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A CAMBODIAN MAGIC FLUTE

Agnes Alpuerto / Khmer Times



Local musicians showcase the sounds of traditional musical instruments. Jean-Francois Perigois

After introducing Austrian composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's 'The Magic Flute' through the Mozart at the Mansion in January, Executive Producer Robert Turnbull and his talented team raised the curtains at Chaktomuk Theater as they presented 'A Cambodian Magic Flute' to give the Kingdom its first ever classical opera. Agnes Alpuerto witnesses history unfold.

The lights were dimmed. The noise subsided. And in the silence that enveloped the iconic Chaktomuk Theater, the sounds of roneat phlua, kong phlua, tro, sralai and skor reverberated inside the symbolic venue. And with their most graceful movements, five women – all dressed in Apsara costume – performed the 'Robam Choun Por'. The spotlight then turned to the orchestra, positioned just below the stage, as they played the overture. The beautiful exchange of music from the two groups created the perfect start of "A Cambodian Magic Flute".



Papageno's comic vibe gives the play a lighter mood.

If there's anything as glorious as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's "The Magic Flute", it would probably still be the same piece – but this time, the classical opera is infused with remarkable sounds and arts that are uniquely Cambodian.

With a 1791 play that originally depicted love and enlightenment, it is no wonder why Executive Producer Robert Turnbull used Mozart's most adaptable opera as the means to introduce classical opera to a Kingdom that never saw one before. And without a doubt, Turnbull made the right decision.

"This is definitely the most rewarding and fulfilling moment of my life," Turnbull said before last Saturday's opera started.

"I don't have to promise you that the night will be fulfilling. I don't have to promise you that we found local talents that are worth nurturing. Because you will see it for yourself tonight." He was right.

Nine Asian soloists, 18 Cambodian dancers, nine local traditional instrumentalists, 28-member orchestra – the play exceeded expectations and even went beyond any affirmative adjective one can use for a classical play.

The story follows Tamino's quest to save Princess Pamina who was said to have been kept captive by an evil Sarastro. Tamino's journey is filled with colours – with a comic bird catcher named Papageno to keep him company and the magic flute and silver bells for their protection – and dangers as wild animals and the villainous Monostatos try to block their triumph.

The play ends with striking highlights on how the good wins over evil, on how love – a true and passionate one – is enough to conquer hardships, and on how one attains real enlightenment.



Cambodian classical dancers surround the Queen of the Night as she sings her part.

But the challenge for the play's whole production team didn't dwell so much on the story, as Mozart's masterpiece is often seen as quite similar to the popular Ramayana story and to some of the common elements of the Hindu and Buddhist symbolisms.

With workshops and preparations running since 2015, Turnbull, Rome-based conductor Aaron Carpena, stage director Stefano Vizioli and the Phnom Penh-based Amrita Performing Arts team collaborated to conceptualise sections of the score where local instrumental infusion can have greater impact.

"Our idea is to capture the magic of Papageno's instrument through the beguiling sounds of Cambodian traditional instruments," Carpena said. "Mozart's music for the glockenspiel will be transformed by a Khmer ensemble tantalised by the thought of what Mozart would have done himself if he had access to Cambodian musicians in Vienna in 1791."

With a strong goal to give true Cambodian sounds to the play, Papageno's magic bells took the sound of a pin, a traditional Cambodian harp. The flute solos of the "Fire and Water Trials" were played using a khloy.

Khmer musicians – Him Savy, Chan Vitharo, Ikeda Bonsamngang and Cheak Bunhong – playing the flutes and clarinets joined the Saigon Philharmonic Orchestra, in giving "A Cambodian Magic Flute" spectacular sounds.

Beyond the Khmer sounds of the play, the production team also highlighted traditional dances. Amrita Performing Arts dancers performed candle dance. The dancers also accompanied the Queen of the Night every time she entered the stage, not just adding beauty to the scene, but showing off the art of 'robam borann' that deserves to be given the spotlight.



Prince Tamino's magic flute produces the tune of happiness that even wild animals dance to its sound.

Photo: Jean-Francois Perigois

And to keep the Cambodian vibe felt all throughout the two-hour two-act play, a Khmer narrator, Chhorn Sam Ath, came in between scenes to explain the plot to the local audience. His animated presence and funny interactions with the actors on stage gave the crowded theater echoes of laughter.

And yes, Prince Tamino and Princess Tamina were a sight to behold in their Khmer traditional attires.

It was, to say the least, a genius display of talents and creative minds that have succeeded to leap past the hurdles of personal, cultural and language differences, and the very fact that such genre of performing arts is relatively new to the eyes of its expected audience. It was a celebration of art beyond art.

A Cambodian Magic Flute, with all its honest and tangible efforts to give the Kingdom of Cambodia a classical play that transcends the words 'beautiful', 'spectacular' and 'historical', was worthy of the long standing ovation and loud applauses it got. Note that it wasn't even the main production yet.

And as the directors, actors, musicians and dancers bowed to the still jubilant audience, the theater was filled with pride and hopefulness: hope for the upcoming grand full production of the Mozart at Angkor at the Chau Say Tevoda temple in Siem Reap next year, and hope for the future discovery of local soloists and musicians to stage more classical plays in this promising Kingdom.

A special mention also goes to the following key characters:

Tamino – Kingston Kung

Pamina – Hae Ryong Cho

Papageno – Rios Li

Queen of the Night – Pariyachart Sittidamrongkarn

Sarastro – Hsieh Ming Mou

Monostatos – Tran Duy Linh

First Lady – Nguyen Thi Thanh Nga

Second Lady/Papagena – Vo Thuy Ngoc Tuyen

Third Lady – Nguyen Thi Thanh Huyen

Priests – Leng Kanol/El Chandina.