Khmer Arts Ensemble

The Lives of Giants

CAST
(in order of appearance)

Akaeng Khameaso (child) Chea Socheata
Uma Keo Kunthearom
Tevabot (male angels) Kong Bonich, Lim Chanboramy, Sao Phirom, Sao Somaly
Tep Thida (female angels) Long Chantheary, Mot Pharan, Pum Molyta, Som Saymalyrou
Akaeng Khameaso (adult) Rin Sreyleak
Preah Eyo (Shiva) Chao Socheata
Preah Visnu (Vishnu) Sot Sovanndy

Instrumentalists
Roneat Ek (xylophone) Nil Sinoeun
Sralai (quadruple-reed oboe) Touch Sarin
Sampho & Skor Thom (drums) Ros Sokun
Gong Thom (circle gong) Soun Phally

Singer Cheam Chanthopeas
Dresser Sam Ratha

Costume Makers Angkor Thom Handicrafts, Iris Color Studio, Kum Sokunthea, Hout Sokleng, Sim Chanmoly, Vuthy Tailors and artists of the Khmer Arts Ensemble

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THE LIVES OF GIANTS

The Lives of Giants is drawn from the Reamker, the Cambodian version of the Ramayana, an ancient Sanskrit epic. Its principals, philosophy and character are fundamental to the cultural consciousness of South and Southeast Asians.

Akaeng Khameaso is a giant in Preah Eyso’s heavenly realm who has been the target of relentless taunting and teasing by a band of mischievous angels since he was a child.

Eventually, he can take no more abuse. He complains about his plight to Preah Eyso, pleading for a way to protect himself. Pitying Akaeng Khameaso, Preah Eyso gives the giant a magic wand and tells him to direct his voraciousness and rage toward beauty.

Uma dances before Akaeng Khameaso. Entranced, he approaches, allowing her to reframe the triumph of violence over compassion.

With her husband and leader now gone, Uma turns to Preah Visnu for help. Preah Visnu declares that the only choice is to kill Akaeng Khameaso. But Uma disagrees. She wants to put Akaeng Khameaso in touch with his sense of humanity so that he will renounce violence. Preah Visnu insists that her plan will never work but allows her to try. If she fails, he will step in and slaughter the giant.

Uma dances before Akaeng Khameaso. Entranced, he approaches, allowing her to reframe the triumph of violence over compassion.

Nevertheless, I believe compassion is an antidote. When we acknowledge our own and our enemies’ humanity, we create room to step away from inhumane behavior. I’m a realist and recognize that this is a difficult task. Compassion often loses out to adrenaline-fueled revenge. But I hope that an alternative path exists. “What might have been” can become “what can be.”

Like many of my compatriots, I have a deep love of storytelling, particularly in the forms of folklore and mythology. In The Lives of Giants, I have taken an episode from the Reamker epic that describes a previous life of the vengeful giant king Reap, and given it my own interpretive twist. With movement and melodies, costumes and light, The Lives of Giants conjures this mysterious and magical world as a reflection of our own.

Sophiline Cheam Shapiro

Dance in Contemporary Cambodia

Dancers in Cambodia are responding to a contemporary environment that includes both lightning-speed development and reminders of a devastatingly violent past. During the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979), nearly a third of Cambodia’s population perished. Large numbers of professionally trained dancers died, with a mere 10–20 percent surviving the genocide. Classical dance, with long historical roots intertwined with spirituality and with the monarchy, was nearly wiped out. With the loss of so much embodied knowledge, government arts officials have publicly prioritized the preservation of Cambodia’s traditional dance heritage for more than 30 years. Stylistic innovation, officials claim, threatens efforts to recover and rebuild Cambodia’s arts. As a result, younger generations of dancers—students of genocide survivors who had danced before the war, and their students—embody the main force of creativity in professional dance circles in Cambodia today.

