

Fusing The Traditional With The Contemporary: Projecting Female Strength Through Dance

Classical Khmer dance dates back more than a millenia to royal courts where a performance was believed to be a bridge between the gods and kings — a link between the spiritual and natural worlds.

With the use of fingers curved backward, arched spines, bent knees and a graceful control of the dancer's movements, Khmer classical dance is sacrosanct and most dancers will stay away from altering the revered dance form.

Ny Lai and Khun Sreynoch (Ny&Khun) do not feel the same way and have shown no qualms in challenging the status quo. The two dancers are part of New Cambodian Artists (NCA), a dance company that has fused classic Khmer dance elements with pop culture, contemporary dance and theater to create unique performances.

The duo have not only created their own dance style but are also using it to highlight issues like feminism, gender-based violence and environmental pollution. In "Giant Satrey" the duo use the giant — a common character in traditional dances — as a symbol to portray strong women who are role models for their communities.

"We focused on the power of some of the movements and turned the dance into a regular demonstration of dance skills and female strength ... we are showing the strength of the contemporary Cambodian women," says Khon Sreyneang, the former director of the dance company.

More recently, the duo presented "Sorohn and Snow White," where the performance is filled with deep pain as it starts with a ritual commemorating the bodies of women and the atrocities they have faced. Again, un-



A scene from NCA's "Cinderella Not a Fairy Tale" performance from 2021. (Photo Credit: NCA)

afraid to experiment with form, the dancers use no words during the performance and only use simple props like white chalk powder and red lipstick to convey their story.

The artistic expression of Ny&Khun is an allegory for a young Cambodian generation that wants to use their rich history and culture and meld it with other artistic influences to create new art forms that can be used not only for entertainment but also for advocacy and awareness raising.