

The background of the entire page is a dark blue, textured surface. On the left side, there are two figures of Cambodian dancers. The upper figure is a golden, stylized dancer with a tall, pointed headdress, wearing a yellow sash and a purple skirt. The lower figure is a more realistic, light-skinned dancer in a green sash and a reddish-pink skirt. Both are in dynamic, expressive poses.

The Eternal Gesture

TRANSMEDIA PROJECT
About the Royal Ballet of Cambodia

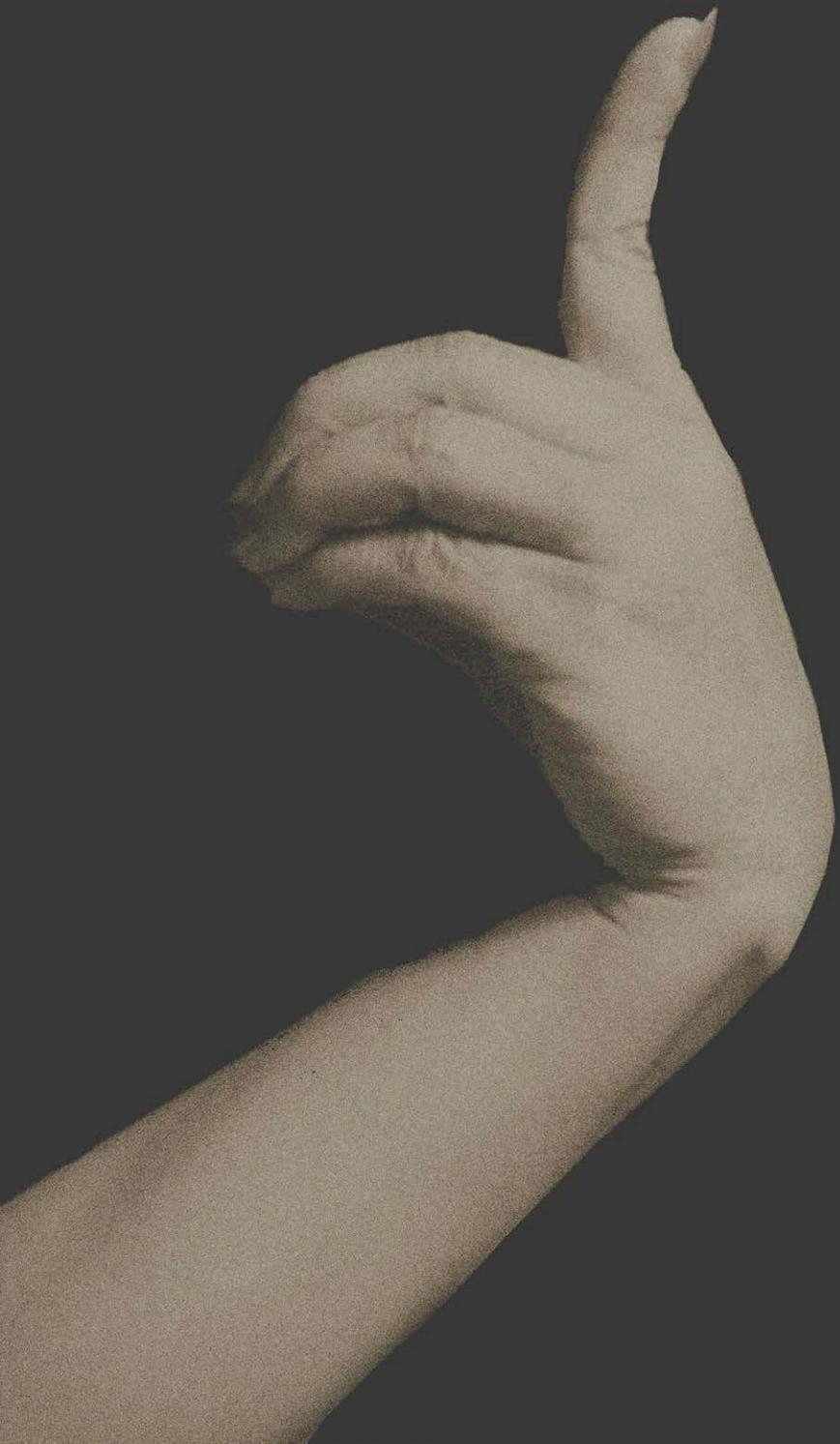
DOCUMENTARY

Starting with the basic gesture describing the cycle of life, we retrace the history of the Ballet, focusing on the importance of nature and spirituality.

SMARTPHONE APP

A smartphone and tablet application, to reach out directly to young people and retrace in detail the history of the Ballet Royal and its gestures.

The Eternal Gesture



The tree grows...

Summary

Foreword.....	page 5
Project Note.....	page 6
Director Statement.....	page 13
Content.....	page 14
Audiovisual Processing.....	page 18

Foreword

Particularly appreciated, the Royal Ballet of Cambodia is at the very heart of Khmer culture. It is one of the most ancient dances, one of the oldest that still illuminate us today. Since its birth, which dates back to the Angkorian period in the 12th century, the dance has had a sacred and symbolic role and is the messenger of kings to the gods and ancestors. The dances evoke the founding legends of the Khmer people and highlight the virtues of supernatural heroes.

With modesty as the watchword, the gestures are elegant, subtle and paradoxically almost immobile. The faces, which once had the heaviness of white blush, remain impassive and only slight smiles are sometimes perceptible. Whereas in Western ballet one tends to free oneself from the rules of gravity by making dancers flutter and whirl endlessly, Cambodian classical dance is the opposite, with movements firmly anchored in the ground and heavy, ornate costumes. Each of the dancers' gestures evokes a word, expressing Nature and human emotions, the body eventually forming a sentence. Body poetry. The aesthetics of the Royal Ballet of Cambodia makes its singularity.

