



Arts of Cambodia

Out of adversity

An ambitious festival of Cambodian arts is about to hit New York

ON HIS lightning tour of South-East Asia last year, Barack Obama made a point of criticising Cambodia's prime minister, Hun Sen, for his dismal human-rights record. Cambodians have indeed done horrifying things to each other (see the obituary). But what of America's own legacy in the country? Cambodians have not forgotten the sustained American bombing campaign between 1970 and 1973, which drove so many people into the arms of Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge army.

"Parachute Skirt with Flowers", an art installation made of military detritus collected over three decades, offers a disturbing reminder of that era. At its heart is a United States Air Force parachute that landed in Prey Veng village, the home of Leang Seckon, a Cambodian artist. It was known locally as *chhat*, Cambodian for umbrella, and Mr Leang remembers how it was used to cover leaky houses during the rains.

Mr Leang's artwork arrives at the Bronx Museum this month as part of "Season of Cambodia", a \$2.6m arts festival involving more than 125 artists of different disciplines, performing or exhibiting in 30 New York institutions, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art to the Asia Society. The catalyst behind the festival is Arn Chorn-Pond, a human-rights activist and outspoken critic of America's foreign policy during that period. Orphaned as a boy, Mr Pond became a child soldier with the Khmer Rouge. After the war he was rescued from a Thai refugee camp by an American pastor, who adopted him. At

Brown University Mr Pond met Amy Carter. It was partly through her father, former President Jimmy Carter, that he began working with Amnesty International.

During the Pol Pot years Mr Chorn-Pond was stationed in the north-western city of Battambang where he witnessed horrific violence every day. He was saved by his skill in entertaining Khmer soldiers on the *khim*, a dulcimer-like instrument used to play propaganda songs. Mr Chorn-Pond's search for his *khim* teacher, Yoeun Mek, and their eventual reunion led to the creation of what is now known as Cambodia Living Arts (CLA). This Phnom Penh-based organisation tracked down 20 other master musicians, many of them destitute. It gave them housing, food and a small allowance to encourage them to pass on their musical techniques and traditions to future generations. CLA initiated the New York festival.

Cambodia has a long tradition of classical music, dance and film. King Norodom Sihanouk, who ruled the country until 1970, used to appoint artists to Cambodia's diplomatic missions. Sihamoni, his youngest son and the current king, trained as a ballet dancer in Paris and Prague. Norodom's eldest daughter, Buppha Devi, specialised in a classical dance style known as *robam boran*, and performed for General de Gaulle and Marshall Tito.

All that changed with the arrival of Pol Pot in 1975. He regarded artists as superfluous. One of his favourite sayings was, *tuk min chamnen, dak chenh ka, min kat*—"to

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keep you is no gain, to kill you no loss". Thousands died before Pol Pot fled in 1979 and the terror ended. It took another decade for cultural life to recover.

Identifying survivors was just the first challenge. *Robam boran* dancers start training when they are six years old, and have to learn thousands of different positions to achieve the required balance of technical perfection and spiritual poise. One of the festival's highlights—to be shown at the Brooklyn Academy of Music—is "The Legend of Apsara Mera", which includes a dance that Princess Buppha Devi made famous. Among the performers are two young stars of the genre, Chap Chamroeun Mina and Chey Sophea.

The Joyce Theatre in Chelsea will host the Khmer Arts Ensemble, a privately funded company created by Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, who trained with the Royal Ballet. The ensemble gives modern twists to classical dances, folk legends and even Western plays and operas. "A Bend in the River" (pictured), from a popular Cambodian story of village love and revenge, receives its world premiere in New York. This event has brought together for the first time three of Cambodia's most important artists—Ms Shapiro, a Moscow-trained composer, Him Sophy, and Pich Sopheap, a sculptor who is working for the first time as a stage designer.

Mr Pich already has an international reputation. A child during the final days of the Khmer Rouge, he emigrated to America and enrolled at the Art Institute of Chicago. Mr Pich's works, with their broken Buddhas and undetonated bombs, have a strong autobiographical feel. He was the first Cambodian artist to be offered a solo show at the quinquennial DOCUMENTA exhibition in Kassel, in Germany. During the festival Mr Pich's work will be shown at Tyler Rollins Fine Art, the Metropolitan Museum and the World Financial Centre.

Amrita Performing Arts promotes con- ▶▶

▶ temporary dance in Phnom Penh with the help of several Westerners, including Peter Chin of Canada and a German choreographer, Arco Renz. Chey Chankethya's 15-minute solo, "My Mother and I", which opens at the Abrons Art Centre on April 18th shows both her classical Cambodian roots and the influence of these choreographers.

Only two shadow-puppet companies survived the war. Wat Bo, a Siem Reap-based troupe, will perform scenes from the "Ramayana" at the World Financial Centre's Winter Garden. An unlikely setting perhaps, but the organisers are confident that the atrium with its giant palms is as close to the puppeteers' natural environment as can be found in New York.

Cambodia had a vibrant film industry during the 1960s and Asia's first international film festival was held in Phnom Penh in 1968. Its best-known director, Panh Rithy, has put together a programme of ten full-length feature films (including three of his own) to be shown in New York, along with four shorts.

The link between creativity and memory is raised repeatedly by Mr Panh, who lost almost his entire family during the Khmer Rouge era. How to revive a culture after a holocaust is a question that he would like to see more widely discussed. The festival will introduce new audiences to Cambodian culture, and remind Americans of their government's checkered role in Cambodia's history. ■

"Season of Cambodia: A Living Arts Festival" is in New York until July 7th. For events and tickets visit www.seasonofcambodia.com