Cambodian choreographer’s “re-imaginative” work revives thousand-year old dance tradition

Imagine being an eight-year old child, taken from your home to a camp where you endure forced labor. It sounds like a child’s worst nightmare, but for Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, it wasn’t a bad dream. It was reality.

Cheam Shapiro and her family were among the thousands who suffered at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. During the regime’s four year reign, as many as three million people died as a result of starvation, torture and execution. Among them were 90% of Cambodia’s artists, including a vast majority of Cambodia’s classically-trained dancers. A thousand-year old art form, Cambodian classical dance was traditionally taught from memory, passed from dancer to dancer. With the deaths of so many, Cambodia nearly lost one of its most precious cultural resources. Fortunately, the art form is not only surviving — it is thriving, thanks in large part to Cheam Shapiro.

Following the Khmer Rouge’s oust from power in 1979, Cheam Shapiro studied Cambodian classical dance at the Royal University. She learned the highly-stylized and refined movement language of Cambodian classical dance from former dancers who had managed to escape the killing fields. For them, teaching dance was a way to help preserve a part of Cambodian culture. Cheam Shapiro is continuing that tradition with the Khmer Arts Academy, an organization that she founded to teach Cambodian-American community in the Long Beach, California area.

In addition to her teaching, Cheam Shapiro is also re-energizing the ancient art form through the creation of new works.

Her latest composition, *Pamina Devi*, is a re-imagination of Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*. In it, Cheam Shapiro combines the worlds of imperial, classical Vienna with the lush, vibrant landscape of Cambodia. Because *The Magic Flute* explores the enlightened change that occurred after the American and French revolutions, its story easily lent itself to re-interpretation through the lens of Cambodian history.

“For a Cambodian of my generation, revolution and enlightenment often come hand in hand with war, terror, starvation and slaughter,” she says.

Raised in darkness by her mother, the Queen of the Night, it is only through an arduous and terrifying journey that Pamina is able to transcend the rivalries and betrayals from which she is born and seek out a middle path of justice, tolerance and love. The parallels between Pamina’s story and her own were not lost on Cheam Shapiro, who not only endured the Khmer Rouge’s regime but also the other factions that struggled for power after their fall.

“I find a personal resonance in Pamina’s tortuous journey, which, like mine, allows her to overcome betrayals and transforms her into someone who transcends the darkness from which she was born.”

In the aftermath of the killing fields, Cheam Shapiro was transformed from a starving child to a “celestial dancer.” Since then, she has gone on to become a teacher, choreographer and, now, a preservationist, helping to save a once venerated art form from extinction.

*Pamina Devi* makes its U.S. premiere September 27, 2007 at 7:30 p.m. at the Phillips Center for the Performing Arts. It is performed in Khmer with English subtitles. There will be a pre-performance discussion with Sophiline Cheam Shapiro at 6:45 p.m. and a post-performance discussion with Cheam Shapiro and the company immediately following the show.

The creation and U.S. tour of *Pamina Devi* has been made possible in part by the Asian Cultural Council; the Max & Victoria Dreyfus Foundation; the Spunk Fund, Inc.; an anonymous donor; and the National Dance Project of the New England Foundation for the Arts, with lead funding from Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and additional funding provided by The Ford Foundation, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and JP Morgan Chase Foundation. A Creative Capital Project.
Rinde Eckert didn’t have to look far for inspiration for Horizon, the tale of seminary instructor Reinhart Poole. His grandfather, Thomas D. Rinde, was a Lutheran minister who taught religious history at a seminary in Nebraska and also served as the school’s director for a number of years. His grandfather was not the only inspiration in the creation of his main character, however. Eckert also relied on the life and writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, who was, perhaps, the most influential theologian of his generation.

Eckert was reading the works of Niebuhr when he was commissioned to write Horizon. While it definitely informed his work, he is quick to point out that one should not look too hard for similarities between the Reinhold of history and the Reinhart of Horizon. “Although those familiar with Niebuhr’s ideas may see the ghost of them here,” he cautions, “one ought not to strain the comparison.” Horizon is the story of one man’s metaphorical journey through a desert of spiritual despair. Fired from his job teaching ethics at a seminary — the administration thought he was too Socratic in his teaching methods — Reinhart is now at a crossroads. He experiences a crisis of faith that Eckert describes as being “not over his religious convictions, but over the character of his service to those ideals.” Reinhart still has faith in God — he just doesn’t have faith in himself.