In the late 1960s, the Royal Ballet seems to be doing well, thanks in particular to the efforts of Queen Sisowath Kossamak. At the same time, the Kingdom seemed to be living peaceful days and enjoying an economic boom never before experienced and was modernizing, thanks in particular to the actions of Norodom Sihanouk and the help of the West. Although Cambodia was neutral with regard to the Vietnam-U.S. conflict, Nixon launched

Operation Menu in 1969 and de facto bombed the border thinking that Vietnamese troops were on Cambodian soil. Cambodia would then become the most bombed country in history. The following year, Sihanouk was overthrown and Cambodia sank into a civil war that would last five long years. In 1975, Phnom Penh fell into the hands of the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot then established the horror that we know. The Royal Ballet was severely affected by Pol Pot's madness, and 90% of the corps du ballet disappeared.

After Pol Pot's fall in 1979, the dance masters and musicians met again and decided to re-form the Royal Ballet and restore it to its former splendor under the aegis of Princess Norodom Buppha Devi. After years of effort, the Ballet is unanimously recognized worldwide and will be classified as an oral and intangible heritage by UNESCO in 2003. However, although the Royal Ballet no longer seems to be in danger as it once was, it remains threatened by lack of funds and insufficient international recognition.

Despite the splendor of the Royal Ballet and the enthusiasm it represents for the Khmer people, we realized that today it does not benefit from strong media coverage or communication. With this in mind, we would like to realize a transmedia project that incorporates a documentary and a smartphone application. In this way, we hope that the Royal Ballet can continue to exist and, by offering several points of entry, spread to a wide audience.



Project Note

Project Note



George Groslier

It was with the tools of his time that George Groslier immortalized, in 1927, the dance postures of the Royal Ballet of Cambodia, through a remarkable photographic work of 900 photographs.

