The Play of the Gods

A Photo-Essay on Khmer Dance Training

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David Feingold has watched the revival of Khmer dance over the past nine years, seeing students start to regain the mastery he found thirty-four years ago when he accidentally wandered into the Royal Dance School in Phnom Penh. These photographs were taken between 1986 and 1994.
The themes and forms of Khmer “classical” dance have persisted over nearly a thousand years.

The gestures of the apsaras, the heavenly dancers, that adorn the walls of Angkor Wat are reflected in the repertory of khon—narrative dance gestures—taught at the Dance School of the Fine Arts University in Phnom Penh today.
The dancer embodies the Khmer ideals of beauty, grace, and continuity—continuity not only between the past and the present, but also between the realm of gods and that of men.

Cambodians have gone to great lengths to preserve their dance traditions. During the Khmer Rouge years (1975–1979), more than eighty percent of the performers in Cambodia died of starvation, disease, or execution. Both in refugee camps on the Thai border (shown here) and in Phnom Penh, troupes tried to resurrect what had nearly been destroyed. As one dance teacher in the camps said, “Dance is another form of struggle.”
The training to be a dancer is also a struggle. Teachers teach kinaestically rather than by example, molding the supple bodies of the young dancers to attain the correct forms.

Ritual exercises are performed each day to acquire the flexibility, balance, and control that are the essence of Khmer dance. The dancers must learn the gestural vocabulary of the dance, as well as the narrative structure of performance.
Selection to become a dancer is as rigorous as the training. Hundreds of children vie for the few places at the Fine Arts Dance School. They are auditioned, examined and tested. Instructors inspect limbs and evaluate their flexibility. The teachers talk of a "Khmer look" which they seek, as well as suppleness and grace.

The classical dance is made up primarily of episodes from the Reamker, the Cambodian version of the great Hindu epic, the Ramayana. Although based on the Indian epic, the Reamker contains many episodes that do not exist in the original. It is a uniquely Cambodian representation of social relationships and the moral universe.