

Buddha Overcomes All Obstacles

November 10, 2018, 2 pm



Program

Classical Cambodian Dance-Drama Buddha Overcomes All Obstacles

This dramatic retelling of the Buddha's determined search for enlightenment follows the Historical Buddha as he encounters the world outside his family's palace, renounces secular luxuries, and resists temptations from an army of demons. Long performed in the Khmer court tradition, this dance-drama has not been seen on stage since the 1960s. For the Freer|Sackler performance, it has been carefully restaged by master musicians and dancers. Among them are winners of major awards from the National Endowment for the Arts as well as artists formerly with the Royal University of Fine Arts and the Royal Dance Troupe of Cambodia. They come to Washington, DC, from across the United States for this production, which is coordinated by Cambodian American Heritage, a thirty-eight-year-old Washington-area organization dedicated to preserving Khmer dance, music, and culture.

Today's performance is presented in collaboration with Cambodian American Heritage, Inc. (CAHI), a nonprofit art organization in the Washington area that has promoted the preservation, teaching, and performance of Cambodian traditional culture since 1980. The performance is presented in partnership with the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage and the Religion in America Initiative of the National Museum of American History, with support from the Lilly Endowment. This project also received Federal support from the Asian Pacific American Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center.

Background

Siddhartha Kumar was born into the Sakyas (Kshatriya) caste in the capital of Kapilavastu located in what is now Nepal. When he was born, a fortuneteller announced to his parents that the child would become either an important religious figure or a political leader. Hoping for the latter, his parents ordered Siddhartha be trained as a warrior, surrounded by luxury, and protected from experiencing anything unpleasant. At the age of sixteen, Siddhartha Kumar married his cousin, Princess Pimpa Yasodhara, and settled into a privileged family life. Unhappy living in the palace, the prince wanted to go out and see how other people lived.

Scene 1

Prince Siddhartha, now twenty-nine years old, and Princess Pimpa Yasodhara are in the palace garden, enjoying a life of luxury.

Prince Siddhartha played by Masady Mani

Princess Pimpa Yasodhara played by Devi Yi

Song lyrics

Oh, Once upon a time . . . oh . . . Prince Siddhartha and his wife, Pimpa

Oh, seated on an elegant throne . . . oh . . . surrounded by their attendants.

The princess walks . . . oh . . . to enjoy the beautiful sights of nature

Oh, as if it were neatly embroidered.

The Sapotaceae flowers are in full bloom.

She picks them and adorns her body.

The fragrant, flowering trees grow in attractive straight rows.

The prince picks a *champeii* [frangipani or *Plumeria alba*] flower to give to his beautiful wife.

Scene 2

Prince Siddhartha leaves the palace with his charioteer, Schannamatya, and witnesses the four signs: an old man, a sick man, a dead body, and a monk. In fact, these are not actual people but instead are the messenger Devabutra transforming himself. The prince, who has never before seen these things, asks Schannamatya for an explanation. Carefully considering what he learns, the prince is determined to find true happiness and supreme peace.

Schannamatya played by Paula Chea

Song lyrics and narration

The prince sees people who seem strange to him,

Strange, uncommon, and extraordinary.

Schannamatya responds to the prince's inquiries.

Oh, an old man and sick man . . . oh . . . and there, a dead man.

The prince asks Schannamatya where such men, whom he had never seen before, came from.

Schannamatya continues to explain.

Oh, and over there, there is a monk who is seeking niravana.

Transience, suffering . . . oh . . . so much suffering . . . birth, old age, sickness, death . . . bones and flesh returning to the earth.

Scene 3

Prince Siddhartha's father, King Suddhodana, prepares a banquet to celebrate the birth of Rahula, the prince's son. The palace is filled with music and dance. Everyone celebrates until they tire and fall asleep. Prepared to leave the palace, the prince wakes up and takes a final look at his sleeping wife and child.

Song lyrics

At the royal residence, in the hall of the glorious castle,

The monarch and the beloved crown prince preserve time-honored tradition.

Triumphant and prosperous, an auspicious day,

Rahula inherits the power of the Sakya dynasty.

Scene 4

In search of everlasting peace and happiness, Siddhartha leaves the palace with his charioteer, Schannamatya, and his horse, Kanthaka. They stop at the Anoma River, where the prince renounces his earthly possessions by removing his jewelry, putting on a yellow robe, and cutting off his hair. He tells Schannamatya to bring his jewelry and horse to the king. Schannamatya and Kanthaka are sad to leave their master.

