

Dance as Liberating and as Limiting, as
Connecting, Creating and Crossing
Boundaries:
Interview with Prumsodun Ok

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ABSTRACT

In an interview with Prumsodun Ok, an artist, teacher, writer, and speaker, we discuss how dance is both a liberating and transgressive form in his own practice and life. Prum, the founder of Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA (Cambodia's first gay dance company) shares his thoughts about his artistic practice, what it helped him to find, and how it continues to redefine his own place in the world. Together, we reflect on themes of gender, transgression, belonging, and the roles that dance and the body play in a particular context like Cambodia. This interview is co-written and co-created between the authors and the dancer.

KEYWORDS

Dance; belonging; gender; Cambodia; Transgressing

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SETTING THE SCENE

We met Prumsodun Ok for the first time at a workshop that we both organised in January 2021. The workshop was a part of the research that we were carrying out between 2018 and 2020 at the Institute of Social Studies (see this Introduction). Entitled *Transnational mobilities of music and dance in the global South: Choreographing belonging, composing identity*, the online workshop gathered a number of researchers and artists, some of which are authors of articles in this Special Issue. Prum was one of the presenters. His paper co-authored with Toni Shapiro Phim impressed us and intrigued us, and therefore we asked Prum to engage with us in a conversation about some of the themes that we explore in this Special Issue.

Prumsodun Ok is an artist, teacher, writer, and speaker, and the founder of Prumsodun Ok & NATYARASA, Cambodia's first gay dance company. His interdisciplinary performances have been performed at Currents Festival (Cambodia), Camping Asia (Taiwan), and CTM Festival (Germany) among others, and have been lauded as "Radical Beauty" (Amranand, 2017). He is the author of *The Serpent's Tail*, the first in-depth, critical history of Khmer classical dance written by a practitioner and uploaded onto the world wide web as a digital inscription. His keynote speech at the Dance/USA Conference and TED have roused audiences to their feet in ovation. Born to Khmer refugees in the United States, he now works as an artist, teacher, writer and filmmaker, and is the founder of Sereiyos Productions, a dynamic creative agency and production company working across the disciplines of dance, music, film, and design. He lives in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. For further details see: <https://www.pumsodun.com/>

In what follows is an edited version of our conversation that took place online on March 21, 2022. The questions emerged from some of the key themes addressed in the Special Issue, from the previous exchanges that we had with Prum during a seminar that he gave for the INSPIRE research project in September 2021 as well as his online talks and presentations. The text presented here was mutually agreed upon with Prum. The conversation took place over Zoom. Prum was in his home in Phnom Penh, Roy in his home office in the Netherlands and Kasia in her home in Geneva. The questions emerged across geographical spaces, and time differences, but also across themes that guide this Special Issue.

IN CONVERSATION

Katarzyna (K): You have engaged with multiple forms of arts but mostly dance. Could you explain why classical dance is the medium through which you decided to express yourself as an artist?

Prum (P): In many instances I feel like the dance chose me. I remember when dancers from Cambodia came on tour to the United States and they would see me dancing and they would say I have this *nisay* with the dance. *Nisay* literally means "support," but in the connotative sense it is used to refer to a karmic attachment to something. This was there already before I started dancing. For example, when I was 3-4 years old, my father recorded a video of dancers performing Khmer classical dance. These were amateur dancers performing at a local temple for the Khmer New Year festivities in Long Beach (US). When I saw these videos, I remember putting on my sister's red dress and imitating the movements. The dancers I was imitating had costumes that weren't the best and they had bad technique. Despite the many cracks and the holes that were present in the performance, the beauty and the power of the dance still shone through.

More broadly, dance is probably the first art form. If you think about it, all you need for dance is just your body; your body as instrument, you can make music. You can make movement. You can make narrative. There is something very primal and powerful about dance. There's a power to it. From the fact that as your gestures happen, they are dying at the same time. That impermanence is something that I really identify with, value and cherish as a Buddhist artist.

Roy (R): You mention Cambodian dancers coming to the US. Could you explain more on the transnational dimension in your relation with Khmer classical dance.