With its three-member cast, including Eckert as Reinhart Poole, Horizon transitions back and forth between present and past. It sometimes even delves into fiction, as when two stonemasons, characters in a play that Reinhart is writing, come to life onstage for a theological discussion. Eckert employs a range of musical styles, infusing Horizon with everything from opera to barbershop to church hymns. Rather than distracting from the action, these experimental techniques serve to enhance the underlying themes of Horizon. As Reinhart relives past conversations with his deceased parents, works on his final lecture, delivers sermons and ruminates on his life, he explores his own “personal horizon” — that place where his two worlds meet and clash.

“The horizon in Reinhart’s world is metaphysical even implied by two physical matrices – the earth and the air, the source of our strength (and pain) and the character of our dreams (our desires),” says Eckert. Rinde Eckert has called his career a “wonderful mistake.” A former opera singer, he left that discipline when he found it too constraining for his creative impulses and began working in experimental theater. His work as a composer, writer, director and performer has taken him across the United States, as well as to Europe and Asia. He has won a number of awards including two Critics Circle awards and two Isadora Duncan awards in San Francisco, and a special Obie award and two Drama Desk awards in New York. In 2005, he was awarded the American Academy of Arts and Letters’ prestigious Marc Blitzstein Award given to a lyricist/librettist. In 2007, he was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

Not too bad for someone who calls his career a mistake. Horizon is directed by David Schweizer. It will be performed October 16-18, 2007 at 7:30 p.m. in the Phillips Center Black Box Theatre.

Horizon was commissioned by the Lied Center for the Performing Arts, a unit of the University of Nebraska; the Mondavi Center at the University of California, Davis; the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland; and Arts and Cultural Programming at Montclair State University, New Jersey.
One of the advantages of presenting a performing arts series within a university environment is the opportunity to reach young people. This is critical to the future of our cultural explorations worldwide as “what kind of future can we expect without any young people involved?”

A recent study report titled *Involving Youth in Nonprofit Arts Organizations: A Call to Action* by Barry Hessenius that was commissioned by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, deals with this issue. *Involving Youth* takes a broad brush to the issue, investigating the activity of young people between the ages of 16 to 30, in six domains: governance, membership, financial support, advocacy, audience development, and artist support.

The report makes the usual recommendations about dialogue, commitment, resources, partnerships. I am pleased that University of Florida Performing Arts is engaged in each of these areas through our Student Marketing Team, our interaction with UF Student Government, the active internship program that exists within our department, our Student Affiliate Program and the various outreach activities that exist among UF departments, Santa Fe Community College, Alachua County School District and the Marion County School District.

Sadly, it seems more and more that in the “real world,” the arts are under appreciated; artistic organizations are overcommitted and insufficiently capitalized. The human and financial costs can be unmanageable for organizations that are already spread too thin. Herein, is a priority that UFPA maintains in allocating resources to be certain that the younger members of our community have a recognized voice and place within our performing arts presentations and ancillary activities.

It is our hope to continue to attract the best and the brightest into the arts. To this end, based on Mr. Hessenius’ report, three things need to be done that we are already undertaking.

We need to continue to include younger members of the community on our Advisory Board of Directors. This is not at the exclusion of more senior members of our community, but rather to provide a balance to the dialogue that surfaces around programs and policies of our operation. Further, this is an easy accomplishment as it requires no funding, no grant writing and minimal staff oversight. Not only does a board appointment engage the best and the brightest in a meaningful way, but it is one way that the sector can address the needs and lifestyles of young people. This input is at the core of our decision-making, and not as a programming or marketing after-thought.

The UFPA Student Marketing Team is critical to our mission as our message — in both form and content — is important in attracting youth to our events. Our reality is that the “over-40 crowd” is not the most adept at making a connection with potentially younger audience members. It’s important that we “go to the source” for our input and direction.

We will do everything that we can to make the performing arts relevant. By listening to young board members, young marketing specialists and young audience members, we can learn what benefits the performing arts have for a younger generation. These may be different from the older members of our traditional audiences but it will open doors to how we can expand our audiences of tomorrow.

Michael Blachly
Director
Behind the Scenes

(Left) Storm Roberts with the cast of The Producers. Mr. Roberts, who appears on 98.5 KTK’s morning show Storm & Chris, had a celebrity walk-on role in the production. (Right) Guests from Performance Sponsor WGFL-TV CBS4 with the cast of The Producers.

(Left) Seating and carpeting replacement continue at University Auditorium. (Above, right, below) Construction of the Fackler Foyers at the Phillips Center.
Introducing... UFPA’s Development Team!

