

# Show

Ignacio Naretti/The Orange County Register



## THE WORLD OF DANCE

**ETHNIC DANCE  
KEEPS TRADITIONS  
ALIVE IN  
A NEW WORLD**

SHOW KICKS OFF A  
SERIES ON CUL-  
TURAL DANCE  
WITH A LOOK  
AT CAMBODIAN  
DANCERS, IN-  
CLUDING THE  
YOUTH GROUP  
AT CAM-  
BODIAN  
FAMILY  
IN SANTA  
ANA.

# Cover Story

Sopheab Yam, below, practices a cultural dance with other youngsters at Cambodian Family Inc.'s Santa Ana warehouse (Yam is also pictured on the cover). At right, teacher Chea Lim demonstrates a step for his students.



ROOTS

## Cambodian refugees in OC bridge cultural gap with dance

Story by Laura Bleiberg  
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The Orange County Register

A thousand years ago, in what today is Cambodia, sculptors decorated the walls of the royal temples with carved pictures of dancing goddesses.

Flesh-and-blood women — dressed like goddesses in silks and jewelry — performed for kings, mimicking the movements of the deities on the walls.

Today, in the Cambodian Family Inc.'s Santa Ana warehouse, Cambodian refugee children, some barefoot, most in T-shirts, jeans and shorts, play games and wrestle on the concrete floor.

Then their teacher, Chea Lim, 34, turns on a boom box hooked to a giant speaker and the music for the "Coconut Dance" drowns out all other clatter. The girls crouch in a semicircle on the floor, hands flexed as far as possible. The boys dance toward them in a heel-first walk.

The dance itself is not old. But the steps being passed on are a fragile bridge that links these children to their ancestors, their war-torn homeland and culture.

"We want the children to understand their roots through the dance," said Lim, the agency's youth coordinator. "Each folk dance reflects the life in Cambodia. When I teach them the 'Fish Dance,' I explain, 'This is the way we fished.'"

Cambodian Family Inc. is a 10-year-old, non-profit agency offering services such as English-language classes and employment counseling, mostly to the estimated 3,000 Cambodian adults and children in Orange County. Many live on nearby Minnie Street in Santa Ana, the center of the country's



### Series to focus on variety of troupes

Orange County has a richer and more diverse store of dance than immediately meets the eye.

The Orange County Performing Arts Center has brought renowned ballet companies here with much fanfare. But there are dancers and companies here that toil in the relative obscurity of garages and small studios. They might never appear on the center's stage, and are found instead at festivals and recitals, practicing their art.

Many of the performers emigrated from India, Mexico, Cambodia and other countries. Some might be called professional, but others are not. In many cases, they dance to keep alive the culture of the countries they have left behind, and to share that culture with the people of their new home — us.

Over the next several months, we will introduce you to these dancers. We will explain to you why they dance, where you can see them perform and what their dances look like and mean.

We begin today, with an introduction to the county's small Cambodian dance community, which are continuing an ancient tradition that was nearly annihilated during the brutal rule of the communist Khmer Rouge.

### Cambodian community.

Most came to the United States in 1979, after the Vietnamese invaded and took over from the despotic Khmer Rouge. Pol Pot's followers killed more than 1 million Cambodians during their four-year rule, targeting intellectuals and professionals for extermination. They nearly wiped out the court dancers and master teachers.

Cambodian Family started offering dance lessons several years ago so children could perform during the New Year's celebrations; this year's begins today. The agency's Youth Dance Group now performs in Orange and Los Angeles counties about 20 times a year, said Dawn Toyoma,

family services coordinator. The children danced for Vice President Dan Quayle during his recent stop in Little Saigon.

The children have not achieved the expertise of professional groups such as the Classical Dance Company of Cambodia, which performed at the Los Angeles Festival in 1990. Lim doesn't expect — or necessarily want — to turn the children into professionals: "We don't have the time to train them at that level."

Lim, who teaches with his sister Phalen, was strict with the children during a recent Saturday afternoon rehearsal, yelling commands over the music and demonstrating steps. But the boys still laughed and joked

during practice. Several girls admitted they could try harder.

Lim said he teaches the children folk dances, which are easier to master than the classical dances (those the court dancers performed). He has also taught the boys an "American dance," a hip-hop routine to Hammer's "2 Legit to Quit."

Lim and Toyoma said they noticed that several girls made marked improvements in their form and technique after a visit by a professional children's dance group from a Thailand refugee border camp, called Site 2. The US tour of the Angkor Dreams group was stranded in Orange County last October, when organizers ran out of money. They gave an informal performance at Cambodian Family.

"Before the Site 2 dancers came here, Phalen tried to persuade the girls to do the proper back posture," Toyoma said, explaining that women should have an arched back and slightly protruding buttocks. "They just laughed and said it was ugly. Once they saw the Site 2 dancers and saw how beautiful they looked, they have really tried."

Chea and Phalen Lim have found a following outside the agency. Cambodian students at the University of California, Irvine, and at California State University, Fullerton, have taken dance lessons from the pair. At Cal State Fullerton, the Cambodian Student Association presents a New Year's celebration, at which its informal dance group performs.

Senior Somvea Ngann, 24, saw her first dance performance when she was in a refugee camp in Thailand. The Cambodian

Please see CAMBODIA'S

Family children performed at Cal State Fullerton several years ago and Ngann decided the university students could learn to dance, also. Most had never taken any kind of dance lessons.

"I think it's fun," said Ngann, who is the group's leader. "And it looks so good. It's like art and it's not just art; it's alive."

Sophomore Seyla Te said he joined the dance group without telling his mother, whom he said would not approve.

"She wants me just to go to school," said Te, a biology major. "To me, it's just time to take a break. (And) you are presenting your own culture."

The desire to present and preserve their culture drives Chea and Phalen Lim to teach. The brother and sister are self-taught dancers. Chea buys videos from a store in Long Beach, which has a substantial Cambodian population, copying the steps. He dances vigorously and gracefully for the children, but when asked to assess his talent, he laughed and dismissed his abilities.

"I cannot dance. I can teach and choreograph the steps," he said.

Phalen, 19, admitted she would consider pursuing dance professionally if she had the opportunity. She went to see the Classical Dance Company of Cambodia and tried to learn from watching them.

The Cambodian Family Youth Dance Group has about 16 children, and there is a fairly high turnover each year. As the girls reach puberty, many parents decide it's time to stop the lessons and public performing. Toyoma said.

"In the Cambodian culture, many parents don't want their children to dance," she said. "Some of them don't feel it's a valuable cultural experience."

But the dancers must come to the center one hour before class to do their homework, Lim said. "Our main goal is to help these kids grow up in America."