

DANCE REVIEW

Angkor Dance expresses drama through subtlety

By Jonathan Richmond
Sun Correspondent

Peter Veth feels a deep spiritual connection to Khmer dance. “It keeps me grounded from all the business out there,” he said.

Krong Reap is the character in Angkor Dance Troupe’s magic entertainment, “Reamker,” that takes Veth into another world. Krong is a classic Khmer personification of evil, a would-be rapist who abducts the beautiful Neang Seda from her husband.

Veth is a master of gesture, ranging from grand sweeps that represent abusive power and self-mocking comedy, to detailed small movements that reveal the frustration of unrequited lust. His performance was brilliant, particularly in his ability to use exaggerated art forms to convey true emotions. There was no doubt that Krong was sinister (but also that he was a loser).

Gesture is well-studied by the entire troupe who have learned that subtlety can reveal big truths. Hand movements can indicate love or rejection: Pech Heung in the role of Neang Seda uses her hands to indicate love for her husband Preah Ream and to push away Krong Reap disdainfully.

The production under the direction of famous master of dance Proeung Chhieng, visiting Lowell from Cambodia for the fourth time, coherently joins choreography — often most expressive when at its most delicate — with a sense of comedy: both from the bungling of the monstrous Krong Reap and from a troupe of mischievous monkeys hurling them-

selves about without abandon to bring joy, however serious the story being told.

Visually, Angkor’s “Reamker” was magnificent, underlining a professionalism that brings international-class artistry to Lowell. The production, presented at the Merrimack Repertory Theatre this past weekend, featured attention-grabbing scenes such as an adrenaline-soaked battle that was epic in its sudden-found power. The circling knife-drawn warriors were full of threat.

But, soon after, a ring of maidens arrives to serenade and curtsy to Neang Seda, their candles casting light into the darkness in the most magical of many fantastical passages to grace the evening. The refined Golden Mermaid (Sovann Macha) remained serenely calm in the face of the overstrung and jittery white monkey Hanuman, projected with huge energy by Peter Chea. The boisterous monkey troupe and their neurotic (and very funny) movements blended well with the rather gentler mermaids with whom they were paired. Humor and charm went hand in hand. This production was about harmony; many emotions were projected yet they were unified in dance, making for a grand entertainment that was intensely spiritual while exposing many facets of humanity at the same time.

The set was very simple with just a couple of basic props leaving darkness as dramatic background to the dazzling intricate costumes, beautifully made. It was as if nothing unnecessary from the world of mundane human objects



Peter Veth as the lustful Krong Reap meets resistance from Pech Heung as the beautiful Neang Seda, whom he has stolen from her husband.

PHOTO BY JONATHAN RICHMOND

was allowed in to distract us from the action.

As Angkor has done before, two characters were cast in modern roles as students, performed by Tim Sokhoeun and Poutda Pech, to help interpret the story to the audience. Their presence added hilarity, particularly when Sokhoeun carried a small kid in a monkey role on his back while Pech jumped in the air in the midst of the other monkeys.

Cheymony Fennell is a longtime member of Angkor Dance Troupe, and played a leading monkey

role in “Reamker.” He was asked why he sticks with Angkor no matter what else comes up in his life replied: “It’s just passion.”

Virginia Prak, only days back from a beauty pageant in the Philippines, lost no time in getting on stage because “they’re my family.”

Director Chhieng remarked that “with art there are no barriers,” and dance has the ability to transcend questions young people might have as to whether their identity was American or Cambodian. With art recognized as a

treasured part of the Lowell community they can be both, he said. He sees them as part of his family also: “They are very talented and I love them very much.”

There is good reason for everyone to love performances of the quality on display last weekend. We saw a show that got to the essence of Cambodia, yet was clearly up there representing Lowell as a place where young people can strive for the highest achievements in the arts world overall, irrespective of ethnic or national identity.