

The CAMBODIA DAILY WEEKEND



Anders Jiras

Entitled "Bach Cello Suite," this dance was choreographed and performed by Yon Davy with French cellist Vincent Courtois in 2010 as a joint project of the Institut Francais and Amrita Performing Arts.

Leaving Legacy Intact

Amrita arts founder Frumberg takes his last bow

BY MICHELLE VACHON • THE CAMBODIA DAILY

In the mid-1990s, Fred Frumberg, who was heading the stage-directing department of the Paris Opera, was feeling restless.

Mr. Frumberg, whose career had included an apprenticeship with cutting-edge German director Harry Kupfer and producing works around the world for U.S. director Peter Sellars, had lost enthusiasm for his job of handling about 20 shows a year at the Paris Opera and wanted to move on.

Soon after, Mr. Frumberg started to think about volunteering his time, and then heard of Cambodia. He met with the future King Norodom Sihamoni—who was then Cambodia's ambassador to Unesco in Paris—and learned about the efforts made to revive the country's performing arts, whose artists had been nearly wiped out under the Khmer Rouge.

So he signed on as a Unesco volunteer for a year and arrived in Phnom Penh in June 1997, one

month before the CPP and Funcinpec forces were to battle it out on the streets of Phnom Penh.

He remained a Unesco volunteer for five years.

"I was...helping Cambodian artists' process already in place, to revive their lost repertory," he said. "My mission was to bring some expertise into the process, to bring a sense of true capacity building of production management and, of course, fundraising to help restore all repertory."

"But suddenly there was this young generation of artists who were, like, having discussions about contemporary creativity," Mr. Frumberg recalls.

Fully trained in the country's theater and dance traditions at the Secondary School of Fine Arts and the Royal University of Fine Arts, some young artists were eager to move forward.

As dancer and choreographer Chumvan Sodhachiv, known as Belle, put it: "All we want is to cre-

ate art, a new thing, collaboration, and also develop our culture.

"Of course we are human and there are going to be mistakes or problems. But we learn from them and develop.... Our art grows, old form or new form: It grows," she said.

So in response to these young artists, Mr. Frumberg set up the NGO Amrita Performing Arts in 2003. Since then, the organization

Continued on page 2



Anders Jiras

Cambodian dancer Noun Savitou in 'Khmeropedies III: Source/Primate'



CAMBODIA'S ILLS

Eclectic exhibition exposes social evils

page 4



BYE BYE, AMERICAN PIE

Germany faces up to new responsibilities as Europe's pre-eminent power

page 8



LIVING ON THE LAMB

Lean lamb fillets are cheap and quick to cook

page 14

Top: Siv Channa
Center: Reuters
Bottom: Creative Commons

has produced innovative works in theater but mainly in contemporary dance, helping Cambodian artists use their classical training to develop new forms.

And this month, Amrita is marking its 10th anniversary with a photographic exhibition of some of its shows at Java Cafe. There is also a changing of the guard: On Monday, Kang Rithisal will take over for Mr. Frumberg as executive director.

For some time, Mr. Frumberg had felt that it was time for this move, he said. So when he was offered the position of director of production for the Singapore Arts Festival earlier this year, he decided to accept. The festival is managed by Singaporean director Ong Keng Sen, who has worked with Amrita in Cambodia. Mr. Frumberg will be relocating to Singapore in the coming weeks and continue to serve as Amrita's chairman of the board.

Mr. Rithisal has been with Amrita since 2003, except for two years during which he completed his Master's degree in arts management at the State University of New York in Buffalo.

He had first come to Amrita in late 2003 to help out while his brother Suon Bun Rith was studying arts management on a nine-month scholarship in Indonesia. Mr. Bun Rith left Amrita in 2011.

With funding from organizations such as the Rockefeller Foundation and the support of individuals such as Sam Miller, now president of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council in New York City, Amrita was able to launch various projects. One of them was the Cambodian Artists Project offering mini-grants to artists. Many of them received a few hundred dollars for project development, but just a small sample of the works submitted were actually staged during the three-year program.

Still, the program led to 12 full productions, Mr. Bun Rith recalls. One of them was "Phum Derachan," or the miserable village, in which directors and students from the Secondary School and Royal University of Fine Arts performed a 1925 historical incident in yike, a form of Cambodian theater dating back to the 8th century.

Presented in 2006 at the Chenla Theater with a cast and crew of 52, the play related the killing of French tax collector Felix Louis Bardez in the village of Krang Leav in Kompong Chhnang province. As they had mentioned at the



Dancer Chey Chankethya in 'Olden New Golden Blue' choreographed by Peter Chin and premiered in Canada in 2011. Jeremy Minnogh

time, stage directors and teachers Chheang Chhor Dapheak and Chan Sarin took risks by dramatizing a modern historical event within the strict singing, speaking and movement rules of that particular theater form. But they succeeded, the result being a powerful show.

When it came to dance, Mr. Frumberg was adamant that if there was to be a Cambodian form of contemporary dance, it had to be borne out of the country's classical dance tradition. Any foreign choreographer volunteering to give workshops in the country virtually had to audition with Amrita to make sure that they would respect the dancers' classical training: Those only set to teach their

own technique needed not apply.

That has proven crucial for dancers' development, said dancer and choreographer Nam Narim.

"When we are with Amrita, we can open our minds and we have the freedom to do things.... Since we know who we are, we can be creative and we know how to manage contacts with each other and with other cultures."

In some cases, the outcome has been spectacular, producing unique works with Khmer classical-dance roots that have won international acclaim even though they might occasionally have ruffled a few feathers among traditionalists in the country.

