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Arts4peace Festival Celebrates Cambodian Culture

Cambodia’s rich culture is set to be celebrated during a 10-day festival that showcases the country’s traditional and contemporary art.

Cambodia is a country that is known for its rich culture and heritage. From the almighty Angkor Empire through to the Golden Age of the swinging 50s and 60s, the kingdom has a colourful artistic past: Apsara dancers, shadow puppet theatre, folk dance, traditional music, modern architecture, Cambodian rock ‘n’ roll.

This year marks the 40th year since the fall of the Khmer Rouge, whose attempts to quash the country’s culture failed. Under the Pol Pot-led regime, artists were one of the sectors targeted, with an estimated 90 percent of the country’s artists killed or forced to flee the country.

While this led to a significant decimation in the arts scene, huge efforts have since gone into preserving and developing Cambodia’s unique artistic identity. And much of the efforts have been led by Cambodian Living Arts (CLA), which is this year celebrating its 20th anniversary.
"This year is 40 years after the end of the Khmer Rouge and 20 years of CLA's work," says Jean-Baptiste Phou, CLA's head of creative programmes. "We want to reflect and look back on these 40 years. What is the state of the arts scene today and what is the value of the arts in Cambodia?"

As part of the jam-packed 10-day event, work from past and present will be presented, ranging from an exhibition of Unsung Heroes of Cambodian Culture, a community concert by The Khmer Magic Music Bus and Am Chorn-Pond, and an online programme that takes in digital exhibitions, blogs by young writers and archive material.

Previously commissioned pieces of work will be revived, including the traditional heritage play Mak Theung and the opera Where Elephants Weep. Contemporary works will also feature, with all-female troupe Medha performing The Call for the first time in Phnom Penh. Channra Sophea will also showcase her contemporary dance The Dream. And a bill of theatre events has also been commissioned for the festival.
The event will culminate with the Cambodian premiere of Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia. There will be three shows of the critically-acclaimed multidisciplinary production by Rithy Panh and Him Sophy. The show has already toured Australia, the US and France.

“Another aim of festival is to engage with people and our audiences to look at the role the arts play in transforming our society, especially 40 years after the genocide,” adds Phina So, CLA’s knowledge, networks and policy programme manager.

This includes a series of inspirational talks that follow the TEDx format. Three generations of artists and cultural practitioners will be invited to talk about their life and how they use the arts to transform and make positive changes in their communities.

There will also be Q&A sessions and an unsung heroes programme, which will see a panel of judges visit all provinces to search for people who have dedicated their lives to the arts.

With the festival running from November 14 to 24, this is the largest celebration of the arts in Cambodia’s recent history. CLA aims to attract a minimum of 5,000 people during the 10 days, with 70 percent being young Cambodians.

“Now, what we really try and do with CLA is to help people understand the value of art in society, especially for the next generation,” says Phou. “This isn’t just making sure knowledge is passed onto the next generation because that’s what our mission was 20 years ago. We have moved onto how art can play a role as a form of expression, a look into modern society.”

CLA started 20 years ago with the aim of preserving the country’s arts and ensuring ancient artforms that have been passed down through generations are preserved. In the last decade, it expanded its reach, helping to nurture a new generation of artists who use these traditional techniques to tell contemporary tales of the world around them.

Phou says, “The previous generation was mainly a vehicle of this tradition that has been there for generations. It was passed down, and they were very careful to preserve the purity of these traditions. What we are seeing now is the younger generation want to tell their own story; what is surrounding them, their life, dreams and hopes.”

So adds, “The younger generation want to explore things, but I don’t think they go too far from the roots of traditional arts. Even though many contemporary arts still use tradition, they try to tell a new story in a new way that shapes how they see society.”