Traditional repertoire and customary themes

Government-sponsored dance activity, beyond the teaching and performance of selections from the traditional repertoire of classical and folk pieces, includes both the restaging and completion of previously unfinished works, and the creation of new choreographies for state celebrations and festivals. These dances have been fashioned strictly within the classical or folk movement vocabulary, representing customary themes, such as the celestial, royal and sweeping mytho-historical focus of the classical repertoire. Thus, while the production of contemporary work in the state institutions of the arts, including the Secondary School of Fine Arts, is ongoing, it is most often only specific storylines that are new.

“Robam Sahasamay”—contemporary dance

Until very recently, discussion of professional Cambodian dance within the country revolved predominantly around “tradition.” Though
innovation has been a hallmark of even traditional forms of performance, Cambodia’s dancers have over the past several years come to translate the phrase “contemporary dance” as robam (dance) sabaasamay (modern/of the same time period), acknowledging that this is a new construct on their part. Nonetheless, Cambodian choreographers, and the institutions supporting their work, are still often tied to concerns about national identity and history, and influenced by a traditionalist discourse. Many sabaasamay dances employ common conventions of Western contemporary (and other) dance such as pedestrian costumes and movements, a variety of musical accompaniment, innovative choreographic patterns, projections and spoken word. These dances have often taken as a central theme the desire of the younger generation to explore new creative grounds while still honoring their country’s long artistic heritage. Despite occasional criticism from teachers and peers for straying from strictly “Cambodian” performances, these artists are exploring their unique creative voices through movement and music, looking to literature, biography and autobiography, emotion, nature and politics for inspiration.

Expanding possibilities

The neoclassical choreography of Sophiline Cheam Shapiro represents another approach to creativity. Inspired by themes other than the divide between tradition and innovation, Ms. Cheam Shapiro experiments with and flexes the muscles of the robust classical aesthetic. Her company, the Khmer Arts Ensemble, established in Cambodia in 2007, performs both contemporary creations and works from the classical canon. Ms. Cheam Shapiro has a firm base as an accomplished performer and teacher of classical dance. She was a member of the first generation to study dance professionally after the ousting of the Khmer Rouge.

Since 1999, Ms. Cheam Shapiro has been expanding classical dance’s possibilities through the development of original dance dramas that break with received storylines, and through experiment with gesture, vocabulary, partnering, movement patterns and costume—all of which are often officially considered inviolate. She also makes pioneering use of traditional musical arrangements and instrumentation. These rigorous explorations link Ms. Cheam Shapiro to dance-makers across the globe, such as Senegal’s Germaine Acogny, Indonesia’s Sardono and the late Chadrakala from India.

In The Lives of Giants, you see and hear all of these elements at play. Choreographic patterns are dynamic and sometimes asymmetrical; movement flows out of but is not restricted to codified gesture, vocabulary or posture. Melodies that never before accompanied classical dance are employed to great emotional effect. Merrily Murray-Walsh’s costumes synchronize with Marcus Doshi’s scenic abstractions of water and light while referring to traditional motifs in decorative patterns and accessories. The lighter weight of the printed costumes harmonizes with both canonical and Ms. Cheam Shapiro’s innovative movements. Akaeng Khameaso’s mask incorporates a metal mesh with traditional papier-mâché elements, allowing dancers to breathe and see more easily.

This essay is adapted from “Professional Dancers and their Contemporary Context in Cambodia,” http://www.goethe.de/ins/id/lp/pit/ctg/rgt/kam/enindex.htm.

Sophiline Cheam Shapiro is a choreographer, dancer, vocalist and educator. Her work has toured to four continents, hosted by such notable venues as New York’s Joyce Theater, Cal Performances, Cambodia’s Les Nuits d’Angkor Festival, Walt Disney Concert Hall, the Venice Biennale, Hong Kong Arts Festival, Carolina Performing Arts, University Musical Society/Ann Arbor, Reunion Island’s La Foire Internationale des Mascareignes, Amsterdam’s Het Muziektheater and Vienna’s New Crowned Hope Festival. Works include Samrittechak (2000), The Glass Box (2002), Seasons of Migration (2005) and Pamina Devi: A Cambodian Magic Flute (2006). Spiral XII (2008), a collaboration with composer Chinary Ung, was commissioned by the Los Angeles Master Chorale, and Munkul Lokey/Shir Ha-Shirim (2008) was commissioned by the Guggenheim Museum’s Works & Process series.