You may know Elizabeth Auer as UFPA’s Assistant Director, but since November 2006, she has also served as the Interim Director of Development. With previous work in fund raising at Florida State University and the Orlando Shakespeare Festival, filling the need for this position did not take much convincing. “The support provided by our patrons and Affiliates is instrumental to the success and future of our organization. I am enjoying the opportunity to engage at a deeper level with our donors.” Elizabeth’s experience in the arts varies widely with training in theater, dance, French horn and piano. She even had a previous job as a church organist!

Lori Siegel, Development Coordinator, began her first day with University of Florida Performing Arts by attending the January 2007 Hard Hat Gala! Completing her bachelor’s degree in 2005 and master’s in 2006 at UF, Lori serves as the primary liaison for UFPA Affiliates and the Advisory Board of Directors. With 19 years of classical dance training while growing up in Miami, Florida, Lori has enjoyed working on the other side of the arts. “My time at the University of Florida and my training in dance are very different, but very special parts of my life. Being able to bring those two areas of my life together has been an extraordinary experience for me.”

Lindsay Krieg, Performance Sponsor and Grants Coordinator, came to the University of Florida Performing Arts staff through the proverbial “back door.” Before receiving her bachelor’s degree in marketing from UF in Spring 2007, Lindsay worked in the box office and as an intern in the marketing department. Growing up in Fort Myers, Florida, she spent her youth dancing, which helped shape her future career in the arts. “I have the opportunity as a young professional to connect my passion for the arts with my love for the University of Florida.” Since June, Lindsay has been meeting with current Sponsors and looks forward to continuing the relationship to promote the arts through businesses in our community.
Thank you to the businesses who have committed to sponsor a performance this fall. There will be many others to thank in subsequent issues.

**WCJB TV20**

A proud sponsor of University of Florida Performing Arts since 1995, WCJB TV20 knows the importance of bringing live theater and arts to audience members. As your home team and North Central Florida’s most watched television station, they continue their tradition of supporting UFPA in its endeavor to bring the best to our community. WCJB TV 20 sponsored The Wedding Singer this fall, and will sponsor Annie and Chicago in the spring.

**Shands HealthCare**

Tim Goldfarb, CEO of Shands HealthCare knows that “as part of our mission of improving the quality of life for the Gainesville Area and our partnership with the University of Florida, Shands HealthCare is proud to support the performances at the Phillips Center for the Performing Arts. We play an active role in bringing first-class entertainment to the area.” This season Shands HealthCare is sponsoring 3 Mo’ Divas in the fall, and Dame Kiri Te Kanawa and Izthak Perlman in the spring.

**Dharma Endowment Foundation**

The arts are an important part of life for Mickey Singer and the Dharma Endowment Foundation. Realizing that there are many different aspects of a human being, it is the arts that touch the deepest and most important part of us. “Art feeds our hearts and souls. Through supporting the arts, we are supporting the beauty that resides in all of humanity. This ends up strengthening our families, our communities, and the world we live in.” This season the Dharma Endowment Foundation is supporting University of Florida Performing Arts through their sponsorship of The Fab Four, Yamato Drummers of Japan and JIGU! Thunder Drums of China.

**WGFL-TV CBS4 and WMYG-TV MY11**

As prominent members of the broadcast industry, WGFL-TV CBS4 and WMYG-TV MY11 strive to entertain, enlighten and educate viewers through their programming. By supporting University of Florida Performing Arts, they encourage this mission through live performances. When sitting in the theater for a live performance, audience members are able to experience something new and beautiful, filling their lives a little more and evoking a new emotion. UFPA performances reflect the diversity of interest in our community and WGFL-TV CBS4 and WMYG-TV MY11 seek to do the same. This past summer, WGFL-TV CBS4 sponsored The Producers and will sponsor Marvin Hamlisch and Joel Grey this October. WMYG-TV MY11 will sponsor Tango Buenos Aires in November.

**WIN-D-FM**

Knowing that the arts are extremely important, WIN-D-FM continues to support the programming offered by University of Florida Performing Arts. Adding an important element to the quality of life in Gainesville, they are proud to help bring beauty and entertainment to the North Central Florida community. In addition to the great work presented on the stages, WIN-D-FM believes educational aspects of the arts are important for inspiring Alachua County’s youth for future generations. This season WIN-D-FM sponsored The Fab Four, who performed this past summer, and will also sponsor the upcoming performance of The Actors’ Gang in 1984.

**Compass Bank**

Andy Hardin of Compass Bank feels, “there is no better time to support the arts than now! With all the concerns facing Floridians from the ever-continuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to impending weather situations and economic woes facing the state, the arts are a magnificent way to escape our day-to-day problems, expand our minds, be educated and simply have fun.” Striving to be a good corporate citizen to Gainesville and Alachua County, Compass Bank believes in the arts. University of Florida Performing Arts and Michael Blachly’s great vision to bring some of the world’s greatest talent to Gainesville. Compass Bank would like to encourage all businesses and individuals to support the arts by being a performance sponsor and/ or attending a UFPA production. You will never think of our community in the same way again! This season Compass Bank is sponsoring Evita.

