their movements were similar, highly contemporary with classic traits, yet closer examination revealed vast differences.

This same structure was later repeated by their male counterparts, followed by solo and group parts.

Through individual and collective physical expression - and amid unique music and sound by Kobalt's Marc Appart and Khmer rap artist Phanna Nam - "Crack" showed that much of Cambodia's socioeconomic struggle is universal, far beyond the parameters of traditional-versus-modern cultural conflict.

It was an intercultural collaboration that worked - and that's rare these days.

This is probably due to the respect the artists have for one another's backgrounds. I've watched many of these Cambodian dancers in more classical works, and it's delightful to see them step into another realm without once forgetting their roots.

I'm sure the experience they gained will help them develop their own work in the years to come. Much credit is due to the Goethe Institut Southeast Asia, through its increasingly active tanzconnexions support project.

Renz explained how he set up the performers' collaboration.

"First I asked them to talk about themselves. I met everybody individually, with the interpreter. When we got together in a group I asked them to show me what they've been doing, as dancers and choreographers.

"Second, I improvised with them on a very physical level. I introduced very simple physical principles they could apply in relation to different subjects. I didn't want them to be limited in style - I tried to challenge them to develop their own language and movement based on the internal principle.

"Third, I was testing how they'd react to the language that came from outside. I brought in a very short extract of movements that I made up especially for them before going to Phnom Penh.

"One important aspect of our work was that there's always a frame, and how one gets freedom inside of the frame. They had to define their own ground in between the frames. I tried to keep my frame simple - I tried to define some kind of architecture of movement. Maybe the most difficult thing onstage is how to stand and to walk, rather than doing 15 pirouettes."

The National Arts Council and Singapore Tourism Board paid for the writer's trip.

Last chance

- The Singapore Arts Festival ends on Sunday.
- There are many free events, but those charging admission can be booked at [www.Sistic.com](http://www.Sistic.com).
- Visit [www.SingaporeArtsFest.com](http://www.SingaporeArtsFest.com).