

Khmer Court Dance: Cambodian Royal Court Dances. Produced by Sam Ang-Sam and Naomi Hawes Bishop. Dance director, Chan Moly Sam. Narration, Paul Cravath. Multicultural Media MCM1004 (VHS; 1 videocassette; 74 minutes)

A group of Khmer dancers and musicians, all resident in the United States, came together in 1984 and again in 1992 to document their art. The result is *Khmer Court Dance*, video recorded in a studio in California. This videotape provides a

record of selected pieces from the repertory of the court (or classical) dance of Cambodia. ("Khmer," the name of the majority ethnic group in Cambodia, is often used interchangeably with "Cambodian" in English.) The dances presented include so-

los, duets and ensemble works. With this selection, the viewer gains an introduction to the movement style and costuming of three of the four major character types that populate Khmer court dances and dance-dramas: the princess or female deity, the prince or male deity, and the giant. The monkey, the only role performed by men, is not represented.

Khmer Court Dance opens with the performers participating in a *sampeah kru* ceremony, a salutation to the spirits and teachers of the dance. Dressed in practice attire, they present offerings and prayers as they seek continued guidance and protection. Khmer dancers perform this ritual regularly, including before a performance (as well as before having their art recorded on videotape.) With this scene as a backdrop, the narrator begins his introduction to the first piece on the tape.

All the dances are performed in full costume. We are treated to shimmering silks and brocades, golden tiaras, and the fierce mask of the ogre. Music of the *pin peat* orchestra, recorded separately, accompanies the dances. (At one point in the tape we see three of the musicians.) The quality of the visual and sound recording is excellent.

Paul Cravath, a professor of theater who completed his doctoral dissertation on Khmer court dance in 1985, provides the narration. He introduces each dance and offers an overview of the relationship of Khmer dance to the ancestors, deities, and the land. References to the historical development of the art in the ancient Khmer empire are augmented by archival photographs.

The first piece is called *Buong Suong*, a solo for a dancer of the female role. "Buong suong" is the word for a hallowed act or rite of supplication directed toward the deities. This dance is one of the few considered sacred enough to be performed as part of such a ritual. *Buong Suong* is followed by *Apsara*, a piece that can be danced by five or seven women who represent celestial dancers. Inspiration for the costuming and movements of this dance, which was created in the second half of this century, came from the carvings of heavenly dancers found on the famed twelfth-century temple of Angkor in northwestern Cambodia.

Chhouy Chhay, the next dance, is unusual in that it is performed in a style midway between those of female and male characters, the latter's gestures and movements being somewhat broader and higher than those of the former. Because it is particularly difficult, *Chhouy Chhay* is not in the repertory of many Khmer dance troupes in the United States. The Muni Mekhala-Ream Eyso duet is an excerpt from a longer work sometimes danced as part of a *buong suong* ritual. Here the almost oafish high-stepping giant, Ream Eyso, provides a marvelous contrast to the graceful flowing goddess, Muni Mekhala.

Tep Monorum, the final piece, can be danced by up to nine pairs of dancers. Here, two couples glide in and out of various formations while the chorus sings of their heavenly bliss.

There are now more than two hundred thousand Cambodians in the United States. It is a testament to the value they accord their dance heritage that in almost every sizeable Cambodian-American community young people study and perform classical and folk dances from their (or their parents') homeland. And it is a tribute to the dedication of the Washington, D.C.-based husband and wife team of musician/scholar Sam-Ang Sam (the tape's co-producer), and dancer/scholar Chan Moly Sam (the tape's dance director), as well as that of all the artists featured on the tape that *Khmer Court Dance* was conceived and produced.

So little good visual material is available about Khmer dance that music and other performing arts libraries will find this an extremely valuable addition to their collections. The narrator tells us that the artists hope the video will be of assistance to future students, performers, and scholars of this style of dance. Indeed, those interested in the topic will benefit from the excellent and varied dance selections included and the background information supplied. The tape is valuable for students of dance ethnology who want an introduction to one type of Khmer art. In addition, an understanding of Khmer dance is important to the study of Southeast Asian performing arts in general. Scholars of other performance traditions will gain some comparative material from this tape.

Dance of the court tradition is thriving in Cambodia, and documentation efforts

continue to be made there as well. In 1986 the Ministry of Information and Culture recorded a videotape of thirteen classical and folk dances performed by artists of the University of Fine Arts and the National Department of Arts. In 1993, *The Tenth Dancer*, a film about the lives of two of Cambodia's professional dancers, was released as part of the BBC's "Under the Sun" series. Rather than presenting full pieces from the repertory, this film aims to explore the relationship of recent history to Cambodian artists and their art. The dance

department of Cambodia's Royal University of Fine Arts is currently undertaking a project in which ancient dance-dramas are re-created by older master teachers and taught to younger dance teachers who may never have seen these pieces before. These are also being recorded on videotape.

TONI SHAPIRO
Mills College

Videos reviewed in this column courtesy of Wingsound and Multicultural Media.