

**INSIGHTS** > Exploring Female Empowerment through Dance in Cambodia

BY **KERRINE GOH**  
24 JAN 2017

## Exploring Female Empowerment through Dance in Cambodia



Contributed by Ellen Steinmuller



*Ellen Steinmuller reports on the three-month artistic residency that she spent in Cambodia to develop a choreography addressing the issue of domestic violence with the first and only all-female contemporary dance company, New Cambodian Artists.*

<https://vimeo.com/200800542>

During the autumn of 2016, I ventured out to Siem Reap in Cambodia to undertake a three-month artistic residency with the pioneering all-female contemporary dance company, **New Cambodian Artists (NCA)**. I have previously worked with NCA as a contemporary dance technique trainer over a two-month period in 2015 as part of a self-funded professional development initiative. I have been deeply touched by the artistic talent, strength and courage of these young artists. To be able to return to work with the company, this time in a choreographic capacity to develop a piece on the issue of domestic violence, was a dream come true.

*'Kom Lang Satrey' (Power Women), is the successful outcome of this*

residency. The piece constituted the first work developed by a visiting artist and is an important addition to the company's repertoire in disseminating their mission of female empowerment through dance. It was premiered in Phnom Penh in November at the Institut Français Culturel as part of the Dignity Project 2016.

### **The challenges of artistic community engagement in Cambodia**

'Kom Lang Satrey' aims to be a **community engagement piece** to raise awareness of the issue of domestic violence and inspire change in the perception of women's roles in Cambodian society. However, reaching Cambodian audiences with this important message is a challenging task.

Cambodia faces a lack of cultural infrastructure that is hard to appreciate from a Western perspective. The radical policies of the Khmer Rouge regime in the 70s left Cambodia deeply scarred in many ways. The effect of the total annihilation of Cambodian arts, with 90% of artists killed, can still be felt today. The result is a lack of artistic development and funding as well as a lack of public accessibility and engagement.





### The pioneering work of New Cambodian Artists

Since 2012, NCA is making history as the **first and only all-female officially registered contemporary dance company in Cambodia**. NCA is an initiative by Dutch theatre director Bob Ruijendaal. Together with the Company Director, Khon Sreyneang, they have assembled, trained and developed an innovative dance company with a unique repertoire; a fusion of the rich Apsara tradition with contemporary improvisation, choreography and music with the intent to foster growth and understanding of contemporary Khmer expression.



Not only are NCA artistic pioneers, they are also pushing social boundaries in pursuing and disseminating their mission of **female empowerment through dance**. It is evident that being part of NCA has transformed the dancers' lives, helping them become confident, independent, empowered and professional young women. The unique artistic vocabulary of NCA could not offer a more appropriate language to raise awareness of domestic violence and inspire change in the perception of women's roles in Cambodian society.

### **Making this residency a reality**

Being the only all-female contemporary dance company in Cambodia certainly has its challenges. **The company does not receive any financial support from national or international funding bodies**. Their work is sustained solely from the income received from performances primarily for Western audiences.



My first and vital task in developing this project was securing funding. I was very fortunate to receive support for my travel expenses through the Lisa Ullman Travelling Scholarship Fund, a prestigious mobility fund for UK-based dancers. Securing funds to finance my stay proved to be more of a struggle. But I have found a creative and rewarding solution in the new and blooming arena of crowdfunding. With the kind support of the public, I was able to secure sufficient funding through Generosity, an online fundraising platform for socially-minded causes.

Additionally, NCA successfully applied for further financial support for the artistic development through NGO-CEDAW, a non-governmental organisation to monitor and promote the implementation of Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). As a successful applicant for their Dignity Project, NCA had the opportunity to develop the new repertoire and perform it as part of the Dignity Project Festival 2016 in Phnom Penh in November.

### **The Creative Development of 'Kom Lang Satrei'**

It was absolutely paramount to create a **choreography, which would be accessible to a Cambodian audience**. Due to the lack of cultural infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, the broad population of Cambodia does not regularly engage with contemporary art and might not be familiar with abstract symbolic expressions. Therefore the artistic language had to be accessible whilst challenging to current conceptions of art and women's role in society.





During my artistic research for the piece, it became evident that oppressive cultural traditions have left women in Cambodia vulnerable to violence and abuse as it offers a fertile ground for the normalisation of the issue. The tradition of subservience and inferiority of women particularly manifests in the 'Chbab Srey' (Women's law). This traditional code of conduct conveys to women that they are inferior to men and contributes to a culture of silence. As one can imagine, there are many challenges in breaking this silence, voicing the unspeakable and engaging in a meaningful dialogue. As an artist and therapist, I do strongly believe that dance holds transformative powers; it can inspire change and has the potential to express and communicate when words fail us.

I have introduced the 'Chbab Srey' as a central artistic stimulus to generate movement material for the piece. The dancers' authentic and raw responses constitute the core of 'Kom Lang Satrey'. Their emotional

physical expressions have guided me in creating the overall narrative of the piece, a story of transforming suffering into strength.



It has certainly been a steep learning curve for me to translate my Western understanding of contemporary dance into such a different context. The expertise of Bob Ruijendaal in his role as artistic director has been immensely valuable, with his guidance, I was able to develop a narrative and a symbolic expression that was engaging and accessible to a Cambodian audience while maintaining the artistic integrity of NCA.