P: Where I was born and raised in Long Beach (US) is home to the largest Cambodian population outside of Southeast Asia. When I began my dance training, I got lucky in the sense that my teacher, Sophiline Cheam Shapiro¹, had no issues with the fact that I was a man. She took me in without any questions and with open arms. I was lucky. At that point, my teacher was also at a very important juncture in her career. She was just starting to choreograph and make a name for herself as a choreographer. And so Neak Kru Sophiline would choreograph her works, and set them on dancers in Cambodia. Then she would tour these works with them throughout the United States. And so, every time that the dancers came, they saw me. I was about sixteen years-old then and these were dancers from the Royal University of Fine Arts (Cambodia). They saw that I was the only boy in class but they also saw the love I had for the dance, and they saw the talent. That was why they could say something like, 'Prum, you have *nisay* with the dance'.

There was also another dance artist from Cambodia, who now is one of my best friends. I first met her when she was on a fellowship programme at UCLA. One day, I went to pick her up to have her come and teach a workshop at the Khmer Arts Academy in Long Beach. Then she said to me, 'Prum, I was told that the first thing to see in America was you dancing.' As my career developed, I was going back and forth between Cambodia and the States for training. When my teacher had her own company, one of her dancers said to me after observing me teaching young Khmer American students: 'Prum, no one here loves dance as much as you do.' In many instances, the dancers from Cambodia have acknowledged my talent and my love for Khmer classical dance. And also the thing that makes me special from others.

R: What do people refer to precisely when they say 'nobody loves dance more than you do'?

P: At first, that comment caught me by surprise. But I think the way that I understand it, is that it's something very real. My love for dance is the reason why I left the United States. When you ask most Khmer people in the United States 'Why do you dance?', they say 'because it's my culture'. And you ask them, 'What is your culture?', they say, 'Khmer'. And you ask them, 'What is Khmer?', and then, they're mostly not able to give you an answer. This means that Khmer dancers in the US, they come to it mostly as a hobby, a way for exercise. They come as a way to maintain their culture, whatever that means.

However, I'm very different in the sense. I'm an artist. For me, culture is something that is beyond borders. Culture is something that is shaped and transformed and revolutionised. For me, art is not about preserving identity, art is a tool to explore

¹ Sophiline Cheam Shapiro (1967) was raised and educated in Cambodia. She was among the first graduates of Cambodia's reopened national School of Fine Arts following the Khmer Rouge period. Trained in Khmer classical dance, she moved to the US in the 1990s where she set up the Khmer Arts Academy teaching students from the Cambodian diaspora in Khmer classical dance.

and shape and question the world that I live in. Because of that, the way that I interact with art, and the way that I understand myself in life, is very different from someone who is coming from a more ethno-nostalgic or a more nationalist kind of place of practice.

K: You said you left the US also because the way dance in the US was practised in the Khmer community, so as a Cambodian American artist, how do you relate to both these contexts? And for you, what is the context of your dance?

P: The reason I left the United States was that I realised that, no matter how much energy and investment I would pour into these young people whom I was training, there was no way that I would be able to nurture the next generation of artists there—even if some of them had the potential to be stars in Cambodia. There are limitations in the way that they understand Khmer classical dance, and because of how they think one can't make a living as a Khmer classical dance artist in the United States. For example, I once had a seven-year-old girl come to me in class and say, 'Bong Prum, what is your real job?' I was teaching full-time . . . The parents who are having these conversations around these young people, they also can't fathom what success might look like as an artist. And so, they would never allow their children to commit to a life of art, to commit to live for the dance.

As someone who was born and raised in America, and of Khmer heritage, I used to feel like I was being ripped and torn apart. That I was never Khmer enough, and that I was never American enough. So much of that is because of the narratives that you see in the media like minorities being torn apart by two cultures. However, eventually I didn't feel the need to fit myself within a spectrum. I found that being both Khmer and American, I have this rich foundation of knowledge of language, of history and culture that so many other people do not have access to. And I'm going to use that. Instead of placing myself within a spectrum, I'm going to place that spectrum inside of me. And whenever I need the right word or image or colour or sensation or expression, I have the ability to pull it out and use it whenever I want.