One of them was "Revisiting Gi-

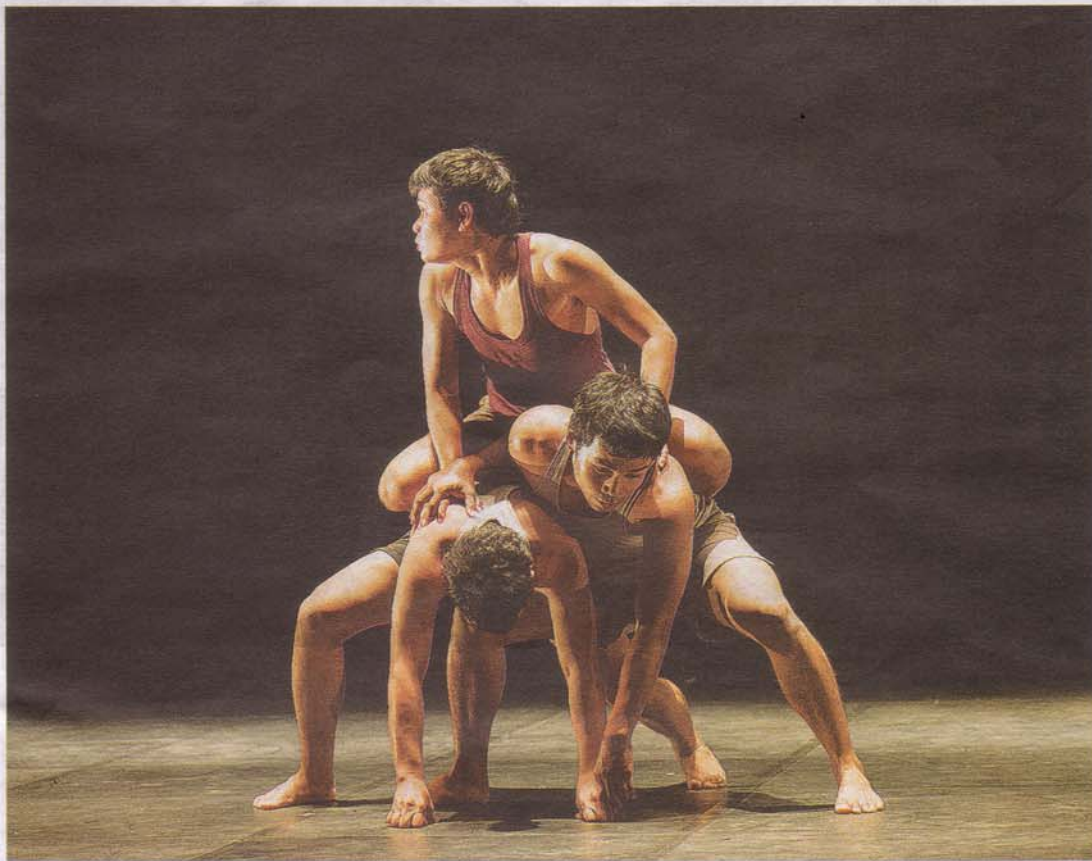
ant and Monkey," a dance for male dancers trained in masked-dance "Lakhaon Kaol" that was choreographed by Pichet Klunchun, a renowned Thai contemporary dancer and choreographer who trained in a similar traditional Thai dance form. Following its premiere in Phnom Penh in 2005, the dance was performed in Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur.

The dance "Crack" created by German choreographer Arco Renz has so far been performed in Singapore, Indonesia, Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands in addition to Cambodia. It also earned Amrita and Mr. Renz the 2012 ZKB Patronage Prize and the ZKB Acknowledgment Prize



Fred Frumberg, left, and Kang Rithisal, right, now chairman of the board and executive director of Amrita Performing Arts respectively.

Siv Channa



Anders Jiras
Khiev Sovannarith, top,
and Khon Chan Sithyka,
right, in 'Khmeropedies
III: Source/Primate.'

in Zurich.

Last April, *The New York Times'* famed and notoriously hard-to-please dance critic Alastair Macaulay wrote that the dance "Khmeropedies III," featuring male dancers in the monkey role, had "mimicry, charm and virtuosity throughout."

Produced by French-Cambodian choreographer Emmanuele Phuon and Amrita, the dance was performed at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York as part of the Seasons of Cambodia festival. Previewed in Phnom Penh

in February, it will be presented in Singapore next month.

Amrita's expertise in the country has both been to produce shows and facilitate tours. For Season of Cambodia, Amrita handled all legal paperwork and logistics for 125 artists to go New York, Mr. Rithisal explained.

When the Broadway-style musical "Where Elephants Weep" was presented in Phnom Penh by Cambodian Living Arts in 2008, Amrita's team had the task of meeting the technical requirements of people

used to New York productions, he said. Since the equipment was not always available in the country, this turned into one of the most difficult projects Amrita had had to handle, he added.

For Mr. Bun Rith, the most important role of Amrita has been "to help mentor artists on how to start and develop their own projects," he said.

Ms. Sodhachiviy agreed.

"Amrita is like a coffee machine," she said. "OK, I want a cappuccino or I want a cafe latte, I push a button

and it comes out. But another person asks for wine, so the machine tells him he cannot have wine because wine is not really good for him right now...that he has to test the waters first before he can have wine."

Amrita guides artists but does not give orders, Ms. Sodhachiviy noted. "They give us the skills to stage the works but also to be strong, to be human beings."

"Amrita is a small community but it's a big thing inside, a big heart," she added.