

## travel &amp; leisure

## Hang's 'Pin Panhchapor' a masterpiece performance by Angkor Dance

By Jonathan Richmond  
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Maybe we shouldn't be surprised that Cambodian artist Rithyvaruth Hang, Acting Dean of Music at the Royal University of Fine Arts and director of the Mozart Music Center in Phnom Penh, chose to bring his new work, *Pin Panhchapor*, to Lowell to be performed by Angkor Dance Troupe at the Merrimack Repertory Theatre last weekend. Such is the dedication and professionalism of Angkor's children of refugees, many coming from families where daily living is a struggle, that he said audiences in Phnom Penh, visited by some members of the troupe, could not tell which dancers were from Cambodia and which from Lowell. He then declared that some of the dancers from Lowell were even more accomplished than their Cambodian counterparts.

Hang's new work, for which he both conceived the story and composed the music, is a rare masterpiece — and its performance by Angkor Dance Troupe was sublime and breathtaking. Hang is fascinated by the carvings of battle scenes at Angkor Wat and recreated them on stage using the story of the conflict when two guys fall in love with one girl. The pin — a Cambodian harp — plays a key role in summoning the Panhchapor, the deities of five colors who calm things down.

Hang points out that five is an important symbolic number across cultures. There are five rings



Peter Chea and Chummeng Soun as the Monkey General and Giant King separated by Water of Immortality, Channa Sath. To see more, visit [http://www.whatdouwannado.com/travel/ci\\_30595466](http://www.whatdouwannado.com/travel/ci_30595466).

in the Olympic flag that come together in harmony, and he has sought similar harmony in the five colors — black, white, blue, red and yellow — used for clothing, and the music composed on five notes A, C, D, E and G.

The show begins with Naga — a giant mythical snake — composed of seven serpentine boys from the Troupe who snake themselves forward then coil themselves up, head sticking up, evoking drama and subtle wit. Violence begins as Peter Chia as Monkey General and Chummeng Soun as Giant King battle it out. Channa Sath, clad in bright turquoise in the role of the water that grants immortality at one point, stands between the knife of the fierce-looking monkey (with a wonderful facial expression by Peter Chea) and giant in a serene pose.

Five apsaras (female spirits whose statues adorn the temples of Angkor Wat) enter the garden of paradise. Led by Virginia Prak as the White Apsara, they dance while producing five

traditional hand gestures with a fluidity and grace.

Then the violence really starts. Prak's five-colored harp playing brings back Vann and Soun, this time as lovers Soriya and Arun, who go at each other vigorously while Prak looks on disapprovingly, and then lead their armies of Angkor Troupe boys into the war scenes depicted on the temple walls of Angkor Wat.

This action was at once stylized and realistic. The boys wore warlike expressions, yet there was harmony and a sense of spirituality and enchantment, their bodies carried with ceremony and poise. Everything was enacted with a professional precision rarely seen except on the world's top stages.

Hang's music uses traditional Cambodian instruments but mixes in some modern sounds. The pin (harp) produces sonorities that are traditionally elegant, but become urgently percussive at times. Composition for the srolai — a wooden wind instrument — has a gentle and colorful

beauty, while drums and gongs carry penetrating sounds of war: sinister, enraged, and creations of the 21st century sound world. The music ensemble played with great brilliance while Sopaul Cheam was an evocative singer.

Lowell is fortunate to be exposed to this spell-binding work performed by the young people of the city's cultural asset, Angkor Dance Troupe. The performers of Angkor reach beyond the mundane nature of their everyday lives to produce world class greatness through their commitment to dance, their culture, discipline and excellence.

## Spotlight on youth arts at UTEC



As if Angkor Dance Troupe wasn't busy enough last weekend with their production at the MRT, they also performed at UTEC as part of a local showcase on youth arts arranged by UMass Lowell. Pictured is a scene from a traditional Cambodian folk dance, accompanied by UML's Vong Pleng Khmer — a full traditional Cambodian orchestra.



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