There is the Hindu story of Narasingha, who is an incarnation of Vishnu, who comes down to Earth to kill a demon king who—because of a boon he got from Brahma—cannot be killed at day or night, and he can't be killed by human, man, or demon. He can't be killed inside or outside either. So he terrorizes the world. Vishnu transforms into Narasingha and appears out of a column and kills him during twilight. For me, as someone who's in and of, and between so many languages and worlds and disciplines, I see a strong resonance with this image of Narasingha, with this powerful story about embodying the middle ground. But also, learning how to be in, and go to the extreme. The extreme of American, the extreme of classical dance, the extreme of experimental filmmaking—going anywhere in between those things and finding that I don't need to place myself in anyone else's spectrum. And recognizing myself as a center that contains the spectrum, and in a way in which I respect and value other people as their own centers as well.

K: How does this spectrum work in relation to classical dance? How do you place yourself within the tradition of classical dance because it's a very strict spectrum as we know?

P: So, for me, something that I'm really mindful of is that I don't allow others to label me. For example, some artists label themselves as traditionalists. On this basis, they somehow gain authority and power or authenticity. I don't see that there's any credibility by calling yourself a traditionalist in the sense, because often times being

traditional is about controlling what other people do but then giving yourselves the freedom to do what you want. In my understanding of the history of this dance, it's always changing. It's always evolving, and the power of dance is exactly that. There's a certain spiritual core that stays alive and stays vibrant, and stays resilient and stays timeless. Timeless doesn't necessarily mean without change, right? It stays timeless and this is being balanced by the changes of the world. The changes in technology of that world, the changes in politics. But then also, the changes of the people who carry the art form. I don't understand how people growing up in a Buddhist country (i.e. Cambodia), living in a Buddhist country, can even imagine this idea of no change. Because our religion, our philosophy, is so much about impermanence.

I'm an authentic artist. My demand for the rigour of the technique is higher than many other people here in Cambodia. So for me that word 'authentic' is really problematic because some dancers think they are traditional, or they present themselves as being traditional. To the outside eye, it might look like they are doing things as they have always been done. But to the inside eye, it's like, actually no, why is your technique like this? Why is your costume like this?

For people who are on the inside, we see the change in classical dance happening all the time. And it is not just now. There is this book called *Saramani* which was written during the French colonial period about the life of a dancer in the palace. One of the things it describes is that the teachers in the palace were constantly adding new elements to their dance, and taking things they didn't like out, as they were competing with each other for the attention and favour of the king. That sense of competition has always led to innovation. This art form has never been a stagnant art form. I don't want people to confuse being stagnant with being still, or confuse being stagnant with being authentic, and confuse being stagnant with being traditional.

K: There is an incredible amount of work that you put into the precision of the gestures. And there is a tremendous amount of work that the dancers you train do with their bodies, with their minds also. How does this emphasis on precision and hard work enter into the discussion of authenticity and integrity in dance?

P: For me as a teacher, and I can probably say the same thing about my own teacher, is that the physical perfection of the technique is something of core and primal value. However, I allow for freedom with that as well. It's this balance. My students need to be the most precise and refined dancers that they can be. And so, I'm constantly transforming myself as a teacher and pushing them as my students. But then, on top of that, there's the sense of finding freedom within our limitations, right? For me, in my classical dance I find freedom. I find freedom in my limitations. So, for outsiders they might think that the codified nature of the dance makes it limiting. That you can't say this, or you can't do that, but for me, the more that I understand this language, the more I realise, 'Wow, I can do anything I want with it.' And, I have the freedom to try and embody it in the most perfected and refined and elevated sense that I can imagine and when I'm able to feel that, there's a powerful sense of freedom and liberation.

R: You stress the importance of being precise in your dance and to become the best dancer one can be. But these codes aren't limitations but rather give you a sense of freedom. Isn't there an interesting contradiction?