Already at that time, the Royal Ballet was threatened by «*the evolution of Cambodia and the influence of the West*». Then it was through the Pol Pot regime that this sumptuous art was practically eradicated. Today, the Royal Ballet can still have difficulties, particularly due to a lack of financial and other resources, and the risk of being relegated to the rank of tourist attraction exists. The risk of disappearance seems to follow the Ballet and the dancers' glow may diminish. No doubt, and hopefully, this will never happen since there will always be people passionate about this art and talents to bring it back from the ashes, as Princess Norodom Buppha Devi was able to do, who gave the Ballet back the brilliance it merits.



Picture from Groslier

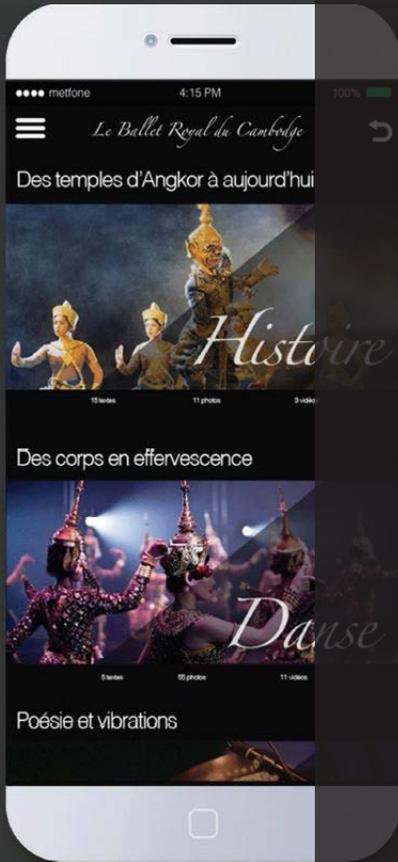
George Groslier, through his work, was a visionary. He was already aware that the traditional Khmer dance was fragile, despite the grace with which the dancers seem to be touched.

Today, technological and broadcasting means have evolved. Let's be the George Groslier of 2021! Let's keep track of the Royal Ballet and broadcast it to as many people as possible. And it is with this in mind that we believe it makes sense to multiply the number of media in order to reach all audiences.

This is how we propose a documentary accompanied by a smartphone application that retrace the history of the Royal Ballet and explains this art of gesture.

We strongly believe in our project and the potential usefulness of the Royal Ballet.

Project Note



App design



Dancer

There is no smartphone application dealing with the Royal Ballet and we are convinced that it will find resonance with the Khmer youth (and the world) who want to know more about their culture. The Bophana Centre created in August 2017 the «Khmer Rouge History» application. They have the ambition of 200,000 downloads internationally and are currently receiving excellent reviews. A parallel can be made with our desire of application, since although they do not deal with the same subject, they remain in the field of education and the transmission of an essential element of Cambodia's history.

The content of our application will be photos, videos, interviews, explanatory and informative writings. The user, thanks to a very simple usability of the application and an intuitive navigation, will then be able to retrace the history of the Royal Ballet, notably current, since we imagine a substantial part reserved for the Buppha Devi years, the leading figure of the Royal Ballet of today. In addition, the photos and videos in the application, as well as the explanatory texts, will give a concrete insight into what the Royal Ballet of Cambodia is like to users discovering this art, without ever having seen it. In order to make this discipline accessible to all, as far as possible, we think it may be very interesting to add a category dedicated to explaining some gestures in the application, with photos and texts to support it. As a result, the novices will then have some leads to decipher the dancers' movements, their language, and appreciate the poetry of the gestures all the more.

The aim of the documentary will be to retrace in general terms the History of the Royal Ballet which is intrinsically linked to the History of Cambodia. The ambition is not historical, we do not want to train novice spectators, but to make them aware of what an artistic discipline can go through and that in this case, although the roots of the Royal Ballet of Cambodia are millennia old, its recent history has shown that the madness of Humans could make it disappear. The documentary will also want to describe the most important gestures of the dancers among the 4000 gestures of the basic repertoire, so that the spectator understands that each gesture has a meaning, while emphasizing the importance of nature and spirituality.



