

The Phnom Penh Post

Tiny dancers

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Photo by: PETER OLSZEWSKI

Khmer girls dance at the Preah Ang Chiek Preah Ang Chhorm Shrine in Siem Reap.

Fourteen young Khmer girls, dressed in flowing white garb with coconut flowers in their hair, danced sinuously to the rhythm of traditional classical music. The Preah Ang Chiek Preah Ang Chhorm Shrine in Siem Reap, next to the Royal Residence, was the venue enlightened by their sashays.

As the girls went through their paces on the evening of January 26, a growing band of lucky tourists gathered, gob-smacked, to watch this ritual unfold. The looks of delight on the crowd's faces proved they knew they were seeing something special, but of course they were unaware of the significance of the proceedings.

They were unaware that the shrine where the ritual was taking place was the most sacred site in Siem Reap and that the images of the divinities within the shrine are considered the most powerful in the town.

They were unaware, too, that the ritual was unfolding in the presence of royalty and that two of the three women sitting on a prayer mat among the dancers were princesses, including one of Cambodia's most legendary classical dancers, Her Royal Highness Princess Bopha Devi, and her daughter, Princess Norodom Sisowath.

The third woman was the "mother" of the tribe of little dancers, Lady Ravynn Karet-Coxen, although she was quick to tell 7Days, "You can drop the lady bit and just call me Ravynn Karet-Coxen as it is more in tune with the work I do with the most destitute, thank you."

The dancing girls were part of a troupe that had been lovingly trained by Ravynn Karet-Coxen, the founder of the Nginn Karet Foundation for Cambodia (NKFC) Conservatoire Preah Ream Bopha Devi dance school, of which Coxen is chairperson.

Princess Bopha Devi, the patron of the school, had come to the sacred shrine on the evening of January 26 to partake in the ritual and to pray for the good health of the King Father and the King, to pray for the government so that it can lead the country well, and to pray to the dance divinity and the dance spirit of ancient Angkor.

But more importantly, the ritual at the shrine was the culmination of a day of celebration marking the third anniversary of Ravynn Karet-Coxen's dance school at nearby Banteay Srei, the first and only in the Angkor Archaeological Park and the only school of its kind in the Kingdom.

The onlooking tourists were lucky to see the performance because usually the dancers are hidden and protected from the prying eyes to "preserve their purity" as Ravynn Karet-Coxen put it.

She said her school was not intended to train dancers to entertain people for money.

She claimed the dancing taught in her school helps the children learn to respect their god and divinities, and explained that the little dancers usually perform in temples and sacred areas for the gratification of the Gods and the King, and that last year the dancers performed their first royal private performance for the king's birthday.

She added that her dancers are never allowed to wear heavy costumes, jewellery or make-up on their faces, like the so-called traditional dancers who perform in public for tourists. Her dancers are also instructed to dance in bare feet on Mother Earth, and not on carpets and stages.

"We do not dance just for happiness or money," Ravynn Karet-Coxen emphasised. "And certainly not to entertain tourists in the hotels. We don't need them. We are dancing for our God."

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