P: Yeah, well, maybe some people would not like this analogy. But similar to love, it is like something sticky; it's about attachments, perhaps even about bondage. But

love can also be very liberating and freeing from, from those bondages, right? It's the same way for me with the dance.

K: This idea of dance as limiting, but at the same time, liberating, finding liberation within is a different way of thinking about boundaries and transgressions. So in your dance and as an artist, do you see that you're transgressing something or is this rather our reading of it as outsiders rather than your own as an artist?

P: I think that many people would consider me a transgressive artist. Both people who are practitioners and people who are just general observers. However, I don't consider myself a transgressive artist because everything I do comes from a place of love, comes from a place of care, comes from a place of searching for enlightenment—the way that the Buddha did. I give you an example. In his search for enlightenment, the Buddha left his family, left his home, left his teachers. And he strayed in the forest before finding the Middle Path. I think it's important for young artists and old artists, no matter what age, to have that spirit of being able to detach ourselves from our environments of comfort, whether that's our homes, our families, our cultures, our language, our behaviours. To detach ourselves in search of something higher and fuller. My own explorations as an artist, I find it to be a very Buddhist journey. I've made "mistakes" along the way, however, if I didn't make those "mistakes," I wouldn't be the teacher that I am today. I wouldn't be able to create jobs, to give people passports and opportunities to perform internationally, to allow for the next generation of young artists to be seen on the international stage. So, for me, I don't see myself as transgressive. Rather, I see myself as performing my role and duty as an artist to serve a tradition that was nearly destroyed in the genocide and by using it as a tool to inspire the enlightenment of myself and of my community—the enlightenment of the world. And to serve this tradition by making it one of love and knowledge and hope, magic, and fearlessness, and kindness and compassion. I know that there are people who look at the things that I do, and they're not comfortable with it. But even if they don't agree with everything that I do, they acknowledge my effort and they acknowledge the integrity of my work, and they acknowledge the integrity of the technique with which I teach and perform.

K: The concept of beauty appears very important and central in your work. You talk about this a lot in your interviews. Many people who watch your performances very often they say, 'Oh this was beautiful' but the beauty that you refer to, the complexity of that beauty, appears different. Can you explain to us this understanding of beauty, and what does it mean in the context of your work in Cambodia specifically?

P: You know, when I talk about beauty I'm not talking about superficial beauty. In Khmer, we say *sambok*, which means 'shell.' What I mean with beauty is this inner soul, inner spirit, inner life of a person, of an object, of a moment, of a place that is precious, that is valuable, and that should be cared for. I grew up very poor. I grew up surrounded by violence. I think that the poorest people are those who don't have beauty. I mean the beauty of knowledge, and the knowledge of beauty. So, the ability to recognise, see, nurture, and create beauty is something very essential in my practice. Beauty, you can see everywhere. I think that when we see it, we find value in our life. We find value in our experiences. We find value in our community and our sense of being. Beauty gives us purpose. For example, the last beautiful thing that I saw was in relation to the war in Ukraine. I saw a short video of maybe just ten people stopping a row of Russian tanks from coming into their city. You know, they were not armed, just crying and screaming for these soldiers to leave. To see them confront the Russian soldiers like that, that is beauty. Beauty is bravery.

It's courage. It's love. It's unity. It's hope. It's compassion. For me, if you don't have that as a person, if you don't have that as an artist, if your work does not have that, you have nothing. Beauty allows us to see and to feel the urgency and the value of our lives.

K: Seeing beauty is not something everybody can do. I think it also requires certain sensitivities to the world, and hope to be able to embrace the world. It seems that in the many experiences of your life, where you came from and what you decided to do and be, beauty and hope are extremely interrelated. On that, you say often that you're working with classical dance form in Cambodia and that your context was not the genocide in Cambodia. So this is not what you speak to, but at the same time in some ways you relate to it because you're working with a form that almost got erased during that particular historical time. So next to beauty and hope, is there also a reference to history in your work? Or do you work from the present towards the future?

