

A brief background of Lakhaon Bassac (traditional opera theatre)

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Lakhaon Bassac, a form of traditional opera theatre, is one of the most popular among all forms of Cambodian theatre. Lakhaon Bassac originates from '*Lakhaon Treoung Klok*' performed in the Bassac region of Kampuchea Krom.

In the 1930s, Mr. Ly Suon, known as *Merchant Chha Kruon*, the patron of the troupe in Kampuchea Krom, brought them to perform in Phnom Penh and other provinces along the Bassac River. Immediately the form became very popular and people began to call it "**Lakhaon Bassac**". Lakhaon Bassac is strongly influenced by Chinese and Vietnamese opera as it originated from the multinational region: Khmer-Chinese-Vietnamese.

In the 1960s, Lakhaon Bassac was strongly promoted by well-known actors such as Mr. Sang Sarun and Ms. Chek Mach, considered as legendary performers for most Cambodian. This was a glorious period for the Lakhaon Bassac Theatre. In 1993 the Ministry of Culture of Fine Arts officially recognised Mrs. Chek Mach as **Virak Selapakarini** (Grand Master of Artist); Mr. Sang Sarun is no longer on earth but his voice remains with us on taped recordings. Both remain highly esteemed as masters of Lakhaon Bassac.

A variety of stories are performed through Bassac Theater including legends, the *Jataka* (stories from Buddha's

life), as well as Arab legends.

In 1982, following a dark period when many artists perished, Lakhaon Bassac was revived together with other Cambodian performing arts and quickly spread throughout the country. We noticed that lots of out door performances have been set up during nighttime and thousands of people from all level of the society enjoyed the performances. We would love to see that events happen again at present and eventually became a part of people life.

Lakhaon Bassac has been constantly improved to its current form. Behind the comic and spectacular gestures, this theatre demands great concentration. Sentimental feelings have to be perfectly expressed to avoid a parody of the good and evil spirits. The giants psychology is often more complex that what we could imagine.

Presently, this form of Cambodian Theatre is on the brink of collapse due to the influence of modern cultures. Our purpose is to revive Cambodia's performing arts heritage in its highest form and to encourage the artistes to create more stage performances while building the overall infrastructure for the sake of sustainability, to both generate income and build self-esteem of the artists.