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ast Asia | The story of Epic Arts | Cambodia

Contributed by Ben Valentine

This month, ASEF culture360 starts a new collaboration with ArtsEquator.com, an online platform that brings together information, articles, events and ideas on the arts from Southeast Asia. Through a series of 5 co-commissioned articles, we will look at arts groups, artists and performances in Southeast Asia that are comprised of or are addressing the issue of artists with disabilities. In this first article, Ben Valentine travels to Cambodia to meet the team at Epic Arts. Their mission? To bring people with and without disabilities together through the arts. This is their story.

[caption id="attachment_64201" align="aligncenter" width="620"]

Epic Arts

quarterly showcase[/caption]

Last year, I was introduced to a Youtube parody video of Taylor Swift's Shake it Off by a few Facebook friends. Using the memetic power of the catchy pop tune, the video had flooded my dashboard. Mixing the music with break dancing, futuristic robotic dancing, the chapei dong veng, a traditional Cambodian two-stringed, long-necked guitar, and even the *apsara*, the video remix was distinctly Cambodian.

The *apsara* is perhaps Cambodia's most prized cultural symbol. Depicted on sacred religious sites such as Angkor Wat, *apsaras* were created from the churning of the ocean of milk. They are heavenly deities embodying beauty and grace. Their dance form is considered by many as the highest art form in Cambodian culture.

[caption id="attachment_64199" align="aligncenter" width="620"]

Epic Arts grounds[/caption]

But unlike many of the countless remixes, most of the performers have some physical or mental disabilities. The project is by Epic Arts, an inclusive arts organisation based Kampot, Cambodia, and registered as a NGO in the UK. The main star, and apsara, is played by Onn Sokny, one of two Co-Directors of Epic Arts.

When seeking assistance for shooting the video, some organizations did not want to be involved with the video, fearing repercussions from the government for somehow "tainting" their nation's inviolable symbol. Ultimately, arts organization, Cambodian Living Arts (CLA), bravely stepped up, and we see some of their dancers and costumes featured.

The video was a success; comments were largely positive and they attracted a **quarter of a million views** in the first week, many coming from within Cambodia. Onn told me in her office that, "we wanted to be respectful of Cambodian culture, but we will not hide our own creativity and expression." She insists that **physically handicapped Cambodians have a place in every facet of Cambodian life, especially the arts**. Accordingly, the video, and other like them, are just one tactic in Epic Art's toolbox for engendering positive visibility for all Cambodians.

[caption id="attachment_64193" align="aligncenter" width="620"]

Epic Arts preparing for their quarterly showcase[/caption]

Like so many countries, Cambodia's treatment of those with mental disabilities can be appalling. There is a toxic mixture of mental disorders lingering in the older generation that survived the Khmer Rouge, a virtually non-existent health care system for mental disorders, especially in rural areas, all coupled with abject poverty. Birth defects are considered punishments for bad *karma* from previous lives.

Here, it is not uncommon for people with more aggressive mental disorders to be left chained up at home, to protect themselves and to protect the family and neighbors in the absence of more humane treatment options and understanding. The practice is so common that in 2015 the Transcultural Pyschosocial Organisation started "Operation Unchain," to treat patients in the provinces, unable to come to the few hospitals in the cities. Funds however are quickly running out.

[caption id="attachment_64196" align="aligncenter" width="620"]

Po Sakun at Epic Arts[/caption]

This is the kind of inhuman treatment that Epic Arts strives to fight. Epic Arts was first founded in 2001 with a project creating dances with children in Nanning, China. Seeing the need, they decided to focus on Cambodia, first opening **Epic Arts Cafe in Kampot in 2006,** and then building a **fully accessible arts center in 2009.** The center is the first of its kind in Southeast Asia, and offers inclusive visual and performing arts classes and education. While Epic Arts focuses on people with physical or mental disabilities, it is open to all.

One of Epic Arts most active external-facing programmes are their performances around the country. Here, young Cambodians can see and, most importantly, find joy through performers who would may usually be ostracized for their differences. While their Youtube videos are great for their more viral outreach, on the ground performances that engender dialogues between the performers and everyday

Cambodians is ultimately more positive.

[caption id="attachment_64198" align="aligncenter" width="620"]

Epic Arts Cafe downstairs[/caption]

This ethos moves into every aspect of Epic Arts' work. At Epic Arts Cafe, now my favorite in Kampot, the food is delicious, the place is well run, and the coffee is strong; the fact that it's run almost entirely by people with various disabilities is an aside. Although it remains a incredible challenge to make a living wage in Cambodia, Epic Arts wants more than just survival for their members. Their videos, the performances around the country, and their cafe are all quietly putting handicapped people in valued positions; positions where they are in contact with the public, and are appreciated.

While the work for positive visibility is invaluable, the real work comes within. Fighting stigma, fighting mental and physical boundaries requires hard work and support. Po Sakun is a great example and value of this underserved population. Growing up in a wheelchair in Kampot, Po's neighbors told his mother not to waste money and time sending him to school; few job options would be available to him. Po learned about Epic Arts through their community outreach programme and started studying sign language. In 2011, passionate about their mission, he began as a volunteer receptionist before becoming a full-time administrator.

