



KEVIN TRIMMER/CHANGE MEDIA

Marie-France Arcilla and Marc de la Cruz as the young lovers in *Where Elephants Weep*, premiering this month in Cambodia.

COMPILED BY NICOLE ESTVANIK TAYLOR

Phnom Penh, Cambodia

'WHERE ELEPHANTS WEEP': A new genre, Cambodian rock opera, debuts this month. Phnom Penh audiences will be the first to greet it. The show, *Where Elephants Weep*, is the product of six years of collaboration. (Audiences in Lowell, Mass., home to a large Cambodian population, got a sneak peek in April '07—but the show has changed considerably since then under the eye of director Robert McQueen, who took over from Victor Maog.)

While the phrase “East Meets West” gets thrown around a lot, there’s ample reason to apply it here. Commissioned by Cambodian Living Arts, which has headquarters in Boston and Phnom Penh, and produced in association with Amrita Performing Arts of Phnom Penh, *Where Elephants Weep* features music by Him Sophy, who survived the Pol Pot years in Cambodia and later spent more than a decade studying classical music in Moscow; and book and libretto by U.S.-based playwright Catherine Filloux. In Sophy’s score, traditional Khmer instruments blend with a Cambodian rock-and-roll band. The cast includes Asian-American Broadway veterans alongside famous Cambodian performer Ieng Sithul, and the actors sing in English and Khmer, with surtitles in both languages. The main character, who fled as a child from the 1970s genocide, is returning from the U.S. to rediscover his birth country. In Cambodia he falls in love with a pop star, but the romance meets opposition—shades of *Romeo & Juliet* or “Tum Teav” (an old Cambodian love story), depending on where you’re coming from.

So what does all this East-West mingling sound like?

“Something I don’t think anybody’s ever heard before,” is Filloux’s answer. Deeply concerned with human rights and women’s issues, Filloux has been writing plays about Cambodia for more than a decade, but says this one is different: “This particular piece is not looking in the rearview mirror at the

genocide. Sophy and I very much wanted this to be a movement into the future. We didn’t want to get lost in that bleakness.” Writing the book was a difficult balancing act, says Filloux, between acknowledging the dark history of the Khmer Rouge and dwelling on it. That backstory is info the Phnom Penh spectators surely won’t need, but it’s essential if the piece is going to have global legs (tentative engagements are already in the works for Boston and Long Beach, Calif.). There are other crucial cultural details non-Cambodian audiences must also navigate—for example, in the moment that the male lead, temporarily living as a monk, is reunited with his lover. “For me as the dramatist, it would be really, really great if she could *touch* him—for the romance,” says Filloux wistfully—but she had to settle for ardent singing, since in Cambodia a man may not be touched by a woman so long as he wears a monk’s robes. All the same, such negotiations have given the project energy, Filloux avows: “The thrill of the piece, and the huge challenge, is how much cultural exchange is going on.” (Nov. 28-30, Dec. 5-7; (855) 23-220-424; www.whereelephantsweep.net)

Prishtina, Kosovo

SKENA UP: This international student competition was founded by a group of young artists in 2003 to promote networking and professional artistic values, and encompasses both film and theatre. Nine months after Kosovo declared its independence, what will its new generation of theatre artists deliver to the stage? One show from the program will be nominated to take part in a touring showcase called International Young Makers Marathon, in cooperation with several other European theatre festivals. (Nov. 20-27; (386) 49-225-206; www.skenaup.com)

Lima, Peru

NI TAN SOLOS: The name of this festival, which roughly means “Not Quite Solo,” gives performers who are used to being alone on stage the chance to mingle with their colleagues. While some shows are open to the public, there’s a strong emphasis on master classes and other ways the festival can enrich its participants, who are drawn primarily from Spanish-speaking countries (artists from Germany and the U.S. also attended last year). The event is directed by Alexander Sabino Ayala, of Arlequin & Colombina, which produces the event under the auspices of the Centro Cultural de España de Lima. At press time, 2008 details (including dates) remained unconfirmed; contact the festival for the latest information. (November/December; (511) 536-0563; www.nitansolos.com)

Kiel, Germany

THESPI: Acclaimed performers take turns proving how many different directions a single person on a stage can take a willing audience. There’s humorous memoir (Swiss actor Jürg Kienberger on his childhood in the Alps); tragic biography (Kamil Mackowiak gets inside the head of mentally ill dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, and Norway’s Juni Dahr embodies Joan of Arc); and literary adaptation (Germany’s Ivan Dentler does *Peer Gynt*; the U.K.’s Pip Utton performs *Jeff Wayne’s Musical Version of ‘The War of the Worlds’*; and Ukraine’s Larysa Kadyrova delivers a Gabriel García Márquez–penned diatribe in *The Statue of Love*). There are personal windows into



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Andrea Breth's production of *Crime and Punishment*

hot-button issues (Swiss-Palestinian actor Tahani Salim depicts life in violence-ripped Ramallah; Israel's Miki Peleg-Rothstein dramatizes the agony of sexual abuse). There's satire of American culture's blandness (Jessica Lynn Johnson of the U.S. with *Oblivious to Everyone* and Canada's Peter Aterman with *Slaves of Starbucks*) alongside celebration of its melting-pot mystique (*NE 2nd Avenue*, by Miami-based Teo Castellanos). Add to that dollops of fantasy (Germany's Horst Stenzel plays a creepy-crawly P.I. in *Bug Muldoon*), arts education (*Guide to the World Behind the Scenes*, a sly lecture about the workings of theatre conveyed by Russia's Elena Kharitonova) and more. From Friday to Friday each production will be seen once, no overlapping—so that a theatregoer with a week to kill in Kiel can take in the entire monodrama marathon. (Nov. 7-14; (49) 431-528307; www.thespiefestival.de)

Berlin, Germany

SPIELZEIT'EUROPA: The theatre program of the Berliner Festspiele sparked to life last month with *The Powder Keg*, a look at Balkan violence written in the 1990s by Macedonian playwright Dejan Dukovski, in a new staging by Dimiter Gotscheff. (It travels to Venice this month, and eventually will enter the repertoire of the Deutsches Theater.) Still ahead: Spielzeit'Europa approaches the dark winter months with a shadowy adaptation of *Crime and Punishment* directed by Andrea Breth, originally commissioned for the Salzburg Festival, and described by critic Andrew Patner as "a very German take on a very Russian novel." And January brings the premiere adaptation of book four of William Carlos Williams's dramatic poem *Paterson*, directed by Thorsten Lensing and Jan Hein and titled *The Run to the Sea. An Idyll*. (Thru January; (49) 30-254-89-100; www.berlinerfestspiele.de)



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— Bill McNulty, 2008 Workshop Participant,
Actors Theatre of Louisville (29 years),
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