

Cambodia's Spirits Stir, Toe to Spine



John Vink for The New York Times

By ERIKA KINETZ

Phnom Penh, Cambodia

THE spirits came in February — teachers, giants and angels. The first arrived on a windy Thursday, and they stayed, roiling on in succession through the small, supple body of Chao Socheata until her distraught mother dragged her to the local pagoda, where a monk pressed three broken sticks of incense to her head, beat her with the stems of a banana tree and wrapped a magical string around her waist. Protection enough, as it turned out, against the darker aspects of the spirit world.

Ms. Chao Socheata — a 21-year-old dancer in “Pamina Devi,” the choreographer Sophiline Cheam Shapiro’s retelling of Mozart’s “Magic Flute,” which opens a six-day run on Tuesday at the Joyce Theater in Manhattan — spent much of February weeping, part of it yelling and part of it in a kind of transfixed ecstasy in which she would teach things that she did not know.

When the spirit teachers came upon her, munificent and full of good, old ideas, the honor and the revelations were almost too great for her to

bear. On Feb. 18, she passed out. That’s when the monks were called in. But the lesson had been well taught: in Cambodian dance, as in Cambodian life, the spirits are always watching.

So, to some extent, is the government.

In Cambodia, dance has long been a function of the state — an emanation of power, first the king’s, now that of the strongman government of Prime Minister Hun Sen. The state-run Royal University of Fine Arts here in the capital has a virtual monopoly on arts training, and many graduates go on to work in the ministry of culture or teach at the university.

In recent years, however, an avant garde of Cambodian artists, Ms. Shapiro among them, has been creating an alternative to the state’s model. To make new art, they are finding, they have to change the way art is made.

“Pamina Devi,” which the director Peter Sellars commissioned for the New Crowned Hope festival in Vienna last year, is a case in point.

Last year, Ms. Shapiro, who had moved to the United States in 1991, returned to Cambodia with

her American husband, John. They set up shop on a five-acre estate just outside Phnom Penh, and early this year they founded the 31-member Khmer Arts Ensemble, Cambodia's first full-time independent dance company since the Khmer Rouge took over in 1975.

Dancers at the ensemble make \$100 a month for full-time work. The ministry of culture is Cambodia's largest employer of dancers, paying them \$30 to \$50 a month, plus performance fees. (In comparison, jobs in local garment factories pay a minimum of \$50 a month.)

"Our goal over the next few years is to get up to a more livable wage, \$300 to \$500" a month, said Mr. Shapiro, executive director of the Khmer Arts Academy, an umbrella group that includes the performance ensemble as well as a dance school in Long Beach, Calif.

The academy's total budget has grown to more than \$500,000 this year, from \$80,000 when they founded it in 2002. The Shapiros have grand plans. Mr. Shapiro says they'd like to start a dance research and publishing arm, an international exchange program and a costume shop. One can have such dreams in Cambodia, largely because costs in the country are so low.

"We thought about doing this in the United States," Mr. Shapiro said. "The economics didn't work out. An ensemble of 31 members — that's a ballet company. It's really expensive." In Cambodia, \$100 a month is a decent wage.

Ms. Shapiro has deep roots within the government system. She was in the first class to graduate from the Royal University of Fine Arts after it reopened following the fall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, and taught there for several years. Her uncle was the country's minister of culture in the 1980s.

Mr. Shapiro says the couple tried at first to work within the system, but it wasn't a good fit. "The university, like other systems in Cambodia, is a hierarchical system of patronage," he said. "Sophiline doesn't have a high position in government. She's an individual artist. She says: 'I'm going to make a dance. I'm going to pay for it.' She's cutting off a lot of levels above her."

"We want to take classical dance and give it more emotion and drama, to make dances that are critical of society," he continued. Old-guard government officials "scratch their heads and say, 'Critical? That's not what dance is for,'" he said. "We have an entirely different concept of what art can be used for."

