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 ***Cambodian Dance: Celebration of the Gods (review)***

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Reviewed by:

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*Cambodian Dance: Celebration of the Gods.* Denise Heywood. Bangkok: River Books, 2008. 144 pp., photos, glossary, bibliography, index. ISBN: 978-974-9863-40-4 (Hardcover), \$40.00.

The Cambodian Royal Ballet has fascinated and nourished the deepest interests of foreigners from the very first time it achieved international awareness. Within the last century, numerous scholars and writers have tried to comprehend its complexity and to retrace the history of its origins. The proliferation of female dancers carved on the walls of Angkorean temples and the historical confinement of a group of female dancers to the court, solely for viewing by the royal family, contributed to the forging of a sacred aura that eventually resulted in the promotion of this female court dance to the rank of cultural jewel. But who are these young girls who dedicate their lives to perform the *lkhon kbach boran*, literally the "theatre of the ancient gestures"? How did their image transit through time and what is their place in today's Cambodian society and culture? These are questions Denise Heywood addresses in her book *Cambodian Dance: Celebration of the Gods*, dedicated to the female performers of Cambodia's classical female dance, also known as *robam kbach boran*, which is performed by the Royal Ballet.

In this beautifully crafted book, Heywood follows dancers from the glorious times of Angkor through today. It opens with a foreword by HRH the Princess Bopha Devi, an emblematic figure of the Royal Ballet who embodies the past glory of the dance form and its connection to the sacred. The content of the book is organized chronologically. Heywood grants illustrations an important place, some of which reproduce relevant snapshots of dancers as well as portraits of the pioneers of Khmer studies.

The author chooses to start her journey at Angkor Wat temple, where she first saw a dance performance. She draws a particular emphasis to the different ways *Apsara* are represented on the bas-reliefs. This chapter is followed by another one on the decline of this glorious period under Thai attacks, outlining the evolution of the dance costume under the Thai influence. Finally, notes the author, King Ang Duong returns to Cambodia and establishes a court where dance occupies an important place. This precedes the beginning of the French Protectorate era.

Heywood dedicates a significant part of her book to introducing different artists and scholars who showed great interest in this dance and whose work highlighted, preserved, or studied this art. In this aim, she first outlines the French attitude toward the Royal Ballet at a time when it was locked inside the palace for the enjoyment of the King. An entire chapter is devoted to the tour of the dancers to France for the 1906 colonial exhibition and to the fascination that captivated the sculptor August Rodin. Heywood shares anecdotes of his encounter with the dancers and describes the pictorial characteristics of his watercolor sketches depicting them. Descriptions of other great figures follow, among whom is the **[End Page 144]** Belgian dancer Xenia Zarina and the American dancer and choreographer Ted Shawn, who both went to Cambodia to learn the basics of Khmer classical dance. Drawing from both their accounts, Heywood emphasizes the interest of Western artists in this dance practice.

After outlining the slow decline of the classical dance practice throughout the protectorate, the book's sixth chapter shows the influence of the crowned family on the dance, particularly in terms of how the mother, Queen Kossamak, reinvigorated the practice with the support of her son Norodom Sihanouk (1922-2012). This period is marked by the introduction of men to play the monkey roles, the creation of new dances, and a new status for the court dancers who then left the palace enclosure.

Following the course of time, Heywood addresses the harsh conditions of the artists under the Khmer Rouge's regime (1975-1979). Survivors' accounts retell the horror of a genocide in which they were primary targets, while the author examines Pol Pot's childhood encounters with the royal dancers via some of his close family members. Heywood considers the situation of the royal family in that tormented period...

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