Then gives a leaf...



Documentary

In front of a black canvas background, a graceful hand adorned with gold moves slowly. It is a whole country, a history, a culture that comes to life on stage. It is more than 1000 years and more than 4000 gestures, composing a body poetry, which continue to live on today.

The Eternal Gesture is a documentary about the Royal Ballet of Cambodia, dance listed as a Unesco World Heritage Site. Proposing as a starting point the basic movement describing the cycle of life, we retrace the history of the Ballet, which is intrinsically linked to the tumultuous history of the Kingdom, focusing on the importance of nature and spirituality that we find in each of the gestures that compose the basic repertoire that is a thousand years old.



Director Statement

*Grace
Beauty in its purest form*

Emotion

A gesture that has crossed the centuries

The Gesture of Eternity

The audience always ends in ecstasy, the thunders of applause resound again and again. Whether Khmer or from somewhere else. It is certain that the depth of the language of the gesture was not perfectly grasped; after all, there would be more than 4000 movements. Similarly, what has just been told has been difficult to understand. And yet, the eyes are full of emotions. Intense aesthetic experience. The dancers have just brought to life an art that is over 1000 years old.

3 years ago, I was that audience too. I discovered the Royal Ballet during a tour in Hong Kong. By invitation of Prince Tesso Sisowath, I had the opportunity to follow the dancers and make a short video report. I only knew the Ballet by name then. I saw this art then in his intimacy of preparations and rehearsals, until the performances. I still remember, and forever, when I first saw the dancers rehearse on stage. The gesture, with its precision and slowness, its languor, seemed unreal. The gaze of the dancers was deeper and more intimidating than that of the nymphs. I regretted having to beat my eyelashes, so much I did not want to lose any of that body poetry.

Accompanied by Emmanuel Scheffer, who was then my internship tutor in a French media in Phnom Penh, and who was therefore at the origin of this video project on the Ballet, we wanted to go further than this short report. All the more so as we quickly realized that the Royal Ballet did not enjoy a strong media coverage or a strong communication either internationally, but also within the Kingdom itself, although it occupies a central and sacred place in Khmer culture. We then had the idea of conducting an ambitious project for the Royal Ballet, including a documentary.

The challenge of the documentary will be to reveal the secrets of the Royal Ballet and in particular its gestures. We will follow the dance troupe through rehearsals, where final adjustments are made, to performances. We will also focus on deciphering a few gestures so that the spectator is fully aware that the gestures have their own language. For aesthetic reasons, but also for clarity and legibility, the sequences expressing the gestures will be made on a black background, with only the dancer on stage. A voice-over will then come to explain the gesture. We will focus in particular on a basic movement evoking the cycle of life through the tree and which will be distilled throughout the film.

First the birth, with the hand of the dancer who plants the seed and mimics the growth of a tree. The troupe of the Royal Ballet is then born in the temples of the Kingdom. Rain, symbol of life and fertility. Then the hand is transformed into a leaf which will give a flower and then a fruit. The life. The Ballet is brilliant and is exported abroad. The lotus flower shines, spiritual elevation. And the fruit falls. The hand falls. Life stops. The Khmer Rouge. Annihilation. Finally, the cycle begins again. Life begins again. Everything has to be rebuilt. The cycle begins again. From the waters come the Apsaras, the Royal Ballet becomes a pride and a national symbol. The historical sequences will be treated by the projection of photographs and videos, also explained by a voice-over, under the gaze of today's dancers in order to create a link between past and present.

This film is therefore necessary in many ways. First of all, for the Khmers who will see the behind-the-scenes of their art so sacred and loved, but also on the international scene since the documentary will be aimed at neophytes. Also, this film will be important for the Royal Ballet itself as we continue the conservation work it has begun. This film will help to keep this Eternal Gesture forever.