Before coming to Epic Arts, Po was fixing electronics in Phnom Penh, a fine job for many Cambodians, but Po is obviously brilliant, not to mention creatively oriented. Po is well versed in three languages, and now is one of Epic Art's star dancers, working as their Workshop Coordinator.Before, people looked down at Po, but not on stage. Po's passion are the performance tours around the country, where he and his fellow performers show those very people all that they can do.

> *"The more we go out, the more we will change their thinking," he told me on Epic Arts' lush grounds. "Epic Arts has the same goal that is in my heart. I want to change people's perspectives about us."*

[caption id="attachment_64195" align="aligncenter" width="620"]

Epic Arts grounds[/caption]

My last day at Epic Arts I watched their quarterly **Epic Arts Showcase**, a series of public performances, open to anyone, especially in Kampot. School groups and expats alike came to enjoy their latest performances, from short plays by the youngest children, to the older, more experienced performance troupe. One scene of the last performance struck me. A young man who had possessed such an exuberant stage presence throughout the day, suddenly transformed into a dejected beggar. He crawled on the floor, arms and desperate eyes reaching out to the audience for assistance, anything. Watching, we remember how close many of these performers and students may be to such a fate, not to mention to being left chained up at home. The performance is a metaphor for all that Epic Arts hopes to be. Bravely overcoming all the economic and social obstacles in their way, publically, loudly, creatively.

Ben Valentine is an independent writer living in Cambodia, where he is currently working on his first book. Ben covers contemporary art and culture for magazines and websites around the world, and has written or spoken for Hyperallergic, SFAQ, YBCA, the ACLU, de Young Museum, and the Museum of the Moving Image, to name a few. Follow Ben on Twitter @bennnyv.

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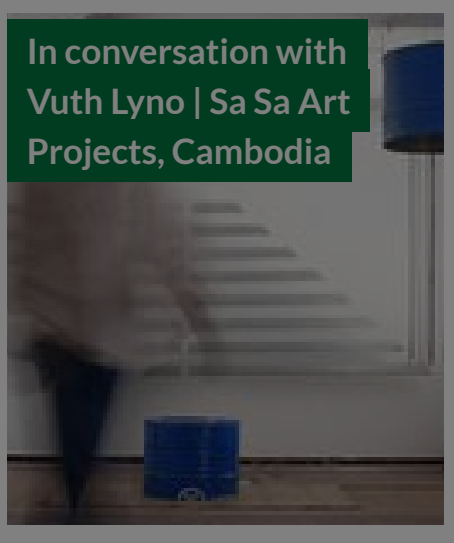

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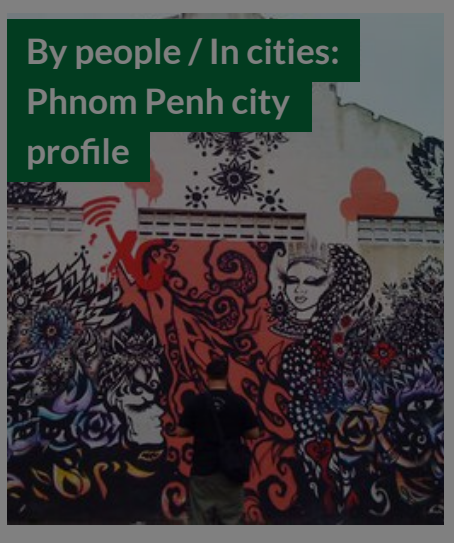

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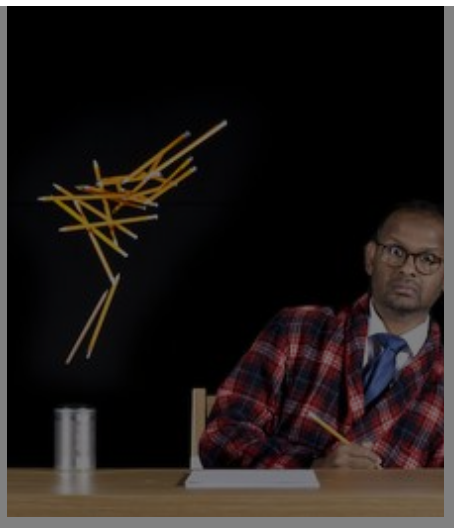

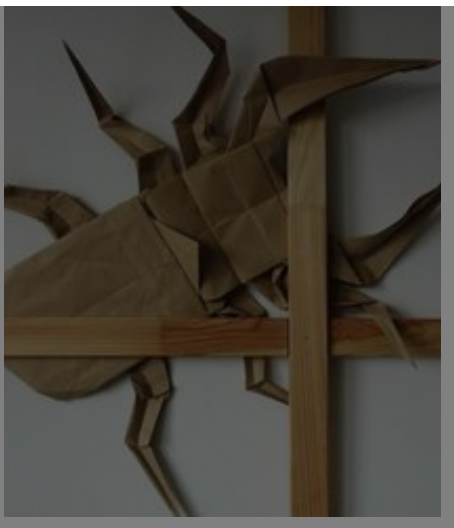

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