In 2009, Ms. Cheam Shapiro was named a National Heritage Fellow, a lifetime honor awarded by the National Endowment for the Arts, and a USA Knight Fellow. She was awarded the Nikkei Asia Prize for Culture in 2006, and has received Creative Capital, Durfee, Guggenheim and Irvine dance fellowships, among many other honors.

Born in Phnom Penh, Ms. Cheam Shapiro was a member of the first generation to graduate from the School of Fine Arts after the fall of Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge regime and was a member of the dance faculty there from 1988 to 1991. She studied all three major roles for women (neang, nearong and yeak); which is rare. With the school’s ensemble, she toured India, the Soviet Union, the United States and Vietnam. She immigrated to Southern California in 1991, where she studied dance ethnology at UCLA. She is co-founder and Artistic Director of Khmer Arts.

Ms. Cheam Shapiro lectures and teaches at conferences and universities around the world, and her essays have been published in numerous anthologies.

Rin Sreyleak (Akaeng Khameaso) has danced the coveted role of Ream Eyso and has performed on four continents with the Khmer Arts Ensemble. In 2009, she was a visiting artist at Dance Advance’s “By Gesture/By Word: Modifying the Classical” at Philadelphia’s Performance Garage. Before joining the Khmer Arts Ensemble in 2007, she studied classical dance at Phnom Penh’s School of the Fine Arts.

Chao Socheata (Preah Eyso) has performed leading roles in Shir-Ha-Shirim/Munkul Lokey, Pamina Devi, Ream Eyso & Moni Mekhala, Seasons of Migration and Spiral XII throughout Asia, Europe and North America. Before joining the Khmer Arts Ensemble in 2006, she studied classical dance at the School of Fine Arts.

Keo Kunthearam (Uma) has performed as Preah Mae in Sophiline Cheam Shapiro’s Rice as well as the solo Neang Neak from Seasons of Migration. She has toured widely with the Khmer Arts Ensemble. She is a graduate of the School of Fine Arts.

Sot Sovannady (Preah Vima) has performed a wide range of characters, including the role of Preah Arun Tipadey in Pamina Devi and Ream Eyso, one of classical dance’s most challenging
ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Nil Sinoeun (musician) learned to play roneat ek (xylophone) with his father, Nul Nil, who was a professor of music at the School of Fine Arts. Since joining the Khmer Arts Ensemble in 2006, he has performed throughout Cambodia and in Europe and North America. He also teaches pin peat music to students in the village of Preak L’vea, where he lives.

Marcus Doshi (scenic and lighting designer) designs for theater, opera and dance, as well as collaborating with artists and architects on a wide array of non-theatrical ventures. Previous work with Sophiline Cheam Shapiro includes lighting for Samricketchak and scenery and lighting for Pamina Devi. His work has been seen internationally in Edinburgh, London, Amsterdam, Castres, Venice, Vienna, Mumbai, Delhi and Phnom Penh. Recent designs in the United States include Measure for Measure, Othello (Lortel Nomination) and Hamlet (Drama Desk Nomination) for Theatre for a New Audience, A Boy and His Soul for the Vineyard, Things of Dry Hours for NYTW, Queens Blvd (The Musical) and The First Breeze of Summer at the Signature, and work with the New Group, Soho Rep, Joyce, Lincoln Center, Chicago Shakespeare, Seattle Rep, Portland Center Stage, Yale Rep, Hartford Stage Company, Seattle Opera, Virginia Opera, Boston Lyric Opera, Lyric Opera of Kansas City, Greenwich Music Festival and Florentine Opera, among others. He has collaborated on a number of competitions and exhibition lighting designs, including the permanent exhibition at the Museum of Chinese in America: With a Single Step: Stories in the Making of America. He has led workshops exploring the interaction of light and movement on the stage, most recently in Jakarta, Indonesia. He holds degrees from Stanford University in more than 300 cities in 30 countries on six continents. Current and upcoming projects include Handspring Puppet Company, Spirit of Uganda, Hugo & Ines, and Doug Varone and Dancers. LBMI is General Manager of Center Stage, a new cultural exchange program initiated by the U.S. Department of State, and served as the inaugural General Manager for State’s DanceMotion United States from 2010–2012. LBMI has worked with Cambodian performing artists for more than a decade. LBMI co-produced Dance: The Spirit of Cambodia in 2001, toured Weyreap’s Battle (Amrita Performing Arts) in 2007, is the performing arts consultant for Season of Cambodia, a major New York City festival scheduled for 2013, and has served as General Touring Manager for the Khmer Arts Ensemble since 2004.