History

Origins and birth of the Royal Ballet

The Royal Ballet is believed to be the oldest living art form still danced today. A dance remarkable for the slowness and grace of its gestures, its origin is said to go back more than 1000 years. It would be King Jayavarman II, considered to be the founder of the Angkor kingdom, who loved to surround himself with sumptuous dancers, dressed lightly, performing choreographies inspired by Reamker legends (Khmer version of the Indian Ramayana, the book of creation). Today, the engravings of this legend can be found on the city of Angkor.



Apsara Carving
Angkor Wat

Splendor of the Ballet

In 1906, King Sisowath travelled to France with his dance troupe. Effect and enthusiasm are present, to such a point that Auguste Rodin will literally fall in love with the Royal Ballet of Cambodia. He will then begin a series of watercolours.

Nevertheless, the first signs of weakness are showing. For Georges Groslier, the influence of the West was a real danger for Khmer dance. As a result, at the beginning of the 20th century, he began a work of memory through photography, as if to perpetuate the Royal Ballet.

Her Majesty The Queen Kossamak will strive to restore the prestige and splendour of the Royal Ballet. She will know how to adapt ancient legends, modernise the ballet while respecting its codes. Under the energy of Queen Kossamak, the Ballet lives its most beautiful hours. In the 1960s, for example, there were more than 500 pupils recruited throughout Khmer society, who could repeat in the best conditions. The Queen also took care to erase all Western influences and shorten the length of performances.

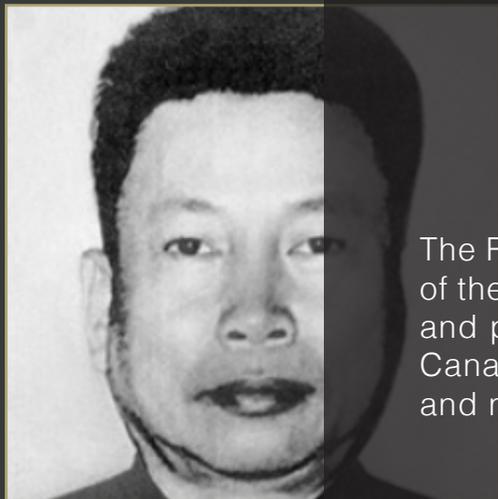
The Queen is considered the inventor of modern ballet. It is her who will stage the legend of Angkor's creation and the famous dance of the Apsaras.



Watercolours of
Rodin

CONTENT

History



Pol Pot

The Royal Ballet during the horror of the Khmer Rouge

The Royal Ballet being a mark of feudal power, it quickly became threatened during the devastating period of the Khmer Rouge in the late 1970s. More than 90% of the country's artists, including dancers, were killed and perished in the work camps. A handful of dancers, about thirty, survived by taking refuge in France, Canada, Thailand or the Americas to flee the regime of Pol Pot. They then met again to open dance schools and make revive the ballet, led by Princess Norodom Buppha Devi.



Princess Buppha Devi

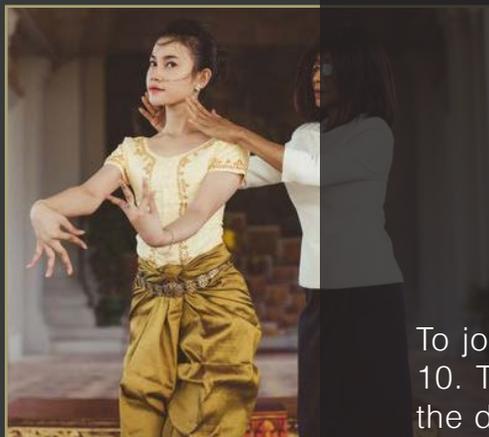
The Renaissance, or the Buppha Devi era

A renowned dancer-star with remarkable beauty, the Princess was commissioned by her father, King Norodom Sihanouk, to reconstitute the Ballet Royal of the past, in 1991. In 1999, she became Minister of Culture. Dance is a lifetime reward for its efforts, and was included in the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2003. The star has recently faded away, in December 2019.