Song lyrics

When the prince arrives at the Anoma River,

he immediately cleanses his body, leaving the laity to become a monk.

He does not hesitate to remove his ornate clothing or to cut his hair with his victory sword and put it on a golden plate.

He instructs Schannamatya, "It is time for you and the resplendent Kannaka to return to the city with these things. Inform my father that one day I will return happy and peaceful."

Then, Siddhartha puts the yellow robe on and becomes a monk.

He sits underneath the bodhi tree.

Scene 5

Siddhartha assumes a new identity as the ascetic Gotama. He meditates in solitude under a large *bodhi* tree in a quiet forest. Mara, the Evil One, makes every attempt to prevent Gotama's enlightenment. Mara tries various tricks to distract him, makes several threats, and even enlists his beautiful daughters to flirt with him. Gotama remains undisturbed.

Gotama played by Samoeuk Man

Mara played by Bonavy Chhim

Song lyrics

Three exceptionally beautiful girls with sparking eyes and lovely smiles entice the monk, who does not flinch or respond to any of their deceptive gestures.

Oh, offering food from the heavens along with fans, lotus flowers, music, and dance.

Scene 6

Mara's daughters and his army intensify their efforts to obstruct Gotama's enlightenment. Despite their persistence, Gotama points to the earth to be his witness. Neang Kanghing, Goddess of the Earth, appears and bears witness to his enlightenment. She squeezes water out of her long hair to drown out evil forces. Gotama becomes Buddha, Sammana Gotama, the Enlightened One.

Mara's soldiers marvel at the miracle, and demons instantly have a change of heart. They celebrate and pay their respects to the Buddha. Candlelight, a representation of this emergence from darkness, has become a Buddhist symbol for enlightenment.

Goddess of the Earth played by Chan Moly Sam

Performers

Leakhena Chea is a master dancer who portrays a giant in Mara's army. She was born in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and attended the Royal University of Fine Arts' School of Folk Dance in Phnom Penh. As a student, Leakhena performed in Denmark in 1994. After graduation, she performed at the Chatomouk Theater, the Royal Palace, and Damnak Chamkar Moan in Phnom Penh. Leakhena now lives in Glen Allen, Virginia.

Bonavy Chhim is a dancer and teacher who portrays the giant Marathiraja, leader of Mara's army. Born in Cambodia, she immigrated to the United States in 1982. At age nine she joined the CAHI's dance troupe as a student of her aunt, Sam Oeun Tes. She studied classical and folk dances with her aunt and master teacher Phan Phuong. In addition to teaching dance, she has performed at the Department of Commerce, Smithsonian Institution, and the Library of Congress. She also performed in the 2001 MIAO LI International Mask Festival in Taiwan.

Ngek Chum is the music director, lyricist, and playwright for this production. A master musician on the *roneat aik* (treble xylophone), Ngek Chum is one of the few Khmer music masters who possesses a vast repertoire across genres and a command of multiple instruments. He has received the Bess Lomax Hawes Award, the NEA's National Heritage Fellowship (conferred upon an artist who has significantly contributed to teaching and preserving important repertoires), and honors from the Maryland State Arts Council. He teaches at the Cambodian Buddhist Society, Towson University, and Cambodian American Heritage. Master Chum, who remembers accompanying performances of Pchanch Mear in the 1960s, provided critical guidance to the production of this performance.

Sovann Chum performs on the *kong thom* (large gong circle). The son of master musician Chum Ngek, he was born in the Khai I Dang refugee camp in Thailand. He says, "There is not really a day or year when I started to play music. I just did it when I was three years old. When I ran around and made noise, Dad would give the mallets to me to keep me quiet." Sovann made his public "debut" at Carnegie Hall in the early 1980s when he was just four years old. Since that time, he has performed on various stages throughout the United States.

Sophy Hoeung, the daughter of a traditional musician, was surrounded by music throughout her childhood. Although she never planned on becoming a singer, local Khmer communities quickly discovered her exceptional vocal skills when she settled in the United States in the late 1970s. Now a master vocalist, Hoeung is a favorite singer of both popular and traditional music.

Bora Keo is a master dancer who portrays Mara's daughter. Born in Cambodia, she graduated from the Royal University of Fine Arts' School of classical dance in Phnom Penh as a specialist of the female role. In addition to being a university teacher, Bora performed professionally with the Dance Troupe of Cambodia, touring France, Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, Malaysia, Australia, India, Korea, and China. She migrated to the United States in 2015 and resides in Pennsylvania.

