



Monkey, magic and madness

Cambodia's 'killing fields' give way to cultural dance rebirth

By Ilene Dube

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In a former girls' school in the Tuol Sleng suburb of Cambodia, white skulls in glass cases are stacked upon each other in row after row. Walls are lined with black and white photographs of the deceased.

The school now houses the Museum of Genocidal Crime. During the reign of the Khmer Rouge, the school had been used as a torture and execution chamber. Between 1975 to 1979, 1.7 million Cambodians were killed.

Thavro Phim, a gentle man in his mid 20s who is a Cambodian classical dancer and instructor, searches the museum for evidence about his father in a scene from



In Janet Gardner's film, Thavro Phim searches the museum for evidence of his father.



Hanuman, the magical white monkey, charms the golden mermaid in traditional Cambodian cultural dance.

Courtesy of Angkor Dance Troupe,
photo by Kevin Harkins

Rocky Hill resident Janet Gardner's new documentary, "Dancing Through Death: The Monkey, Magic and Madness of Cambodia." Mr. Phim lost his father, brother and grandfather to the Khmer Rouge.

The documentary was broadcast on Connecticut Public Television in September and uplinked by satellite to PBS stations.

The Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, banned all religions, disrobed and punished thousands of monks and desecrated hundreds of temples and monasteries. Educated classes were especially targeted for execution.

Many Cambodians fled the country, and only a handful of physicians survived. Influenced by China, who armed the Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot established a radical agrarian society with labor camps in which many died from inhumane working conditions or starvation.

By 1979, the Khmer Rouge was driven out by the Vietnamese army and the country was renamed the People's Republic of Kampuchea. Pol Pot died in a jungle hideout in 1998.

Cut to a scene of Thavro Phim releasing a cage full of birds. In Buddhist tradition, it is believed that releasing birds will gain merit for the next life. Buddhism has been the primary religion of Cambodia since the 13th century, the religion that Mr. Phim has studied. Court dancing is another way to gain merit in the next life.

Carved into the temple complex and royal palace at Angkor Wat are images of the court dances and monkey dances, an important part of Cambodian culture that was nearly lost in the genocide. According to Ms. Gardner's film, 90 percent of the dancers were killed during the Khmer Rouge cultural eradication movement.

Cambodian dancers held a sacred role in the ancient empire of Angkor. Because they had become dancers of the royal court, they were targeted by Khmer Rouge guerrillas. Of the 10 percent of dancers who survived, many have made it their mission to teach this part of their heritage to the younger generation, both at the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, the country's capital, and at Cambodian communities in the United States and around the world.



In the film Thavro Phim releases a cage of birds to gain merit for the next life.



Thavro Phim dances the role of Hanuman, the magical white monkey.

Ms. Gardner's film, which includes archival footage of the Pol Pot years, follows the revival of this art form in Lowell, Mass., San Jose, Calif., and Phnom Penh.

The film shows a Cambodian family in Lowell, Mass., watching an episode of "The Flintstones" on TV. Are they forgetting their own heritage? English is spoken as the children's first language.

To counterbalance this Americanization of their culture, many of the 200,000 Cambodians settled in the United States are choosing to teach their children Cambodian cultural dance.

The dance was not simply entertainment, but a sacred rite. If the deities were pleased, it was believed, they would answer positively.

"The dancers were supposed to be messengers from the gods," said Ms. Gardner.

The movements themselves are sacred. The very posture of the torso, the carriage of the head and the serene expression on the face of the dancer, the graceful hand movements, give the total impression that the dancer is connecting with the gods.

The roles include a prince or male deity; a princess; a giant who represents evil; and the monkey, who represents good. All the roles were performed by women until the 1940s, when the role of the monkey dancer was taken over by male dancers and became more acrobatic.



In this scene, Hanuman falls for the golden mermaid.

The monkey is athletic and fun to dance, according to the dancers interviewed for the film.

"The monkey is funny, noble and heroic, a comic reflection of ourselves," says narrator and executive producer Marlene Sanders. The monkey walks in a comical squat, which Mr. Phim teaches to some of his young protégés.

Costumes of the monkey dancers, with brightly lacquered papier mache monkey masks and a suit into which the dancer is sewn, look much like the friezes of monkey dancers at Angkor Wat. The dance is accompanied by a wooden xylophone.

Mr. Phim has lived in the United States since 1992 with his American wife, Dr. Toni Samantha Phim, a scholar on Cambodian culture. Dr. Phim met her husband while she was working in Cambodian refugee camps in the 1980s. Her doctoral dissertation, "Dance and the Spirit of Cambodia," to be published by Oxford University Press, was Ms. Gardner's primary resource in researching the film. Some of Dr. Phim's footage of Cambodian refugee camps is used in Ms. Gardner's film.

Ms. Gardner met Thavro and Toni Phim in 1990 at a dance school in Cambodia, while on a trip for the U.S.-IndoChina Reconciliation Project.

"Dancing Through Death: The Monkey, Magic and Madness of Cambodia," written and directed by Janet Gardner, will be broadcast on WHY TV tentatively in April, 2000.



Rocky Hill resident Janet Gardner's new film, "Dancing Through Death," will be aired in the spring.

Staff photo by Frank Wojciechowski