

Khmer Circus Arts for Peace

Khmer circus arts, one of Cambodia's unique performing traditions, virtually disappeared over the war years. Now the younger generations are being engaged in circus arts' revival while at the same time using it to impart the message of peace, writes **Kusuma Venzky-Stalling**

Phare Ponleu Selpak

Phare Ponleu Selpak (meaning the Brightness of Art) is a creative group based in Battambang, Cambodia, that uses the arts to support community development. The idea took shape in 1986 in Site 2 refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border where young refugees were encouraged to overcome the trauma of war through arts. Phare Ponleu Selpak (PPS) was formally established as a non-governmental organisation in 1994 after Khmer refugees were repatriated to their homeland. Its main aim is to provide local children and communities with social, educative, and cultural services. PPS set up three artistic schools in visual arts, performing arts, and music. Circus art is a section of the performing arts school. Since its inauguration eleven years ago, the school has already produced as many as seventy-five circus graduates.

Circus Arts: A Cultural Treasure

Thailand and Cambodia share many traditional forms of performing arts, including theatre, dance, and music. Among their common practices are masked dance-drama (Khon in Thai; Lakhon Khol in Khmer), grand shadow theatre (Nang Yai in Thai; Sbaek Thomm in Khmer), and small shadow play (Nang Talung in Thai; Sbaek Tauch or Ayang in Khmer). The Siek Khmer or Khmer circus, however, is a unique art form, and can only be found in Cambodia within Southeast Asia.

Exactly when and how the art of circus came into existence in Cambodia remains unknown. Although old records were largely destroyed during

the times of war, some archaeological evidence reveals that the art of circus dates back more than a thousand years to the great Khmer empire.

Early evidence of Khmer circus can be found at many old temples where different circus skills such as balancing, juggling, or tightrope walking, were carved on stone walls. Dr Sam-Ang Sam, an ethnomusicologist and a leading force in preserving Cambodian performing arts, indicated that the existence and wide practice of Khmer circus dated back to at least the Angkor period, from the 9th to the 15th centuries.

He said that “Khmer circus tradition can be observed particularly in ancient Khmer stone carvings on the temple walls at Sambaur Prey Kuk (7th century); the Bapuon temple under the reign of King Utey Tityavarmann II (1050-1066); and the Angkor Wat temple under the reign of King Jayavarman VII (1181-1218). Other terraces such as the Leper King terrace and the Elephant Fighting terrace also have carvings of Khmer circus and magic acts – balancing, juggling, spinning the wheels, walking on tightrope, animal training, and so on.”

“Prasat Sua Proat (Walking on Tightrope temple) might have something to do with Khmer circus of the Angkor period. At the western corner of the northern wall on the first level of Bayon temple, the Khmer circus scene depicts a strong man on his back who is spinning a wheel with his



*Balancing sword
(Photos: Pich Tum Kravel)*



*Bayon circus tightrope walking
(Photos: Pich Tum Kravel)*

feet; above is a group of tightrope walkers. Khmer circus has also been featured on murals and frescoes, for instance, at the Kampung Tralach Leu pagoda in Kampuang Chhnaing province”, Dr Sam-Ang Sam added.

Transmitting Traditional Knowledge: From Memories to New Creations

During the reign of the Khmer Rouge (1975-1979), an estimated 2 million Cambodians died from execution, starvation, disease or forced labour. Veteran performing masters were killed; the few who survived are still scarred by deep trauma. Many written records on ancient arts were destroyed, leaving scarce sources of knowledge for new generations to rely on.

Today, circus arts in Cambodia are among many endangered art forms in need of safeguarding. Only recently has various governmental agencies and nongovernmental organisations focused on reviving the arts as well as teaching young people to continue the practices.

For some time now, state schools and agencies have been reviving circus at the national level. Dr Sam-Ang said that “following the fall of Angkor in the 15th century, the art of Khmer circus declined and was forgotten. In 1980, following the depose of the

Khmer Rouge in 1979, the Ministry of Culture created the circus section at the School of Fine Arts, with students receiving training on the circus arts both in Cambodia and abroad. Since then, Khmer circus artists have been performing in Cambodia and international stages.”