**The Gainesville Sun**

The Gainesville Sun is proud to support the great performances University of Florida Performing Arts brings to the North Central Florida community. Entertaining audiences, while expanding cultural boundaries, UFPA is an asset to the community. In addition to outstanding national performances, the stage facilities allow local performers and organizations the experience of creating full stage productions. The Gainesville Sun is delighted to be a part of UFPA, knowing that it takes a whole community to support the program that has been created. This season The Gainesville Sun is co-presenting The United States Air Force Academy Band and is co-sponsoring Marion J. Caffey’s 3 Mo’ Divas.

**TheSky973FM**

As proud sponsors of University of Florida Performing Arts, TheSky973FM feel the “benefits of our support transcend the business value of our relationship.” It is a partnership that provides a real sense of contributing to the Heart of Florida in terms of entertainment, education and cultural enrichment. Employees of Entercom are encouraged to participate in activities that “connect us to our communities and to give back.” Involvement with UFPA certainly accomplishes those goals. From performances by local organizations to the world-class touring companies that appear, the menu of onstage presentations offers something for everyone. It truly brings the world of artistic experiences to North Central Florida. TheSky973FM encourages all to support this community treasure by whatever means they are able. This season TheSky973FM is sponsoring The Tenors — Holiday.

**Falcon Financial Management, Inc.**

Considering University of Florida Performing Arts a “crown jewel of Gainesville,” Jeff Davis, Certified Financial Planner and President of Falcon Financial Management, Inc., is proud to join us this season as a Performance Sponsor. As the business has grown since its inception in 1994, Falcon Financial Management has looked for ways to become more involved in the Gainesville community. The perfect opportunity presented itself this year with the opportunity to sponsor The Tenors — Holiday with TheSky973FM. The two already work together when Jeff and his wife Donna host their radio show, Dollars and Sense, on Saturday mornings. Tune into TheSky973FM at 8:30 a.m. to hear Jeff talk about dollars, while Donna helps it all make sense.

**M&S Bank**

Tom Mallini, President and CEO of M&S Bank, understands the need for cultural activities and opportunities in every community. Through their support of University of Florida Performing Arts, M&S Bank is able to play a part in meeting the cultural needs of North Central Florida. Having first seen Ballet Folklorico perform in Mexico City years ago, Tom is excited to sponsor such a wonderful performance and be a part of the rich culture they share with audience members.

**Oak Hammock at the University of Florida**

Oak Hammock resident Elizabeth Mann believes, “the cultural arts are incredibly important for enriching your life and bringing joy.” Out-of-town visitors are often surprised by the impressive array of diverse, quality programming offered to our community, setting Gainesville to a higher standard. One of the reasons residents move to Gainesville to retire at Oak Hammock is because of the many cultural opportunities available in this community. Elizabeth, who recently moved back to Gainesville, found that, “University of Florida Performing Arts has added a wonderful dimension to what Gainesville has to offer.” Oak Hammock is proud to support UFPA, knowing that a town is nothing if it doesn’t have the arts. This season Oak Hammock at the University of Florida is sponsoring the Ahn Trio with the David Benoit Trio.
The Performing Arts Partners program funds the distribution of free tickets to UFPA-presented performances for the physically and mentally challenged, at-risk students and underserved populations.

Anonymous (2)
Allen Enterprises of Gainesville, Inc.
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Dr. Rodney and Beverly Bartlett
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University of Florida Launches Its Next CAPITAL CAMPAIGN

Florida Tomorrow, University of Florida’s capital campaign with a goal of raising over one billion dollars, will kick-off with its public announcement on September 28. Based on a time, place and belief, this campaign looks at the way UF will contribute to changing the world through teaching, research and service.

As a part of the Florida Tomorrow campaign, University of Florida Performing Arts looks forward to exceeding its goal. “We set a realistic public goal, but plan on exceeding that goal through the support of our donors who believe in our program,” says Director Michael Blachly. “We are at a great time in our program’s profile where there is literally something for everyone, making Gainesville a great place to be for the students, faculty, and staff, as well as the public who generously supports the arts.”

Contributions to UFPA, including direct gifts, endowments and bequests, assist UFPA in exceeding their goal towards the Florida Tomorrow campaign. There are many opportunities available to be a part of this exciting time with University of Florida Performing Arts. For more information, please contact Elizabeth Auer at (352) 392-1900 x 325.