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Arts

Cambodia



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THE EARTH**

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Blossoming of the ARTS

Cambodia's rich performing arts are brought to life on stage through *Plae Pakaa*, a show that highlights the country's artistic heritage.

WORDS: CHITRA S PHOTOGRAPHY: ADAM LEE

In an upstairs classroom of a Phnom Penh primary school, dance class is in session. I hear the students first – a chorus of bare feet hitting the cement floor in unison to beats drummed up by their teacher on his *skor dai* (traditional Khmer drum) – before seeing them. It's 8.00am on a Sunday morning and these children are learning the basics of Cambodian dance. Classical Cambodian dance is notorious for its range of gestures and stances, some 4,200 to be exact!

I watch in amazement as the children – a few only kindergarten-aged – exhibit a focus that belies their age, unfazed by the guests who are busy snapping photos of their every move. Run by Cambodian Living Arts, a non-profit organisation whose mission is to create a sustainable environment where local arts can empower and transform individuals and communities, the class I witnessed seemed to be heading in the right direction.

RIGHT:
The *Children of Bassac* performance opens with a dance based on the traditional blessing ceremonies of the Phnornng ethnic minority in Ratnakiri.

OPPOSITE PAGE: A *naga* visits Pangkiya in her dreams, portending doom, in a scene from the *yike* performance of *Mak Therng*.





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Good triumphs over evil in *Mak Therng* – a folk tale reinterpreted through *yike*; the *Phloy Suoy* is a harvest dance traditionally performed to invoke rain; a performer takes on the role of a Cham Muslim trader in a scene from *Passage of Life*; the *Passage of Life* troupe comprises not only actors and dancers but also a traditional orchestra; a cheeky monkey teases the golden mermaid in *Sovann Machha*, a dance which depicts an episode of the *Reamker* or Khmer version of the Indian epic *Ramayana*.





CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Underprivileged teenagers learn the fine art of Cambodian dance every Sunday at the Sothea's Primary School; getting into costume is not an easy task, here, Hom Sreyimi who plays the female lead in *Mak Therng* gets her *kben* (a three-metre long fabric fashioned into pantaloons) tied; a performer carefully applying his make-up before going on stage.

RESURRECTING THE ARTS

Founded in 1998 by genocide survivor Arn Chorn-Pond, Cambodian Living Arts (CLA) aims to preserve the rich heritage of Cambodia. Only a boy during the Khmer Rouge years (1975-1979), Chorn-Pond survived by using the musical skills taught to him by fellow camp internees to play propaganda tunes for the regime's soldiers. A harrowing time for Cambodians, the period claimed the lives of over a quarter of the country's population and, it is said that 90 percent of those who lost their lives were artists. Chorn-Pond – the only surviving member of his family – escaped to a Thai refugee camp where he was later adopted by an American pastor.

In his adopted home of Lowell, Massachusetts, where a large number of Cambodian refugees had settled, the young man built a sound studio for children – many of whom were involved in street gangs – to record their voices and learn about their roots. Eager to explore his own roots and culture, Chorn-Pond returned to Cambodia and began tracking down surviving artists. It wasn't an easy undertaking as many of the artists had fallen into difficult times, but Chorn-Pond persevered. He began by locating these artists and later, organising classes within their communities as a means of passing down the knowledge of the old masters to the younger generation.

COMING TO FRUITION

All that hard work and dedication are starting to pay off and the CLA now has its own traditional performing arts show: *Plae Pakaa*, which literally means 'Fruitful' – a nod to the fruits of the organisation's labours. Ros Rotanak, CLA's bubbly programme manager offers some



insight into *Plae Pakaa*. “For us, *Plae Pakaa* expresses the idea of our work coming to fruition. It is symbolic not only of the emerging artists who are sharing the fruits of their hard work with us, but of the revival of traditional arts in Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge.” In its second season at Phnom Penh’s National Museum, *Plae Pakaa* presents three shows: *Children of Bassac* – a medley of classical and folk dances so-named in honour of its performers who hail from the city’s Bassac slums, *Lakhaon Yike* – a traditional opera and, *Passage of Life* – a fusion piece that charts traditional Cambodian ceremonies from birth to death. The most popular of the three shows – *Children of Bassac* – features the classical dance of the *apsara* or celestial nymph, as well as lesser known folk dances of Cambodia’s minority communities. “Many foreigners want to see the *apsara*. The dance is incorporated into the show but more importantly, we also want people to know that there is more to Cambodian performing arts than *apsara* alone. *Yike* (pronounced yee-kay), for instance, is lesser known but is believed to date back to the eighth century,” she shares with me. To learn about what goes into each performance and to better understand the CLA’s work, Ros suggests I attend its Sunday classes and that is how I end up at CLA’s Phnom Penh office.

BASIC TRAINING

Dance and music lessons are a rigorous affair that requires discipline and dedication. Every Sunday at the Sothea Primary School, students begin their day by moving desks and chairs to the back of classrooms to make space for their lessons. Classes are free but in a city where many are still living hand-to-mouth, spending a day attending class is a luxury. The children come from nearby communities, many hailing from the city’s Bassac slum that was once a refuge for artists. Not everyone attending the classes goes on to perform on stage. But the children do take away with them an appreciation for the arts and culture of their homeland, and learn an art that they will be able to pass on to future generations. As I sit and watch the children, the gravity of what the CLA is trying to achieve sinks in. In front of me are a motley crew of children in T-shirts and shorts, trying their hardest to memorise moves. Every stance they take is a step in preserving a part of their heritage that would have been lost if not for organisations like the CLA.