Away from the capital, the same effort is replicated in Battambang where a circus school offers performing space and training for local children. Khuon Det, the founder and director of PPS’s circus school, leads the mission in promoting Khmer circus arts, and inspiring the young generation.



*Khuon Det, founder and director of Phare Ponleu Selpak
(Photo: Kusuma Venzky-Stalling)*

French teachers at the refugee camp where Khuon Det used to stay introduced him to the world of circus, encouraging him to establish PPS. He received the support of numerous grants to pursue professional training in France.

Khuon Det explained that he learned circus arts abroad, and also visited temples to study. “No elderly people came to say you should do this and that. I incorporate what I learned abroad with the traditions, [innovating new art forms]. I created my own style which I call ‘Social Circus’, a modernised Khmer circus art form mixed with traditional circus practices that address social issues.”

“Due to wars and troubles, Cambodia lost many of its ancient arts. Researchers have the duty to search for what the past generations had left for us. They should document what exists in old people’s collective memories of this art form,” he said.

Asked how he inspired young people to be involved in the preservation of traditional arts, he said: “Development is conservation; conservation is development. When we want to involve young people in the preservation of traditional art forms, we have to develop our present works by combining old people’s experiences and records from researchers.”

He added that “due to the lack of basic knowledge in circus, we looked outside the country for ideas, but when we started training, we noticed and realised that circus knowledge exists in Cambodia.”

Khuon Det elaborated on the characteristics of Khmer circus, saying that “when we began studying circus history, we found that the styles of circus arts is not divided according to country but regionally; for instance, Africa has its own style, Europe and Asia also have their styles. Most of the traditions of acrobatics are from Asian countries.”

“I want to improve our circus arts despite the fact that the Battambang circus group is now recognized, especially by the international community. My ambition is to make the name of our circus synonymous with the name Battambang. So, when people think of Battambang, they think of circus and ‘art’.”

“When we speak of ‘transfer of knowledge’, we don’t just tell our children ‘here you go!’ but we support them by giving them professional training, assisting them to adjust to society, and improve their livelihood. That is why we are trying to help troubled children. When we motivate them to train, however, we should be concerned about their empty stomachs. If our artists have the opportunity to perform and make a living, they and their families will survive. When artists no longer worry about hunger, they can help transmit knowledge to the next generation as well,” Khuon Det concluded.

Distant Haze

In one of PPS’s productions, titled ‘Distant Haze’, the circus performance depicts a story of a girl named Sokha (which means healthy), who was traumatised by the torture and terror experienced during the rule of the Khmer Rouge. Her daily life is haunted by her horrible past and she lives in endless fear. One day, Sokha comes into the custody of a foster parent whose love and kindness brings her comfort, and they eventually help her to overcome the pain of the past. Realising that there are countless



Children and teenagers receive daily training in acrobatics at the Phare Ponleu Selpak’s circus school, Battambang (Photos: Phare Ponleu Selpak)



*Skillful and dramatic balancing arts showing acrobatic precision and balance
(Photos: Jaroenchai Treetanakitti)*

Cambodian children who suffer the same plight, Sokha returns to her homeland on a mission to help in healing their wounds.

Through the spectacle of circus, dance, shadow play, and theatre, the performers of PPS's circus school evoke in their performances the harrowing memories of war and its destruction. Scenes of childhood happiness are depicted through various circus acts: acrobatics, balancing, juggling and wheeling.

Circus skills of contortion and tightrope walking were demonstrated to express human suffering and fears as danger looms and war erupts. In a singularly poignant scene, Sokha becomes set on casting her fears away; the performer displays supreme skills shooting an arrow at a heart-shaped balloon with her feet as she contorts herself into an acrobatic pose.

Human Dialogue

PPS staged the performance during their Chiang Mai visit, and conducted a circus workshop for youths aged 14-18 years old at the Regional Juvenile Vocational Training Center 7 Chiang Mai (RJVTC).

The 'Distant Haze' performance garnered a very warm reception from a large audience of young enthusiasts, both male and female, who gathered around an outdoor space. Despite no safety equipments, proper lighting or sound effects, the show proceeded with great ambience and energy, thrilling and amazing many spectators.