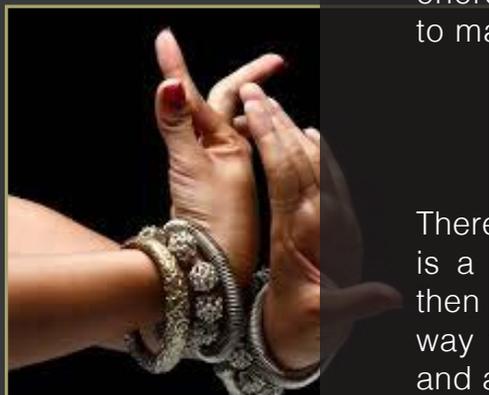
The Art of the Royal Ballet

Rehearsals

To join the Royal Ballet troupe, the dancers begin their apprenticeship very early, often before the age of 10. The dancer's role will be primarily based on her physical qualities and physical appearance. Thus, if the dancer has a small stature and an angelic appearance, she will be given a female role, while a dancer with an imposing physique will be given a male role. Rehearsals take place at Princess Norodom Buppha Devi's home, assisted by her close collaborators. Each movement is carefully examined by the dance teachers, who stand ready to intervene, leaving no millimetres apart. It takes years of rehearsal and practice to master the gesture perfectly.



Adjustment during a rehearsal



A gesture

The language of dance

There are gestures for every action, for combat, there are gestures for love, for crying. Each movement is a sentence. The basic gestures imitate the cycle of life. It all starts with the dancer planting a seed, then the dancer mimes with her index finger stretched out the tree that is growing. This finger gives way to the hand stretched backwards to symbolize the leaf of the tree, then the hand turns into a flower and a fruit, before miming the falling fruit, symbol of death. Then a new cycle begins again.

Performance

A dive into the heart of the Royal Ballet's backstage, where make-up is done and dressing takes several hours, where the costumes are adjusted directly on the body. Then the performance follows. Time stops, and the dancers become divinities.



The Ballet in performance



A flower comes next...

AUDIOVISUAL PROCESSING

Dance, or the meeting of the languages

How then can we film the choreographic work? The dancer's gesture is part of time and a three-dimensional space. The ease would be in the sequence plane, where the dancers would be left in their space, and the camera would only be there to capture. The dance space offers strong geometries, and it would be a shame not to play with these lines visually.

We therefore want to multiply the angles of shooting in order to highlight the dancers' movements and their position on the stage, and use the power of editing to achieve this goal.

*Some geometric shapes given by the dance.
Images from "Le Ballet Royal à Hong Kong" - 2017*



Horizontality



Circle



Diagonal

AUDIOVISUAL PROCESSING

Dance, or the meeting of the languages

Wim Wenders, in *Pina* (2011), has succeeded in confronting dance with cinema. Besides the purely technical aspects of 3D (which, by the way, seldom brings something to the image, as is rarely the case, really something to the image), Wenders has actually staged, or rather put into image, dance by having choreographed especially for the film. He was able to measure his camera movements and choose the judicious axes that best suited his dance moves. The result is sumptuous, and the audiovisual really meets dance and is not just a service provider. It would be interesting to have a similar approach to Wim Wenders and thus a real image of the Royal dance, and not just a filmed moment. To have a privileged access to the stage so as to better convey the beauty of the gesture, these impassive, frozen faces, which in the past were heavy with the white eye shadow that the dancers wore, and which give the impression, the sensation that they are as if inhabited by a deity. To be as close as possible to these gestures, infinitely minimalist, purified, almost paradoxically immobile. To give a closer look at what we usually see from afar. In short, it is about creating a sincere encounter between dance and audiovisual.

