



LIVING ARTS BLOG: ‘We Have More and More Stories to Share’

This blog was originally posted by Cambodian Living Arts on 30 June 2020 and the original article can be found [here](#)

Written by Danielle KHLEANG with contributions from YON Sokhorn.

“When art is created, it expresses the time of the choreographer or artists but there is always a link to previous generations.”

– YON Sokhorn, Arts Development Program Manager, Cambodian Living Arts

“The present day is not a time of cultural discrimination anymore... It is a time of celebration of beauty, of the promotion and preservation of identity.”

– KHIEV Kanal, *Niseth* Choreographer

Ahead of our 2020 *Cultural Season – Expressing Identities: Them and Us*, I caught up with four performers who we have commissioned to create dance works that explore and express the concept of identity within contemporary Cambodian society.

Speaking with the artists, I heard repeatedly that identity is irreducible to a single dimension. Rather, identity is a complex layering of physical, socioeconomic, political and personal experiences. The interviews revealed that each artist has a unique interpretation of what it means to express identity. What follows are excerpts from these conversations, highlighting how dance is used to explore and communicate the many facets of identity and consequently, identity’s relationship to the broader societal context.

“When those trees are cut down or the environment is destroyed, those resources needed to sustain our Kuoy [traditions] no longer exist for future generations”



Kuoy environmental activist, KHA Sros (on the left side).

KHA Sros, an indigenous environmental art activist of the Kuoy people, used the theme of this year’s Cultural Season to express the traditional heritage of her ethnic group to two audiences: her own people and the Khmer ethnic majority. She noted that “due to deforestation and land loss, the tradition... of the *Kanh Chha* dance” – historically a blessing performance meant to bring a large crop yield – “is slowly fading away or being forgotten.”

Thus, when she recruits young artists from her community to perform this piece in Phnom Penh for predominantly an ethnic Khmer audience during the Season, she is bridging her ancestral heritage with the present. She also uses the traditional dances to connect Kuoy culture to environmental issues. Speaking on the subject, she said:

“When our people die... we don’t cremate but bury the body in the forest. Our daily materials and artistic instruments are made from these trees. When those trees are cut down or the environment is destroyed, those... resources needed to sustain our Kouy [traditions]... no longer exist for future generations.”



B-Girl and Exploring Our Cambodian Identities, film and interactive workshop by Women Peacemakers.

Meanwhile, KHIEV Kanal, choreographer of *Niseth* (“Student” in Khmer), took the commission as an opportunity to explore Khmer identity abroad, specifically as a university student in Thailand. He noted that “living in a country that has such a similar culture [to Cambodia] easily leads to confusion and misunderstanding identity.” Through contemporary Khmer dance, *Niseth* delves deeper into the complications of pursuing one’s dreams abroad and highlights failure and success. He went on to say:

“Failure and success are the right and left hands that must be balanced. In theory, failure guides us to success. However, in reality, failure also leads to giving up. Failure and success in a student’s life are a mode of competition. The objective though, is

not to compete with others but one’s self.”

This quest for authenticity, or being true to yourself, resonates with CHUONG Veasna’s dance piece *Who Am I*. Veasna has been a dancer since 2009. In 2016, he became a student of [OK Prumsodun](#), and dance led him to accept his LGBT identity. From his piece, Veasna hopes to “encourage young people to stay true to their passion regardless” of the challenges. He wants the audience to feel that “we are all humankind, so there shouldn’t be any division” and hopes young artists will be moved to innovate on the traditions of the past:

I feel optimistic about change and development. As more emerging artists appear, the Cambodian context keeps changing. We have more and more stories to share with our people and the world while still respecting and learning from our ancestral legacies. Nowadays, I can see Cambodia becoming increasingly open to creativity and contemporary expressions.

As Veasna feels hopeful that emerging artists can respectfully innovate on the traditions of the past, in *Root* NGET Rady wants audiences to leave his performance understanding that “no culture exists in isolation.” In his performance, Rady connects the six traditional art forms of classical, Khoal, Yike, Bassac, circus and folk dance within a single contemporary piece. When asked about the purpose of *Root*, he said, “this piece reflects the diverse forms and richness of Cambodian arts and tells the functions of each form from education, relation to a person’s livelihood, tradition and religious belief.” He added, “through the lens of art, I want to push Cambodian audiences, especially young people, to critically reflect on the role of art in society.”

Set to take place in Phnom Penh fall of 2020, Cambodian Living Arts’ Program Manager, SO Phina, said the Cultural Season aims to “encourage audiences to think about the performances and provoke discussions [that] deeply engage them with the concepts of [expressing identity] ... We give the floor to the audience, especially the youth, to engage with the concept of the arts more critically.”

The 2020 *Cultural Season – Expressing Identities: Them and Us* is made possible with support from [Changing the Story](#)– an interdisciplinary project at the University of Leeds that investigates how arts, heritage and human rights education can support youth-centered approaches to civil society building in post-conflict places. To stay up to date on the performances, panel discussions, workshops and exhibitions happening during the Season, sign-up for our Living Arts eNewsletter [here](#).

TAGS: CAMBODIA CULTURE DANCE IDENTITIES PERFORMANCE STORYTELLING



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