The young performers demonstrate their balancing skills (Photos: Jaroenchai Treetanakitti)



*PPS group presents the 'Distant Haze', and conducts a workshop for young juveniles in Chiang Mai
(Photos: Piyasat Sinpimonboon)*

The event was followed by a workshop for some seventy young participants, to try circus acts, such as juggling, balancing, contortion, acrobatics, and diabolo deals.

PPS was invited to Chiang Mai by Piyashat Sinpimonboon, an organiser of CNX Art Connex. She was confident that, with the PPS members' personal histories and success, young Thai juveniles will be inspired by, and learn from, them.

“PPS was actually founded after the end of the Khmer Rouge reign. Members and founders of the PPS are living proof that they have overcome war. Moreover, many of the young practitioners also experienced numerous problems – living on the street as street children; complicity in theft; trauma from a broken family; and loss of self-esteem, etc.. With their passion in circus and rigorous training, they successfully prevailed over their problems and difficult situations,” she said.



*From left to right:
Chhuon Chandann (rolling
balance performer, 28),
Pin Phounam (contortion
performer, 19), and
Heng Samnang
(acrobatic performer, 22)
(Photo: Kusuma Venzky-Stalling)*



*Last scene: Old Sokha returns to her homeland; listening to a poem by a new generation who reflects on how fear can be overcome by courage, and peace should be maintained
(Photo: Jaroenchai Treetanakitti)*

Teenagers trained at PPS have become talented circus artists who earn respect and a living for their families. Piyashat added that “they should be given an opportunity to share their experience with our youngsters who have similar backgrounds. It is great that RJVTC understood our mission, and invited the group to perform and conduct a workshop there.”

Pin Phounam, 19, is the leading performer of the group, and she took on the role of Sokha. She said that since joining the circus many years ago, her life has improved dramatically. “I came from a very poor family. Since I joined the circus, I found myself becoming stronger physically and mentally. To be able to practice circus arts, you need three things: some natural talent, hardwork, and concentration – I believe I have these qualities. Performing circus boosts my confidence, and at the same time, I can earn some money. Moreover, as we develop better skills, we can participate in international competitions.

By performing on international stages, we gain recognition and many benefits.”

Whether the group of young artists from Battambang managed to raise the audience's awareness about suffering from war or entertained them with the beauty of circus performances, the message that comes across is that we speak one common language – the language of humanity and peace.

Art has no boundaries and neither do human souls. In the last scene of ‘Distant Haze’, a young man reads out his poem to the dying Sokha to remind the audience of the importance of peace:

“Do not distress yourself with dark imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness. Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself. Keep peace in your soul. With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. I wish, all the people in the world, especially children, will have peace physically, mentally and socially.”

It was apparent that Chiang Mai residents enjoyed and appreciated the recent visit of the PPS circus group. The timing of their show could not have been better under the circumstances of the present conflict between Cambodia and Thailand. In the end, perhaps, it is not the ugliness of war that 'Distant Haze' raises, but the celebration of the human spirit, peace, and the courage to re-emerge from the abyss of fear.

CNX Art Connex aims to act as a bridge that connects art works, artists, communities, environment, as well as art-related concepts and knowledge. Its mission is to bring together artists, art enthusiasts, audiences, communities, and art-related organisations in Chiang Mai. For more information: <http://cnxartconnex.wordpress.com>

For more information on Phare Ponleu Selpak: <http://www.phareps.org>

Contributor's Note

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Dr. Kusuma Vensky-Stalling is an independent researcher and advocate in Southeast Asian arts and culture. She studied Drama at Thammasat University, Bangkok, and obtained her MPhil and PhD degrees from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London University in 1998. She worked as a theatre lecturer and cultural advisor as well as a senior specialist in performing arts at SEAMEO SPAFA. Her area of interest includes theatre research, pedagogy, cultural exchange, arts education and management, and literature. Dr. Kusuma currently lives in Chiang Mai where she founded a non-profit art space for children to promote creativity, literacy, and culture. She has been involved in many local arts and cultural activities, and helped in coordination between local and International artists. Dr. Kusuma can be contacted at kusumainuk@yahoo.com