P: I'm really so aware of the history of Cambodia. The understanding of history is something very important to me because how can you move forward if you don't know what came before you? But as I mentioned on that spectrum, I don't see myself as only the past or only the future, or only the present. For me, those things are simultaneous. They are layered. They are going back and forth. In many ways, we're moving into the past and not moving into the future, right? I mean, my impetus to create, my impetus to build in this tradition and in Cambodia, a lot of it reflects the fact that I am the child of refugees, who survived the Khmer Rouge genocide. It reflects the fact that I am a student of a teacher who survived the genocide. But I don't want that genocide to define who I am because it doesn't. However, I don't want to dismiss it as well because it shaped my parents and my family and my teacher. It shaped this country and the people in my community and the people in my society. So, I have a responsibility as I stand in this place, in the present. I have a responsibility to be aware of what is behind me in order to know what is the best step for the future.

R: Another theme in your work that is also central to our Special Issue in this Journal is the theme of gendered bodies. If I put in front of you, this idea of bodies as gendered, how do you see it resonating with your work?

P: Prumsodun ok & NATYARASA is the first gay dance company in Cambodia. But we're not the first gay dancers in Cambodia. We are, however, the first ones to come out in order to mark a clear moment in time and space for LGBTQ people in this tradition and within Cambodian society. However, I have come to understand the complications of labelling ourselves as a gay dance company because for me where I grew up in the United States, gay culture can sometimes be very racist, can be very misogynistic, can be very classist, can be very consumerist. And can be very unaccepting of people who are not the standard, you know, gay white, male, skinny, muscle . . . right? So for me, taking on this label I wanted to make sure that we don't fall into the limitations of what being gay means in the United States. We own and define that word in a way that's authentic to ourselves, to our own experiences and to our own community. For example, we had a performance for a few friends and one of them said this was bigger than gay. It was universal. Also, we had a performance in Thailand and one of the professors, he was the former chair of Chulalongkorn University. He came and said, 'Don't call yourselves a gay dance company, there was nothing gay about your performance. Those were women that I saw on stage.' And then, a reviewer from the *Bangkok Post* described the performance as the most radically queer thing where these young boys were in wigs,

but they were topless. So you could see that they were male bodies, but then their energy is really very feminine. And, although they were performing as men and women, the narration was the love between two men.

Very recently, there is this young Cambodian-born researcher, who's following us from Hong Kong. After observing us for a little and, and watching me teach, this researcher remarked that sexuality is not something at the forefront. Rather, it's something that's always there in the back. What's important here is art and people to people connections. For me, that is important because labels and identities, they give a sense of community, and with that, visibility and power. But they can also become a cage and a prison. Maybe it's because I'm a Khmer American. Maybe it's just the nature of who I am as a person, but I'm able to balance these extremes, as mentioned earlier of being gay, but also being universal, of being Khmer, but also being American and international. And being a Khmer classical dancer, but being able to be presented in contemporary dance festivals. It's this balance that I have.

I think part of it comes from the fact that I'm confident of who I am and my experiences. And I also don't allow for anyone to define who I am. I define myself on my own terms and my work speaks that way as well. So, sometimes it looks very traditional. It's like a devotional work to the Earth goddess, using traditional dance and music and costuming, even though there's a lot of innovations happening within that tradition. And sometimes I'm dragging someone across the stage by their hair, which is something more, physical and movement based, pure movement-based and more theatrical, it's more interdisciplinary. All of that is me.

K: That's very interesting because this discussion also brings us to the concept of gender and how gender is defined from mostly often from Western perspective. These concepts of gendered bodies, of men in dance and male bodies in dance history have been circulating differently in different contexts.

R: To follow up on the above, is there something particular that men's bodies do to Khmer classical dance?

P: Oh, they don't do anything. We're not the first male dancers. If you look at the inscriptions from ancient days, you see that men were being offered to the temples as dancers. And actually, if you want to see Khmer classical dance aesthetics in the ancient days, you have to look at male iconography. You have to look at the iconography of male bodies actually, to best see the connection between dance today and dance in the ancient days. So, actually, it does nothing [laughs].

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