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DANCE REVIEW | PAMINA DEVI

Mozart Tale With Accent of Cambodia

By GIA KOURLAS

“Pamina Devi: A Cambodian Magic Flute,” a new work by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, unfolds like a silent film, taking such gradual, measured hold that by the time it’s over, you can’t help feeling as if you’ve crossed over to another world.

The story, a retelling of Mozart’s “Magic Flute,” is a **celebration of youth, love and enlightenment** that places its title character between her estranged parents. Unable to abide by either’s rigid ways, she discovers, more through honor than rebellion, that she possesses enough fortitude to carve her own path.

Performed by the 32 dancers, musicians and singers of the Khmer Arts Ensemble of Phnom Penh at the Joyce Theater on Tuesday night, the 90-minute production was commissioned in 2006 by Peter Sellars for a festival in Vienna. Tender and faintly campy in the sweetest sense — as when glimmers of irritation flicker across the performers’ faces — “Pamina Devi” is an exotic journey enriched by subtle political undertones.

All of the dancers are women, even those playing

male roles; their jeweled costumes give splendor to their highly articulated feet and sinuous arms and hands, in which supple fingers curl backward to extraordinary effect. Even though Ms. Cheam Shapiro’s Cambodian tale, told with English subtitles, is occasionally dense — navigating the names practically requires sketching out a family tree — the staging and characterization isn’t nearly as opaque.

In the dance-drama, Pamina Devi, portrayed by the delicate Pumtheara Chenda, is abducted by Thornea (Sok Sokhan) to the dismay of her mother, Sayon Reachny, the Queen of the Night (the wonderfully imperious Sam Sathya). After the queen and her devotees liberate Preah Chhapan (Kong Bonich) from a krut, or garuda bird, he promises to rescue Pamina Devi. Armed with a portrait of her and a magic flute, he travels to the Realm of the Sun, ruled by the young girl’s pompous, controlling father, Preah Arun Tipadey (Chao Socheata).

Ms. Cheam Shapiro’s lyrics, translated from Khmer, can be unintentionally funny. (After Preah



Pumtheara Chenda as Pamina Devi at the Joyce Theater.
Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

Chhapan gazes longingly at Pamina Devi’s portrait, his subtitle reads, “Between the two of us, we would produce the most perfect children.”) Yet they don’t dim this production’s vibrancy. **From the percussive, tangy music to the powerful bodies encased in gold, “Pamina Devi” is something of a quiet spectacle, and its message is freedom.**