Images from "Pina - 2011



The dancer approaches directly the camera



The geometric aspect of the choreography magnified by the location of the camera

AUDIOVISUAL PROCESSING

Dance, or the meeting of the languages

The gesture, the importance of its detail, is at the heart of the choreography. It is by the flexibility of the fingers, a position of the elbow or a simple raised toe that the dancer expresses herself. The whole in a smooth and graceful sequence. There is a language that is specific to Khmer dance. The gestures of the hand, “kbach”, constitute a real language and represent elements of nature such as fruits, flowers, or leaves. They are used in different combinations and transitions with accompanying movements of legs and feet, producing a varied vocabulary. The neophyte will not be able to understand and read the gesture without being accompanied in this process. The spectator must, with viewing the documentary, not know the meaning of the movements in their totality, since there are more than 4000 to be listed, but be warned and made aware that the gestures speak. As the repertoire of gestures seems endless, it is impossible and counterproductive for us to transcribe them through a documentary. This is not the point. Nevertheless, by showing a few sequences of gestures, in a very limited number and by explaining their meaning, the viewer will be aware that each movement has a meaning and that it forms sentences.

It is important to keep the aesthetics of the dance and its narrative. Dance speaks and expresses itself with the body and face, not with the voice. Thus, when the dancer performs a danced phrase in front of the camera, she will not directly explain what she is doing. She will simply perform the gestures. But the explanation will be through a very clean voice-over, which will state with sound what the dancer is saying with her body. In addition, Wim Wenders had set up a similar principle where the interviews are done in voice-over, and the interviewee remains silent in front of the camera. The dancer expresses herself with her body, and must, even in documentaries, not use the voice directly. The gestures analyzed will be performed in front of a black background, where only the dancer’s hand, arm or face will stand out from the image. This will allow the spectator’s gaze to be directed and thus his or her attention solely on the dancer. Also, by purifying the image and by keeping only the gesture itself it will be only magnified.



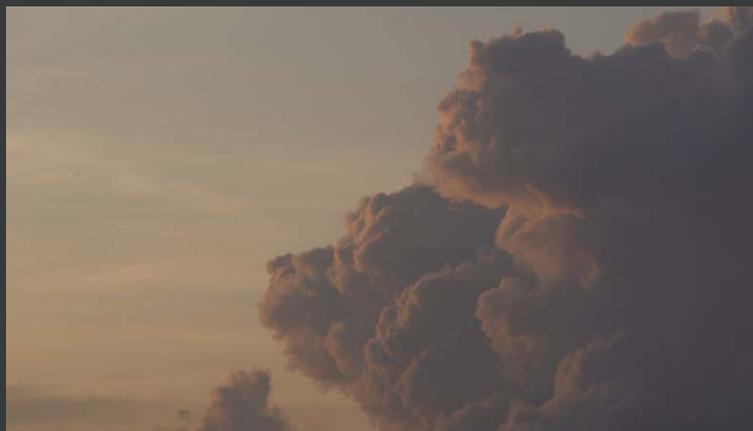
AUDIOVISUAL PROCESSING

Importance of nature

Nature has a most important place within the Royal Ballet. So important that basic gestures mimic the life cycle of a tree. There is a leaf, a flower, a fruit. The story always takes place in a natural setting. We are in the forest when Preah Ream is in exile in the Reamker, we are flying in the skies with Moni Mekhala or we are in a lush garden during the dance of the Apsaras which, let's remember, are born in the waters. We can go even further and as Professor Proeung Chhieng says, the dancer can be likened to a tree: she has a firm bust and is firmly anchored in the ground, like a sturdy tree with deep roots, and has a light and supple hand, like the leaves of a tree. Nature is therefore essential.