*As with other pieces of NCA's repertoire, the stories the dancers tell are deeply personal and yet so universal. In 'Kom Lang Satrey', they share their own pain, anger and struggle of being trapped in oppressive social and cultural structures and demonstrate what it takes to break out and turn pain into power. The piece thus showcases them as what they are: inspiring role models for a young Cambodian generation.*

- For more information on the work of Ellen Steinmuller, please visit: [www.ellensteinmuller.com](http://www.ellensteinmuller.com)



- For more information on the work of New Cambodian Artists, please visit: [www.newcambodianartists.org](http://www.newcambodianartists.org)

This work has been generously supported by:

- Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund
- NGO-CEDAW

*Ellen Steinmuller is a professionally trained dancer, a highly experienced community dance artist and a qualified Dance Movement Psychotherapist with substantial clinical practice. German-born and based in London, her current professional portfolio encompasses freelance engagements in the areas of art, education and therapy, primarily working with vulnerable and marginalised populations.*

*Ellen's artistic work is focused on the development of innovative and original pieces of choreography with the primary aim of effecting empowerment and transformation of performers and audience alike. Her artistic process unites her insight as an experienced movement practitioner with her expertise as a Dance Movement Psychotherapist.*

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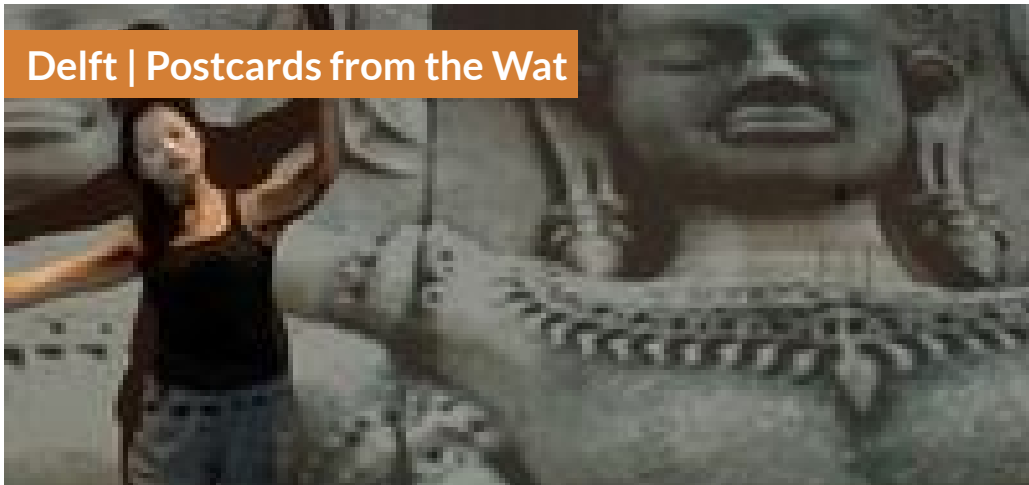
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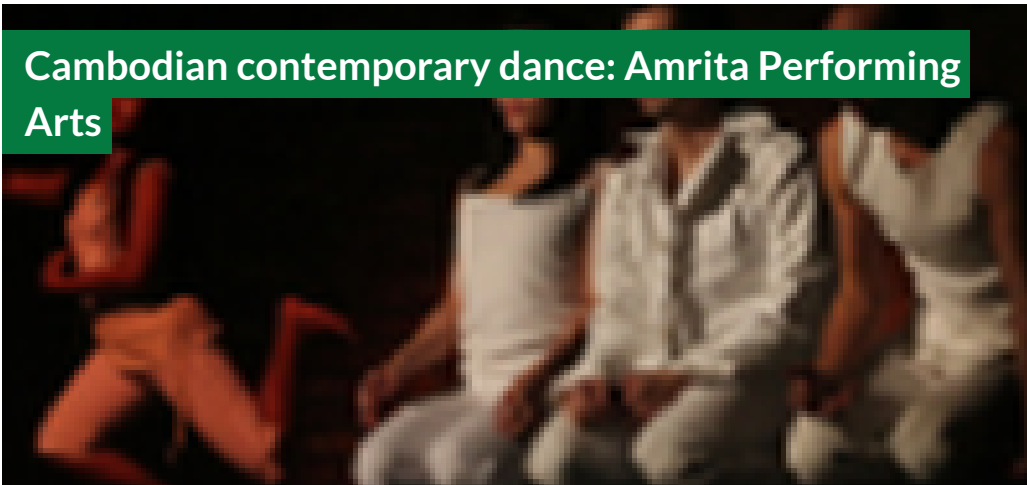
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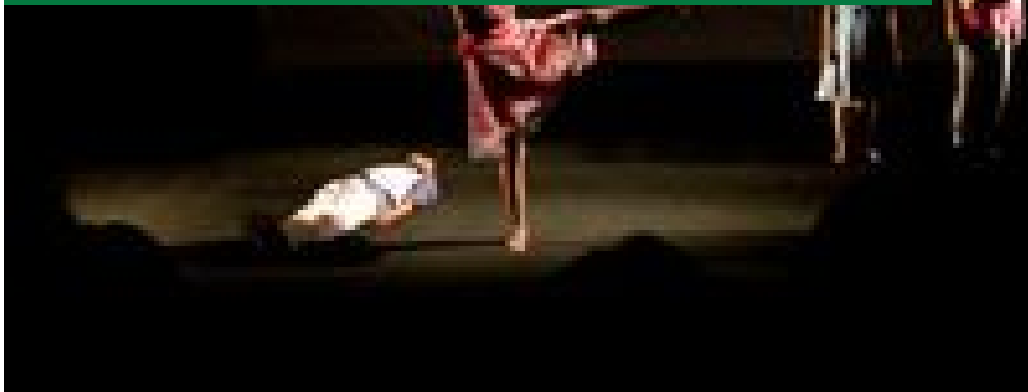


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