

GIVING RATHER THAN TAKING

**“CRACK!” - A COLLABORATION OF AMRITA PERFORMING ARTS AND ARCO RENZ
AT THE SINGAPORE ARTS FESTIVAL 2011 BY TARA TAN**

Wearing florescent hoodies and baggy sweatpants, the Cambodian dancers in German choreographer Arco Renz's *Crack!* looked like something straight from the punk street cultures of London and Berlin. It was a far cry from the ornate gold headdresses and brightly-coloured sarongs that the classically-trained dancers were more accustomed to. But that night, they slipped admirably into Renz's gritty, urban world, proving their versatility and virtuosity as contemporary dancers.

On a dimly-lit stage where the dark, glossy floor shimmered with ghostly reflections, the three, and later six, dancers moved in the meandering, circular motions that mark Renz's choreographic style. There were certain similarities that resonate in both Eastern and Western dance practices: Renz favours placing weight on the lower part of the body, and looseness in the hips, which parallels Asian classical movement training.

MOMENTS OF RECOGNITION

Watching the performance, it was easy to lose oneself in the winding, endless, hypnotic movements as the dancers moved slowly towards the audience. A familiar pose became apparent as they did so - with their knees bent, the dancer's swept their fingers in graceful arcs. Here and there, the street dance sequences - bordering frequently on pop 'n lock routines - drew on dance gestures from the classical Cambodian repertory. The moments of recognition to which these elements gave rise anchored the piece; they reminded you just who these dancers were, and the cultural weight of this work.

In a world where boundaries blur and traditions fade, this small but strong-headed group of Cambodian dancers led by American stage director Fred Frumberg are fighting hard to overcome the severe and long-lasting damage inflicted upon Cambodia through the genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge. Since 2003, Amrita Performing Arts, an NGO based in Phnom Penh, has been forging cross-cultural collaborations between European artists and a pool of young, classically trained Cambodian dancers.

HUNGRY FOR A NEW LANGUAGE

In the last few years, they have gained increasing recognition throughout Asia and Europe. More than 30 years after the bloodshed of the Pol Pot regime, when hundreds of artists were tortured and massacred (90 per cent of the Royal Ballet's dancers were killed in this time for instance), a young generation of artists is finally coming out of its shell. And they seem hungry for a new language, one that would make them a part of the global conversation. It's a Catch-22 situation. On one hand, there is a desire to retain and preserve the precious tradition of Cambodian dance forms. On the other hand, these classical dancers are adamant in their refusal to become living fossils. For this new dance culture to become a lasting phenomenon, it needs to be relevant and articulate the contemporary.

COMMENTING ON THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION

In *Crack!*, Renz has been successful in merging and balancing the two dance forms in an aesthetic and articulate universe. Allowing room for the dancers' histories to emerge from fleeting traditional gestures - flexed feet and bent fingers - as they move hypnotically to the low but insistent pulse of break-beats; the choreographer has clearly been at pains to give rather than to take.

The piece comments on the socio-political situation without being didactic, and in its rambling, fluid and organic space, it builds bridges. The piece comments on the socio-political situation without being didactic, and in its rambling, fluid and organic space, it builds bridges. Moments of deep and sombre self-reflexivity marked the piece, like when dancers, crouched low on the mirrored floor, seem to almost confront their reflections in this dialogical tussle between heritage and the contemporary.

Crack! confronts its audiences with big questions. Is cultural engineering a positive or negative force in the long run? Should, and could, traditional Cambodian dance be left to evolve on its own terms, or should efforts be made to promote its development? It would be interesting to note, as well, how the works of Amrita Performing Arts are received in their home country, and what sort of reactions they elicit in Cambodia, which is slowly, finally, beginning to open.

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