Robert W. Henderson, Jr. (technical director) is a New York-based lighting designer. Recent credits include Khmeroperadys I & II—Festival of Arts & Ideas, Connecticut, and New York City’s Baryshnikov Arts Center; Christmas Carol (Associate Designer)—Hartford Stage, Connecticut; Mary’s Wedding and Tazewell Thompson’s A Christmas Carol—Westport Country Playhouse, Connecticut; Rent, The Laramie Project, I Am My Own Wife, among others—Theatre Three, New York; Associate Designer for the Permanent Exhibition at the Museum of Chinese in America, New York; and, select Harry Winston and Barney’s New York display windows. He also worked on the international premiere of the new opera Where Elephants Weep presented in Phnom Penh. Mr. Henderson received his M.F.A. from N.Y.U.’s Tisch School of the Arts Department of Design.

Lisa Booth Management, Inc. (LBMI) is a New York City-based producing and management firm specializing in contemporary performance. LBMI tours artists worldwide, produces U.S. tours for artists from abroad, and initiates and manages special projects. Since 1983, LBMI programs have taken place in more than 300 cities in 30 countries on six continents. Current and upcoming projects include Handspring Puppet Company, Spirit of Uganda, Hugo & Ines, and Doug Varone and Dancers. LBMI is General Manager of Center Stage, a new cultural exchange program initiated by the U.S. Department of State, and served as the inaugural General Manager for State’s DanceMotion United States from 2010–2012. LBMI has worked with Cambodian performing artists for more than a decade. LBMI co-produced Dance: The Spirit of Cambodia in 2001, toured Weyreap’s Battle (Amrita Performing Arts) in 2007, is the performing arts consultant for Season of Cambodia, a major New York City festival scheduled for 2013, and has served as General Touring Manager for the Khmer Arts Ensemble since 2004.

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Khmer Arts

Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, Artistic Director
John Shapiro, Executive Director
Serey Tep, Managing Director, Khmer Arts Academy
Chum Chanveasna, Company Manager, Khmer Arts Ensemble
Penh Yom and Meas Saem, Khmer Arts Ensemble Master Artists
Chheng Phon, advisor emeritus

Merrily Murray-Walsh (costume designer) began her studies of costume design as an undergraduate majoring in American History and Government at Mills College in Oakland. After graduation, she worked three years of internship at the Oregon Shakespearean Festival. She completed her M.F.A. degree in costume design at Carnegie-Mellon University, and landed her first design job back at the Festival. Early in her career, she served as design assistant to John Conklin and Tony Walton. Since then she’s designed for television, film, Imax, theater and opera. In recent years, her most important ongoing collaboration has been with the theater and opera director Tazewell Thompson, for whom she has designed productions at Glimmerglass and New York City Opera, Opera Columbus, Arena Stage, Westport Playhouse, Hartford Stage Company, the Children’s Theatre Company, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Indiana Repertory Theatre, City Theater Company and Florida State. She has had the good fortune to work with numerous noteworthy directors, including Carroll O’Connor and Robert Falls (theater), Michael Dinner and Tommy Schlamme (television), and Paul Newman (film).

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