

A Royal Dance Survives in Van Nuys

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DAVID BOHRER / Los Angeles Times

Dancer Yon Yem, 12, and a friend behind her practice the stylized motions of Cambodian dance. Their movements represent 1,000 years of culture.

A Royal Dance Survives in Van Nuys

By JULIE WHEELOCK

The Van Nuys apartment is small but immaculate. In a living room corner a Buddhist altar stands next to a sleek, black, late model stereo system, its bass and treble lights flashing brightly as music plays. Ten barefoot girls, ages 7 to 14, wearing an assortment of T-shirts, jeans and sarong skirts, are giggling and chattering in English and Cambodian as they line up according to size. They could be any group of schoolgirls, preparing to practice cheerleader routines.

But as their teacher steps in front of the little group, chatter ceases and with solemn concentration they all begin to dance, their movements slow, stately, subtle, delicate and stylized, their hands and feet placed with exquisite precision.

These girls, who look like ancient paintings come

to life in modern clothes, are practicing something a bit more rarefied than school cheers. They are rehearsing a program of Cambodian classical dance they will perform for the Cambodian New Year's festival, to be held tomorrow at Van Nuys Recreation Center at Tyrone Avenue and Vanowen Street. And many of the dance movements they are striving to perfect can be traced back more than 1,000 years.

How did this highly specialized and revered form of dance, once performed only for royalty, make its way to a modest Cambodian/Latino apartment complex in Van Nuys? And why do these lively, bright-faced young girls choose to forgo after-school playtime to practice this difficult and demanding dance?

A strong national pride is at work here. Ever since the Khmer Rouge takeover of Cambodia in the 1970s, a time when many classical traditions, including

music and dance, were brutally crushed, thousands of Cambodian refugees have relocated in Southern California by way of Southeast Asian refugee camps. Although the largest enclave is in Long Beach, Van Nuys is home to a number of families.

Several of their young girls, eager to perpetuate nearly lost Cambodian classical and folk dances, participate in frequent classes under the aegis of the Cambodian Dance and Music Project of Van Nuys.

Amy Catlin, project director and UCLA and Caltech research ethnomusicologist, said the impetus for the plan came from the Van Nuys Cambodian community.

"In the refugee camps, dancing was an important activity to bolster peoples' enthusiasm for their culture and renew their faith in its rebirth," Catlin said. "The Van Nuys families wanted to train their girls to be dancers and I offered to help them obtain

an NEA grant so that free classes in classical and folk dance would be available to all who wanted them. The NEA funded the program from 1986 through 1989, but this year we're on our own."

Defining the dance as "primarily a female art, an outgrowth of temple and court dancing that has been passed down through the centuries," Catlin said most girls start lessons at age 5 or 6, although babies often respond to the music and start to imitate gestures.

One enthusiastic dancer is 14-year-old Fulton Junior High School student Pinthang Ouk, who has been dancing since she was 5.

"I like the dance movements—it's great for exercising your feet, toes, hands, fingers, neck, your whole body," Ouk said. "It's like slow motion, really smooth. I also like it that all the dances we do have meaning and tell stories."

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One of her teachers is her aunt, Sophanary Ouk, 27, who learned to dance in a Thailand refugee camp and immigrated here in 1981. She learned from Cambodian master teachers, and she feels a responsibility, she said, to pass along her expertise to the younger generation.

"Most people in Cambodia now," she said, "don't know what the dancing is like. I'll never forget it because it's special and important."

Although Sophanary Ouk said she'd like to return to Cambodia some day, Pinthang Ouk said, "Maybe I'm too American. I've been here since I was 6 and I don't know anything over there, although I'd like to visit."

The Van Nuys girls perform frequently in Southern California, and are often invited to dance at museums, schools, nursing homes and even weddings. This year, Catlin said, they hope to be included in the Open Festival, which will run concurrently with this fall's Los Angeles Festival and feature any arts group that produces, performs or exhibits work during the two weeks of the festivals.

In the meantime, the girls are looking forward to the New Year's celebration, although Pinthang said, "I always get nervous when I perform. It's really not easy to do and we work very hard to move just right and stay balanced."

The dancers perform in re-splendent, gold and sequin-trimmed silk costumes and headpieces that were funded by the grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and are carefully packed away in large boxes between wearings. Catlin said, "Some of the materials were obtainable only in Thailand and had to be

imported. The costumes were made by two Cambodian tailors in Long Beach and are quite authentic, because the dance teachers have preserved photos of themselves and their own teachers, dancing in the refugee camps. The headpieces were hard to reproduce. Ours are made of thin sheet metal painted gold, with fake jewels and gold trim, and from a distance they look real."

Catlin said authenticity of dress and dance has been achieved, in part, from studying pictures of ancient carvings found on walls of Buddhist monuments.

"We know from these carvings that 1,000 years ago dance was an important part of the Angkor civilization. But in 1431 the Thais attacked Angkor Wat and carried off the dancers and musicians to Thailand.

"In the 19th-Century Khmer King Ang Doung had a revival of classical dance, and at that time the dancers were a part of the royal family and lived in the palace, never performing for outsiders. But by the 20th Century a lot of restrictions were liberalized and tourists were allowed to see an off-shoot group of palace dancers perform."

In the 1950s, Catlin said, King Sihanouk founded the University of Fine Arts, and it was possible for any student to earn a degree in classical and traditional arts, thus broadening access to palace tradition. Such freedom of access, of course, was destroyed during the Pol Pot regime, when people were killed for performing these arts. Those who survived started teaching when they got to the refugee camps, doing what they could to keep the tradition alive.

The Van Nuys girls, as the

current generation of torchbearers, are aware of the historical importance of their art, and even the youngest of them say that they want to show Cambodians and everyone else that they can preserve this part of their culture. They have been working hard to prepare for the New Year's festival, which is always an important event in the local Cambodian community.

The event is free, although donations are requested to pay for hall rental and food. The festivities begin at 9 a.m., with a religious ceremony conducted by several monks, who bless not only the beginning of the new year, but also the ritual offerings of food from community families, who contribute their finest dishes. Pinthang Ouk said her family always spends \$200 to \$300 on food for their contribution.

A communal feast is followed by an afternoon of entertainment, which includes the dancers as well as several singers and musicians playing various Cambodian instruments, including gong circles, zither, xylophones, flute, violins and drums. After the performance a disco band takes over, playing American and Cambodian dance music until midnight.

"It's not a demonstration of

Cambodian culture, it is Cambodian culture," Catlin said. "It's done for community, not educational purposes." And although the dancers will be in the park instead of the royal palace, their dances will represent 1,000 years of culture.

Cambodian New Year's festivities begin at 9 a.m. tomorrow at Van Nuys Recreation Center, 14301 Vanowen St., Van Nuys. Free, but donations are requested. For further information: (818) 989-8131.

Wheelock is a Los Angeles freelance writer.