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**Youth Today** April 13, 2018

## Khmer ballet star uses traditional motifs to create new dance performance

Say Tola / Khmer Times / Share: [f](#) [t](#) [G+](#) [@](#)



Khmer ballet star Voan Savay created the dance performance to show her own interpretation of how Apsara reconciled the people. KT/Say Tola

As the sunlight faded, many foreigners and Cambodians sat and chatted under artificial lighting to the left of the Cambodian Living Arts theatre on the grounds of the National Museum of Cambodia. Their aim was to gain new insights into a new dance show that mixes classical dance, folk dance and storytelling, created by CLA.

A few minutes later, they were all ushered to their seats by a handful of youths.

### The Performance

As the stage lights came up, a singer started raising his voice, delivering an acknowledgement to his teachers before the performance itself began in a practice that is common in Lakhorn Khaol. Then the classical musicians started playing Pin Peat, with two artists in traditional costumes coming out and fighting each other. As they fought, the story was narrated by singers in a corner of the stage. Characters from each side emerged to fight each other.











After a reconciliation was negotiated by Preah En, an Apsara came on to dance, leading both sides to get together peacefully, struck by the beauty of her dance. The Apsara then stood like a sculpture, leading the audience to recall the sculptures on the walls of Angkor Wat.

The scene changed to another time period. A man looked at an Apsara sculpture and tried to replicate it in wood. Looking at this scene, which is accompanied by singing, the audience was led to believe that this is taking place after Angkor Wat has been built. The cast used their insights to portray what people were doing at that time to survive, showing people's daily activities. They performed the Robam Kous Angre.

The show demonstrated the way that people, concerned about drought, would dance as a form of prayer, which was one of the main purposes of dance in that era.

Later scenes dealt with Bokator, the Khmer martial arts, Robam Nesat and Chaiyam. In the Chaiyam scene, women played a big drum.

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The fishing dance 'Robam Nesat' shows the ways people go about trying to survive. KT/Say Toia

**Original creation**

The performance was created by a former star of the Cambodian Royal Ballet, Voan Savay. She said the first scene of the performance depicts the way that the Apsara told both Asora and Tevda to stop fighting and to make peace, instead, by urging them to watch her dance.

“People might have different views on the Apsara in this story, yet I give my own interpretation that Apsara can reconcile people who are experiencing anger and greed,” she said. “That is why we have many sculptures on Angkor Wat’s walls—the purpose is to spread a message of peace and tolerance.”

The performance showed the love of the sculpture artist for the Apsara, which led him to touch it, but he was eventually interrupted by an old man.

She said, “Some visitors to Angkor want to touch the sculptures. It is wrong because sooner or later we will lose the original Apsara. The audience might get this message through this performance.”

Ms Savay discussed the scene she called “Robam Mekala”. It depicts the way Cambodians use dancing to pray to God for peace and health, and to ward off natural disasters and war, and for other things.

“We were under the control of the king. So when people were concerned about drought, they informed the king and the king told dancers to pray. Before, dancing was related to communicating with God, but after French colonisation dancers performed only to greet high-ranking guests,” she said.

Created by her and supported by Prince Tesso Sisowath, Ms Savay said the performances aimed to depict the cycle of human life, which continues to be practised, especially in rural areas.

“Robam Kous Angre and the fishing dance (“Robam Nesat”) show the ways people go about trying to survive.”

The last scene also features women playing a big drum. Ms Savay explained: “It is about gender equality. If men can play, why can’t women?”

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