Soeum Kim is a musician and teacher who performs today on *tror* (fiddle) and portrays a monk. Born in Cambodia, he fled to Khao I Dang refugee camp in Thailand with the assistance of World Vision in 1979. Soeum returned to Cambodia in 1993, studied music under *tror* master Sar Dan, and joined Norn Chenda's traditional wedding band. He migrated to the United States in 2014 and performs regularly with Master Ngek Chum's music ensembles and at CAHI events, including Cambodian New Year celebrations in April.

Masady Mani is a dance master, choreographer, lyricist, and playwright who portrays Prince Siddhartha. She graduated from the Royal University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh in 1987 and then taught there until 1990. She has had the honor to perform for foreign dignitaries and to tour extensively throughout Cambodia, the Soviet Union, India, North and South Vietnam, and the United States. Now she is the dance director at the Cambodian Buddhist Society in Maryland.

Kimhan Meas, a master drummer, performs on *sampho* (small barrel drum) and *skor thom* (bass drum). A master teacher with Angkor Dance Troupe, he lives in Lowell, Massachusetts, and is an internationally recognized master performer and instructor of Cambodian classical dance. Classically trained at the University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, he has toured internationally and performed in the Philippines, Japan, Malaysia, China, and Thailand. In 2011 and 2012, he worked with the Angkor Dance Troupe under the Parker Foundation to teach dancers in folk and monkey (*hanuman*) dance. He also provides expertise on traditional Cambodian music development at Lowell Community Charter Public Schools and the music department of the University of Massachusetts, Lowell.

Soboun Nol is a master musician on the *sralai* (double-reed) and *khloy* (flute). Born in Phnom Penh, he graduated from the school of classical music at the Royal University of Fine Arts and then became a music teacher there. He toured Japan, France, Denmark, and Thailand as a member of the music ensemble of the dance troupe company of Cambodia. Soboun Nol migrated to the United States in 2001 and now resides in Minnesota.

Sam Ang Phlong is the wardrobe supervisor and dresser for today's performance. The sister of master dancer Sam Oeun Tes, she has been a master seamstress and costume dresser for Cambodian American Heritage for decades.

Sinath Phul is a master vocalist who also served as lyricist and playwright for this program. A former singer at the University of Fine Arts in Phnom Penh, she toured several countries with the troupe and now lives in Philadelphia.

Chan Moly Sam is a master dancer who portrays the Goddess of the Earth. She also contributed to this production as choreographer, lyricist, and playwright. As a child in Phnom Penh, she was captivated by the beautiful female celestial figures (*apsaras*) in ancient court repertory. She entered the Royal University of Fine Arts at age thirteen and studied under dance master Chheng Phon, who guided her in mastering the male role. She studied the female role with master Chea Samy. "He was of the conservative tradition of grand masters," she says. "He never gave compliments to students. This is because perfection is an illusion, a constant struggle to reach the higher realm."

Sam Oeun Tes, artistic and project director for this program, is also in charge of wardrobe and costume designs. A master dancer, choreographer, and playwright, she trained in classical court dance at the Royal Ballet of Cambodia. She performed for many guests of state before migrating to the United States in 1971. Since the early 1980s, Sam Oeun has been the principal teacher and dancer of the Cambodian American Heritage Dance troupe. She was awarded a National Heritage Fellowship by the NEA in 1998. In addition to performing in Egypt, South Africa, Turkey, and Taiwan, Sam Oeun regularly leads her troupe in performances in the Washington region.

Saroeum Tes, president of CAHI, contributed to this production as playwright, transcriber, and translator of song lyrics. Born in Cambodia, his career spanned forty years working for the United States government in the US Agency for International Development and then with Voice of America, where he retired as chief editor of the Khmer (Cambodian) Service. In retirement, Tes continues to serve the Cambodian community and DC area government as an interpreter. Tes has been honored by the Cambodian government for his service and commitment to Cambodian arts and culture in the United States.

Devi Yim, a master dancer who portrays Princess Pimpa, also served as this program's director, choreographer, lyricist, and playwright. She was Cambodia's Prima Royal Ballet Dancer during the 1980s. She is a graduate and a former master of the University of Fine Arts, Cambodia. She toured extensively throughout Cambodia, India, the Soviet Union, Vietnam, Korea, and the United States. In 1992 Yim joined CAHI as a performer and instructor in classical and folk dance. Currently the dance director at CAHI, she regularly performs at local and national venues, including the White House, the Joyce Theater in New York, and Jacob's Pillow in Massachusetts.

