

# Reconstructing the Khmer Classics

Continued From Page 6

again in Phnom Penh after an absence of more than 30 years.

Many of these pieces have been painstakingly reconstructed by a handful of old masters who have devoted their lives to the task. One of them is Em Tiay, a dignified 67-year-old woman, who directs National Theater rehearsals every morning in the burned-out shell of the Bassac. There, to the accompaniment of the sweet-toned, rhythmically insistent Pinpeat orchestra, 40 or so female dancers surround her, resplendently swathed in silk sarongs.

Em Tiay gently places her hand on a dancer's shoulders, maneuvering the taut torso. Taking a left arm into her right hand, she holds out a finger to focus the dancer's gaze. In Khmer classical dance, the position of the eyes is crucial. Em Tiay then kneels in front of the dancer, slowly bending her knees to force the waist inward and the buttocks out.

As a palace dancer, specializing in the role of the giant Khong, a character in the "Ramayana," Em Tiay led

a cosseted, disciplined life. She spent the Pol Pot years in a village near Battambang, in the northwest, where, remarkably, it was her skills that saved her. Her two sisters, who were also dancers, perished, along with 80 percent of the royal dancers, but Em Tiay's Khmer Rouge village chief insisted that she dance for him while others toiled.

Em Tiay is less than optimistic about the future of classical dance in a country still undermined by factional fighting, corruption and the relentless pursuit of self-interest essential to survival. "In Khmer classical dance, nothing is arbitrary; every movement expresses an inner feeling," she said with elegant resignation. "In these circumstances, it becomes very difficult to teach intangible expressions of joy or the feeling of loss."

Such goals are attainable, according to Proeung Chhien, the dean of choreographic arts at the Royal University in Phnom Penh, "provided we act now, before the older performers fall ill or pass away."

A number of grant-giving organizations have joined the effort. The

Rockefeller Foundation donated a fresh set of leather shadow puppets (Sbeich Thom) for use by the last surviving master of the genre, the 82-year-old Ta Tien. The Asian Cultural Council in New York has established a three-year mentor program overseen by the ethnomusicologist Sam-Ang Sam, in which established teachers pass on their knowledge in a structured environment.

A \$30,000 Notation Project from the Japan Foundation, which Mr. Frumberg inherited from Kiri Schultz, an American expert on Asia, takes the mentor idea one stage further. Over 18 months, a dozen dance professors and two foreign notation experts are recording as many as 4,000 gestures on paper and video, in the hope that at least 60 classic dances can be rescued from oblivion. The exercise is not simple: "It's often difficult to establish at what point gestures begin and end," Mr. Frumberg said.

By translating the results of such research into professional opportunities, Mr. Frumberg is significantly

raising his performers' self-esteem.

When his second contract was drawing to a close earlier this year, students at the Royal University of Fine Arts organized a petition to persuade him to stay in Cambodia. "Mr. Fred is a model for us all to study, a loving man with a heart full of conscientiousness, responsibility and humanity," said Hang Soth, the National Theater head, with tears in his eyes.

Few foreigners in the arts have managed to engender this degree of affection and trust. Cambodia's Byzantine cultural politics and the intense rivalry between leading factions makes the distribution and appropriation of foreign money especially sensitive.

Not only is he an impresario, Mr. Frumberg is also involved in everything from marketing to rehearsal schedules to tearing tickets when no one else is available — a rather wider brief than he could have predicted on graduating from Temple University in theater studies in 1979. One minute he will be coaxing the local Women's International Group into helping the fledgling Cambodian