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Breaking its Cambodia Battambang Artistic Talent Showcased Art project digs into Cambodia

Kang Rithisal

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Amrita Performing Arts celebrated its 10-year anniversary late last year. The dance and theatre company's newly appointed Executive Director, Kang Rithisal, plays a key role in ensuring that contemporary artists take centre stage. Interview by Joanna Mayhew, photograph by Charles Fox.

Why was Amrita founded?

Amrita was created to help the revival and preservation of Cambodian cultural performing arts. Amrita is a Sanskrit word which means eternity, so there was an intention of trying to say the arts should continue, should always be perpetual. Officially in 2011, we shifted to being committed to the creation of contemporary dance and theatre. Our vision is nurturing a young generation of artists, who are ushering their ancient performing arts heritage from the past into the future.

What do you mean by contemporary dance?

We have 15 young artists, aged 20 to 30, who are all classically trained in Cambodian dance. Because they are classically trained, the contemporary dance of Cambodia is not something that's inspired by the Western ballet form, or K-pop, or whatever. These are people who were born in the art, in the classical form, and they are encountering international artists who bring new experiences, new techniques, or new thought in dance. These artists get inspired by it, and choose to express their own story or movement from that.

Has this been controversial?

People are still thinking about the revival and preservation of dance 34 years after the Khmer Rouge. They fear that further development of the form will pose a kind of potential threat, or destruction, to the classical form.

Keeping an art form stagnant is not a good thing. The classical form is actually the inspirational base for younger artists to have courage to create new things. Without it, tapping into the new thing would not be possible. We have to carefully nurture the process so their dance development is good — it's Cambodian. Maintaining that balance is like walking on a tightrope.

What do contemporary performances mean for Cambodia?

Having this contemporary dance that the artists choose to express in their art, and that corresponds to the social and political context that they're in now, is very new. Five years ago, if you were doing something like this, it was not received in the way it is received now. The economic and technological developments mean Cambodians have access to the world. People's minds are broadened a bit more, and that really contributes to the change in their perspective. I see that has happened and will continue to happen.

How would you describe the local arts scene?

I say the Cambodian arts scene is like a garden. If it's only one particular flower, then that garden, you know, it's beautiful but it's not so interesting. I like the fact that there are artists who really work on the classical form, artists who really explore creativity in the classical form, and artists who are making the artistic choice to do contemporary work. It is a variety of things, and the co-existence of the different things is actually the beauty of this country's arts.

What is Amrita's proudest achievement of the last 10 years?

To answer, I would be easily attracted to the big shows we have done — like *Where Elephants Weep*, the first Cambodian rock opera. However, recently in Singapore we had one of our artists receiving questions from the audience. With amazing confidence, he grabbed the microphone and explained the classical form and how they moved into creating this work, with no sense of fear, representing Cambodia. And now I've decided that that's actually the remarkable achievement we have made. We have produced numerous productions, but now we have these young artists who will be potential young leaders in the cultural scene. And seeing them flourishing is actually, I believe, the biggest achievement of Amrita.

What is the significance of a decade completed and your new leadership?

I would call it a new phase of Amrita. I've been with this organisation for 10 years. I am part of the Amrita family. I believe in what we are doing. Now, after years of momentum working with international collaborators, we have the courage to say that we are building choreographers for contemporary dance, and I am nurturing this as the new leader because I am a Cambodian. So I have this advantage of having a dialogue with my artists [and] choreographers.

Our dancers and staff see this as a remarkable moment for them. The mission has gone deeper into their blood. They feel the responsibility that they have as the young generation of Cambodians, and that includes myself. Together we look forward with great anticipation to the next 10 years and beyond.

What's the future for Amrita?

In the short term, Amrita is going to further its artist development in terms of their choreographic and artistic development. In the long term we are becoming an internationally or regionally recognised dance company from Cambodia, showcasing the work of Cambodia, by Cambodians.

We are making this new generation of leaders. And they are contributing back to their own art community and making their rightful place locally and in the international arena.

For more information, visit amritaperformingarts.org

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