Artistic and Production Team

Sadira Benge, dancer, giant in Mara's army

Naro Bou, volunteer

Tevy Chao, dancer, attendant, and giant in Mara's army

Soun Chhayrath, actor, mythical animal

Paula Chea, dancer, charioteer Schannamatya, and the Indian mythical bird *garuda*

Amrong Chey, dancer, attendant

Arun Meth, actor, mythical animal

Teravy Mol Cisneros, dancer, attendant, giant in Mara's army

Octavio Cisneros, actor, Kanthaka (horse), Indian mythical animal *mekhallā*

Visal Duong, dancer, *tep kanhaka* (angel)

Angela Ea, dancer, *tep kanhaka* (angel)

Lary Lam, photographer

Sotha Lam, dresser

Samoeuk Man, actor, Gotama Buddha

Gary Marco, CAHI executive director, master of ceremonies, narrator

Suteera Nagavajara, dancer, *tep kanhaka* (angel), musician on *kong tauch* (small gong circle)

Sagnoun Nay, actor, mythical animal

Sok Nou, actor, old man

Joanna Pecore, project administrator, musician on *roneat thung* (bass xylophone)

Grace Rafferty, dancer, attendant, Mara's daughter

Kathy Rafferty, CAHI board member, surtitles

Matthew Regan, actor, body carrier, standing tree

Chhomnimol Murielle Sokhon, dancer, Mara's daughter

Neary Touch, CAHI board member, logistics

Vichheka Touch, actor, sick man, deer

Linda Webb, dancer, *tep kanhaka* (angel)

Tung Yap, surtitle operator

Buddhism and Cambodian American Communities

The artists who collaborated on creating and performing this dance-drama represent the resilience of Khmer culture in the diaspora. The dance-drama itself provides a window into the complex interweaving of Buddhism and other religious traditions in Cambodian performing arts. These master artists and their students carry on a tradition rooted in the ancient temple dances of the Angkor Empire, which was dominated and highly influenced by Buddhism. In addition to Buddhist stories, Khmer classical dances traditionally told stories from India, such as the Ramayana. Khmer Buddhism has transformed throughout the centuries, blending traditional beliefs with Hinduism, Mahayana Buddhist doctrine, and Theravada Buddhist doctrine in the present day.

Following the conflict that roiled Southeast Asia from the 1950s to the 1970s, about 150,000 Cambodians fled their war-ravaged nation and resettled in the United States. Within four decades, more than a quarter-million Americans were of Khmer descent, the vast majority of whom were Buddhists. In spite of the war and genocide in the mid-1970s, during which temples were destroyed and monks and other religious leaders killed or sent into exile, Cambodian and Cambodian American families have sustained their traditions.

Today, centers of Khmer Buddhist activity are found in many cities with a significant population of Cambodian refugees, including Long Beach, California; Lowell, Massachusetts; and Seattle, Washington. Cambodian Americans have established Buddhist temples around the country, from modest storefront conversions to large complexes built from the ground up. These temples not only accommodate people's spiritual needs but also enrich their social life by providing language classes and hosting music and dance groups. In some regions, the annual Cambodian New Year's celebration—typically observed in temple complexes—has become a public festival attended by thousands. The family home also serves as a site of Buddhist practice and socialization. Within their homes, family members share Buddhist stories, pay respect to spirits and ancestors at small shrines, and reinforce culturally revered behaviors and beliefs.

Connections



Lintel. Cambodia or northeastern Thailand, 11th century. Sandstone. Gift of Arthur M. Sackler, S1987.953. On view in gallery 26.

Strung through with scrolling vegetation, budding vines, and dancing figures, this architectural element refuses to stand still. In its original context, the rectangular lintel would have been inserted over a doorway in a Khmer temple complex. Visible from a distance, the geometric form invited visitors to approach. Intricate patterns across the surface unfurl in irregular symmetries; figures interlock and intertwine among the plants. Two warriors wrestle before a central lotus stalk. Their posture, with one foot pressed against the other's thigh, suggests they represent Bhima and Duryodhana, embattled heroes from the Indian epic Mahabharata. A kneeling figure is actively poised on top of the lotus. Although this deity often appears in reliefs from the Khmer kingdom, which once encompassed present-day Cambodia and much of Thailand, his identity remains a mystery. The thick, winding vine resembles the *naga*, a serpent shape that lies at the heart of Cambodian artistic traditions, from architecture to classical dance.