REACHING OUT

leng Sithul, the artistic director of *Plae Pakaa* joins the class midway, watching the children’s every move with his trained eye. Thanks to the efforts of people like leng, these children now have a chance to improve their lives. A renowned singer, leng started the Association for the Training of Poor Children in 1999 to teach impoverished kids Cambodian arts. Going door-to-door in the slums, leng recruited kids who had talent but nowhere to go to learn the craft.

A decade later, leng teamed up with the CLA and his troupe became known as the

Children of Bassac. “It takes a lot of dedication for them to show up for class but teaching them is what keeps people like me going. During the Khmer Rouge years, we were not allowed to sing or dance, we could only keep the arts alive in our heads. Those who survived have a responsibility to the younger generation, to pass on what we struggled to keep alive,” says leng.

For years, leng’s troupe performed at private events and cultural shows but with *Plae Pakaa*, the troupe now has a platform to showcase their talents to a wider audience. Though *Plae Pakaa* is only in its second season, the Children of Bassac draws a full

BELOW: The *Nesat* or Fishing Dance brings to life the everyday customs of Cambodia’s fishing communities.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Based on images etched on the stone walls of Angkor temples, the *Apsara* dance celebrates beauty and grace through precise movements and gestures.







CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: A dancer balances a drum in his mouth while performing the *Chayyam* Drum Dance, a popular folk dance performed during religious processions; teacher Soeur Vuthy gently guides one of his young charges during dance class; a scene from *Passage of Life*: A son seeks his parents' blessing before going off to become a monk.



**AirAsia
Foundation**

AirAsia Foundation is a major partner of Cambodian Living Arts in the *Plae Pakaa* project. The Foundation supports more than 100 students in their quest to learn traditional performing arts in order to preserve Cambodia's artistic traditions and make them sustainable. For more information, go to facebook.com/airasiafoundation

CAMBODIAN LIVING ARTS TOURS

Learn about Cambodian arts from *smot* chanting to classical music ensembles and folk dances to large shadow puppetry by visiting classes where these arts are being revived and passed down by surviving masters to a new generation. The tours that take place in and around Phnom Penh and Siem Reap benefit the artists, performers and their communities. All guides are current or former CLA students who serve as cultural ambassadors with their intimate knowledge of Khmer arts. Prices start from USD10 per person. For details, visit www.cambodianlivingarts.org

PLAE PAKAA

Plae Pakaa is staged at the National Museum, Phnom Penh, with each show being performed twice weekly.

Monday/Thursday: Children of Bassac

Tuesday/Friday: Lakhaon Yike

Wednesday/Saturday: Passage of Life

Book your tickets online at www.cambodianlivingarts.org



house at almost every performance. “These are poor children; by performing, they earn a living for themselves and are able to support their families too. My hope is for them to become professionals in their own right.”

IT'S YIKE!

Leaving Ieng and his students, I venture down to the courtyard where a couple of teenagers are busy re-enacting a scene for the *yike* performance. Their teacher stands nearby, observing their gestures and listening in to make sure they've not missed a single line. *Lakhaon Yike* is a form of musical theatre believed to have originated from the ethnic Cham community of Cambodia. *Yike* performers have to be able to sing, dance and act, which takes years of diligent practice. For Hom Sreymi, who plays the female lead in the *Plae Pakaa yike* production, the art form has broadened her horizons and is a welcome respite from her daily routine. “When a friend told me about auditions for a *yike* class, I gave it a go not expecting to make the cut. I was overjoyed when they chose me to join the troupe and now, after three years of practice, I'm so proud we've made it to the stage,” says the 16-year-old who lives in a one-room shack with her mother and sister.

A CLASS ACT

After watching the children practices, my curiosity is piqued and I want to see them perform on stage. Fast-forward a couple of days and I finally get my chance. Invited to watch the *yike* troupe performing a piece titled *Mak Therng*, I make my way early to the makeshift amphitheatre at the National Museum. Hom and the rest of the *yike* cast also arrive early, many still in their school uniforms. An assistant hands out boxes of food in the changing room – dinner for the cast – while the actors apply their own make-up and style their hair. In a frenzy of activity, the performers get ready to play their parts.

Mak Therng recounts the tale of a poor couple, Mak Therng and his young wife Pangkiya. The couple is separated when the prince, besotted by Pangkiya's beauty takes her for his wife. Distraught by the loss of Pangkiya, Mak Therng demands justice from the king and asks that his wife be returned to him. What happens next is predictable but the beauty of *yike* is not the story itself, but in the truly spectacular telling of the tale.

Passed down from generation to generation, the story of good prevailing over evil was adapted for the stage in the 70s but *yike* breathes new life into it. As is the norm here, prayers are offered before the opening


scene unfolds with Mak Therng and Pangkiya taking centre stage. I almost do not recognise Hom when she steps on stage; the teenager appears transformed, reciting her lines with poise and confidence.


I understand now why back in dance class, so much emphasis was placed on gestures. Every move helps to tell the story and though the entire show is in Khmer, foreigners like me are able to follow the plot without referring to the English subtitles above the stage.



ABOVE: Performers acting out a scene based on the *Reamker*, when Hanuman, the white monkey meets and falls in love with *Sovann Machha* or the golden mermaid.

SUSTAINING A LEGACY

Plae Pakaa signifies a maturing of sorts, especially of the young performers who have worked tirelessly, sacrificing their time and other luxuries just to keep a part of their culture alive. To paraphrase Arn Chorn-Pond's words: “Let's hope the world will get to know Cambodia through its rich arts and culture”. 

 **GETTING THERE** AirAsia flies to Phnom Penh daily from Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok. Go to www.airasia.com for flight details.