

# Dancing the Ramayana Across Asia

By Stephanie Burridge

Classical dances of Asia have an important function in society – to be performed at royal courts, to celebrate the rituals of life and death and to be a conduit with the spiritual world linking the earth to the cosmos. Epic dramas such as the *Ramayana* form an important part of this continuum. The narrative of the *Ramayana* travels from India to Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Indonesia, Cambodia and beyond, and it is fascinating to explore it through dance.

Basically, the story recounts the fortunes of Prince Rama and his beautiful wife, Sita, who are banished from his father's kingdom, Kosala, and left to survive in the forest. While in exile, they learn many of life's important lessons via numerous small scenes and subplots including the kidnapping and rescue of Sita. A variety of good

and evil characters appear, including Rama's brother Lakshmana, Ravana the demon king and the monkey god Hanumaan. The story operates on multiple levels touching on relationships, family loyalty, responsibility and obedience, and it reveals deep moral and ethical issues. Metaphorically, it relates to the universal aspects of human frailty such as the struggle between good and evil, weakness and power, lust and greed, the masculine and the feminine and the search for the soul.

The essence of the *Ramayana* remains the same although dance forms and interpretations vary across the region. These variations include some differences in the characterisation, the costumes, musical accompaniment and the emphasis placed on certain parts of the story. Three dance traditions that illustrate some of the differences in style are the *Bharata natyam* form from India, Balinese dance from Indonesia and the classical Khmer dances from Cambodia.

The *Bharata natyam* is one of the eight forms of traditional classical dance from India. This dance form works on two expressive levels – the feet pound out the intricate rhythms of the dance and the body moves rapidly through the space while incorporating up to 52 precise gestures for the hands, called *hastas*. In *Bharata natyam* the hands tell the narrative and each gesture has a meaning that can be read both literally and metaphorically. For instance, the 'lotus flower', 'the peacock', 'a bud' or a 'leaf' are all gestures used by Sita in the *Ramayana* story as she explores the forest. There are also eight emotive responses that are embodied in these gestures and these so called *rasa* include love, jealousy, serenity and happiness.

In Asia, students usually learn traditional dance through rigorous study under the tutelage of a revered guru or dance master. On a visit to Ubud, Bali, I watched a master teacher pass on his wisdom to a group of 70

young dancers. Dancers from five to eighteen years of age assembled silently in neat rows and watched while, through calm gestures, an old man passed on the stories of the dances. Senior dance professionals then demonstrated the steps and the students followed the intricate

pathways of the dance. Heads were poised, fingers bent backwards into seemingly impossible positions as their bodies danced the *legong*, the first dance that



Ramayana Bali

the young Balinese girls learn. For young men, participating in the famous *kecak* chant dance is an important cultural event. Although it originated from traditional ritualistic roots, the present day version was created for tourists in the 1930's by the German painter, Walter Spies, who greatly influenced Western perceptions of Balinese culture and art, in collaboration with local dance *Wayan Limbak*. The *kecak* has become an integral part of the *Ramayana* in Bali. It depicts the scene where the monkey god Hanumaan and Prince Rama battle against the demon king Ravana during their banishment to the forest. Balinese dance incorporates bursts of energy as the dancers move between stillness and rapid movements for the arms, feet and head. Although there is the same graceful carriage of the torso for the women, unlike Cambodian dancers with downcast eyes, the Balinese performers stare out at their audience with expressive eyes, or wear masks.

In Cambodia, the version of the *Ramayana* is known as *Reamker* or *Ramakerti*. All the features of the classical Khmer dance are present in a Cambodian performance of *Reamker* – deep knee bends, turned up toes, the famous flexed hands and fingers and an innate serenity. In their entrances and exits the dancers seem to float above the floor as they sweep in and out with small, fast steps. There are many short scenes and the male and female roles and real and mythical characters interweave in the dance. The emotions of each character are conveyed through a complexity of gestures that reveal the stock attributes of each.

Against the backdrop of chilling statistics that 80% to 90% of the artists in Cambodia perished during the infamous Pol Pot regime of the 1970s, the remaining masters feel the urgency to pass on the traditional classical dances. Khmer Classical Dance dates from between the 1st and 6th centuries. During the period of Angkor, dancers of the Royal Ballet were considered 'servants of gods' and the link between heaven and earth. In 2003 Cambodian classical dance was awarded World Heritage Status by UNESCO, confirming the importance, and perhaps the burden, of the task of preservation. Costumes had to be remade, musical instruments sourced, dancers trained, steps remembered and the famous characters of the *Ramayana*, like Hanumaan the monkey general, had to be brought back to life.



*Ramayana Cambodia*

Traditional classical dances from the Asia Pacific region are alive with symbolism and metaphor. While the narrative of the *Ramayana* is described through the dance, a complexity of meaning is embodied within every hand and eye gesture, every posture and sequence of movement. The dancers are superb mimics and are trained to perform the characters of the epics with clarity. Knowledgeable audiences can recognise the various attributes of each and the ability of the dancers to bring these to life in their renditions of the roles. Following in the steps of the *Ramayana* is a wonderful way to get to know the diversity and complexity of some of the traditional dance forms in Asia.

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**Stephanie Burrige** grew up in Tasmania, an island as famous for convicts and Aboriginal history as for its spectacular scenery, ghosts, excellent wine and food. Before moving to Singapore in 2001, she lived in Canberra, where she developed a great appreciation for Aboriginal art and culture. She is a dancer, choreographer, teacher, critic and writer.

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Images are from 'Ramayana Bali and Cambodia', da:ns festival 2008. Photos courtesy of The Esplanade Co Ltd