The Khmer Rouge, radical Communists who oversaw the deaths of about a quarter of the population in the late 1970s, devastated classical

Cambodian arts. In the uneasy years since their overthrow by the Vietnamese, most artistic energies — and money — went into cultural preservation. Only now has attention begun to shift toward creation.

That shift has not gone down altogether smoothly. "Pamina Devi" is, in part, a story about the clash between men and women. But Mr. Shapiro said the ministry of culture would not let the ensemble use male dancers — too radical a departure from the female-dominated canon. Instead, the women playing male characters wear pants.

Khim Sarith and Him Chhem, secretaries of state at the culture ministry, said they were unaware of the decision by a previous minister to bar the company from using men. Through a translator, Mr. Him Chhem explained that classical court dance was traditionally dominated by women. He said he had yet to see "Pamina Devi" but hoped Ms. Shapiro would ground her work in a clear understanding of the form.

The government can exert subtle control in many ways short of outright censorship. Some of Ms. Shapiro's dancers still work for the ministry and thus are especially vulnerable.

"We are glad to have more dance companies if they can apply all the ministry's requirements to preserve our Cambodian dance," Mr. Khim Sarith said.

Innovation is fine, he said, as long as it does not damage the integrity of the form. "We need preservation and innovation," he said, "but the innovation must apply the basic foundation and style of the dance."

Cambodian dance began as a form of religious devotion, and those spiritual roots are very much on Ms. Shapiro's mind. The week before leaving for the five-city United States tour, Ms. Shapiro and her company held a lavish "teacher spirit" ceremony ("Sampeah Kru") at their studios. On silver trays, they laid out offerings of pigs' heads, chickens, ducks and tropical fruits. There were thick banana stalks garlanded with fresh jasmine and topped with hard-boiled eggs.

"It's a way of showing respect for our teachers and asking the teachers to guide us," Ms. Shapiro said. "We believe our teachers' spirits are watching us, to make sure we respect the dance and aren't fooling around."

Classical Cambodian court dance, of which "Pamina Devi" is an example, consists of a slow unfolding of fixed gestures. Hands open into flowers; fingers fold into thorns or trace the path of a tear. Everything curves. Toes curl up, fingers bend backward, the spine takes on a dangerous

sway. It's best, really, to give up all modern notions of time and accept that this dance can be no more rushed than the sea.

"Dances were a form of prayer: they connect earth to heaven," Ms. Shapiro said. "The slowness is to maintain a sense of spirituality. It is a way of praying."

She has turned Mozart's "Magic Flute" into a kind of modern Cambodian morality tale. Depending on one's perspective, it's about responsibility shirked, the dangers of ideology, the children of conflict and one young woman who grows up to find strength in herself.

"There's a new energy coming up," Ms. Shapiro said. "There's a desire to catch up with the rest of the world. We've been falling behind for so many years; we want to catch up. The nation is in a process of transforming."

Her distinctive blend of old and new is an inspiration, said Hang Borin, 27, a teacher at the Royal University of Fine Arts, who started an experimental dance ensemble called Trei Visay (Compass) with his friends last year. "She brings foreign stories and makes classical dances," he said. "She has good ideas."

Pumtheara Chenda, 21, who dances the role of Pamina Devi and used to perform with the Ministry of Culture's classical dance troupe, said she liked working with Ms. Shapiro because she learned about the depths of a dance, not merely its steps.

"When I performed with the ministry, I just know how to perform, but I don't know what it means," she said. "They don't explain about the story. They just say, 'Do this, do that.' I knew nothing. With Sophiline, I know the story."

Ms. Chao Socheata, who has recovered from the spirits that ailed her earlier this year, plays Preah Arun Tipadey, the Sarastro role. She likes the story of Pamina Devi, who is caught in a battle between her mother and a father figure, "because it's about parents who don't understand their children and don't pay attention to their children," she said through a translator. "It relates to my personal life."

She said that the spirits still visit sometimes when she dances. "My body knows the spirits come," she said. "But it's just to watch, not to possess."