

True Love Triumphs, Gently in Cambodian Classical Dance

Tradition and innovation meet in a gleaming world

by Deborah Jowitz

It is startling to consider the violence and cruelty of Pol Pot's *Killing Fields* in relation to the tranquility and harmony of classical Cambodian dance. In moving from the temple to the court, the form may have become more elaborated, but it never lost its vision of a moral universe. That vision didn't accord with the Khmer Rouge's plans; it's estimated that 90 percent of the country's dancers and musicians perished between 1975 and 1979. In the difficult years following that period of devastation, Cambodian dance and music didn't simply arise gleaming from the ashes of a culture; it had to be rediscovered and rebuilt—step by step, instrument by instrument, note by note.

Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, who emigrated to the United States in 1991 and has since returned to teach and choreograph in her native country, is one of those striving to invigorate classical choreography with new ideas. She based *Pamina Devi* on Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*, a source Peter Sellars suggested to her for the New Crowned Hope Festival that he directed in Vienna in 2006—part of the 250th anniversary celebration of Mozart's birth.

The story of the opera, with its magical elements, has affinities with several Asian myths. The kidnapped princess is a familiar plot element. But the libretto that Emanuel Schikaneder concocted for Mozart also provided a divided couple, the high priest Sarastro and the Queen of the Night, who squabble over their religious differences and over who gets custody of their beautiful daughter Pamina Devi (Pumtheara Chenda). Cheam Shapiro's script (some of which we read in awkwardly translated, barely visible supertitles) puts the stern father, Preah Arun Tipadey (Chao Socheata), in charge of the Realm of the Sun. What daughter wouldn't be happy—part-time, at least—in a kingdom where everyone shimmers in the light glancing off their head-to-toe gold costumes? Still, ab-

duction, especially by her father's amorous henchman, Thornea (Sok Sohkan), is abhorrent to her and an affront to her mother, Sayon Reachny (Sam Satya). Luckily a young nobleman, Preah Chhapoan (Kong Bonich), rescued by the Queen's minions from a fierce Krut (Sot Savannay plays this masked bird character, the equivalent of the Garuda of Indian legend), vows to find her daughter. Ordeals and battles unite the lovers, and the lonely birdcatcher Noreak (Sao Phirom), who's been aiding Preah Chhapoan in his search-and-rescue mission acquires a mate when he frees his caged bird and—presto!—it's transformed into the lovely Nory (Khut Sovathy).

Cheam Shapiro tells the tale with economy and delicacy. Marcus Doshi's set and lighting place the ten musicians on a low platform at the back of the stage, within a bowl-shaped arch backed by deep blue or red sky. Two other platforms with steps indicate the prominence of a character or moment, but also create possibilities for attractive multi-level tableaux. The musical texture balances the light, rapid tones of wooden xylophones (*roneat*) against the deeper ones of drums and gongs and the harsh, almost raucous voices of high and low-pitched oboes (*sralai*). Singers, almost always more than one at a time, chant the characters' words.

As is traditional in Cambodian classical dance, all the roles are played by women. Some of those playing male roles, such as Chao as the Sun King, are taller than those representing female characters, but all are elegant, and expressive within the style's mandated restraint. In their high, spired crowns, their draped pants and brocade jackets with winging peaks at each shoulder (the "men"), and their fitted silk bodices and long, slim skirts (the women), they resemble little gilded figurines. They travel about the stage with tiny gliding steps; their toes crook upward when they assume a stance. They

seem always to be in motion, even when apparently still, as if a slight breeze were stirring them. And, of course, their hands are constantly unfolding into flowering shapes, fingers bending backward. Sometimes, when they pose on one leg, the other bent up behind so that the sole of their foot addresses the sky, they bounce slightly up and down. They look as if they'd be happy staying there forever.

Almost everything these dancers do is gentle. Pamina Devi pushes her lover away with a tiny gesture of one arched hand and an expression of faint distaste. Preah Chhapoan and the bird (Sot Savanndy) battle by circling each other and crossing wrists. The battle between the trident-bearing disciples of Preah Arun Tipadey and the spear-wielding ones of Sayon Reachny is equally formal. A character showing extreme emotion or injury takes three stumbling steps backward and then maybe sits down.

The tale unfolds at a leisurely, ceremonious pace, but Cheam Shapiro, who also designed the costumes, wrote the lyrics, and arranged the traditional music, manages most of the dramatic moments very skillfully. Especially fine is the scene in which Preah Chhapoan, along with other devotees, is going through the ritual prescribed by his beloved's father. Pamina Devi, with Noreak to back her up, needs badly to get his help; her mother has just told her to kill her father or else. She's holding the dagger warily, torn between obligations. Her entreaties and his peaceful gestures of "Don't you see I'm busy, dear" are beautifully directed and performed.

In this gracious, tranquil universe, rage is formalized and warfare dissolves at the sound of a magic flute. Would it were so easy!