So we need to film this Nature which is at the center of the dance. It will be directly assimilated with the dancer and the dances, as for example by filming a tree or a lightning bolt in the sky that occurs during the fight between Moni Mekhala and Ream Eyso. But also in a more metaphorical way, as for example to represent the birth of the Royal Ballet with the element of water, source of all life. Or the heavens and fire for spirituality. Nature, place of all things and place of spirituality. The role played by nature in the Royal Ballet will therefore be just as important in this documentary.

Only natural light will be used to film nature. Often filmed in the golden hours, to accentuate its grace and beauty.



AUDIOVISUAL PROCESSING

The voice over

How then should the history of the Royal Ballet be treated? Dealing with history will allow neophyte spectators to understand where this art comes from and what it has gone through. As Princess Buppha Devi said, the Ballet has had an eventful history and is still under threat. This must be accounted for through audio-visual treatment. Therefore, we cannot be satisfied with edited interviews and archive footage. We want to add an extra touch by using the language of the audiovisual. For example, we want the story to be told in voice-over. A carefully written voice-over, similar to an inner voice that at times addressed the dancers, at times addressed Nature, and that will highlight the spirituality to which dance aspires. By this process, the poetry is even stronger and the words remain anchored. The action seems uninterrupted, and there is no abrupt return between the filmed moment and the explanatory framework of the interview. We remain in contemplation, both visual and auditory. We seek a solicitation of the senses through this voice-over and do not reduce it solely to an imperative of explanation. Work on the text and the tone to have something almost haunting and thus leave the spectator in the unreality and mysticism of the dance. The immersion is more intense.

*“Bless them...
Show them your greatness...
So faraway grace.”*

Extract of the voice over

AUDIOVISUAL TREATMENT

History

Since we are speaking to a novice audience, it is very likely that some of the spectators are not familiar with the history of Cambodia. We therefore need to use archival images to give the audience a concrete idea of what the Ballet and Cambodia were like. Again, we want to create a personal and intimate approach to the use of archival images, and not to spread them coldly. We want to use archival photography to create a break in the rhythm of a still image and thus capture the viewer's attention. Alain Fleischer, a French photographer and now director of the Le Fresnoy centre in Tourcoing (France), wrote in *La photographie, un cycle de l'éternel retour* (in the magazine *Ligeia*): «*If mechanically reproducing images is not enough to revive them, on the contrary, to project them, that is to say, to re-submit them to the light, to warm them up after a long stay in the frozen realm of dead images and, having had them*». It becomes then interesting to project the photographs, and not only to diffuse them in editing. As a result, we bring images back to life and create memories. This, coupled with the voice over, will, we think, be very striking both aesthetically and narratively.

What should be the projection surface? We can draw inspiration from the works of the German painter Caspar David Friedrich, who placed in the centre of his paintings a character, from behind, facing a projection of a world, facing the projection of the artist's gaze. This central figure becomes an anchor point for the spectator, and the viewer can thus intrude into the painter's universe and his mental projections. The immersion is total. For us, the main character would then be the dancer, who would look at her own story, through a projected photo.



Projections in Pina



Paintings of Friedrich

AUDIOVISUAL PROCESSING

Archives

Use as much as possible amateur and poor quality archives, whether Super-8, Super-16 or DV CAM. We need in the images some badly realized camera movements, zooms, blurs, noise in the image, image jumps, etc. We need to feel the presence of the person holding the camera. This is about trying to create something more emotional, intimate and close to the audience, putting someone absent in the present and materializing the past, giving a rebirth to the images and therefore to the people.

The archive images will be used only for historical periods. However, for the Khmer Rouge period, we do not plan to use an archive. Instead, we will use the metaphor of empty theater to symbolize the forced displacement of the population to the countryside and the disappearance of 25% of the population. We will also use a simple black image, with the sound of war, symbolizing annihilation, on which will appear the Khmer Rouge slogan: To keep you alive, no profit. To eliminate you, no loss. This process will be even more dramatic.





And a fruit.

The Eternal Gesture

MORGAN HAVET