

East meets West

Lucia Blash, Press and Public Relations Officer at The Point in Eastleigh on an exchange between disabled dancers from Cambodia and the UK

In a country where tradition is held sacred, a group of young Cambodians is pushing the boundaries by exploring the world of modern contemporary dance. Not only are they challenging convention but also their own physicality as most of the dancers have disabilities.

The group is part of Epic Arts Cambodia, a registered non-governmental organisation (NGO) that provides a range of professional dance, drama, music and art programs to people of all abilities and disabilities. In a country where an estimated one in 10 people has some form of disability, Epic's mission is to promote integration and acceptance through utilising the arts as a form of expression and empowerment; and to harness the creative potential of people with disabilities while deconstructing myths and stereotypes.

Always looking for opportunities for their dancers to work with, and learn from, professionals, Epic Arts Cambodia recently joined The Point's Elevate: Integrate programme, a week-long workshop with a focus on integrated dance supported by acclaimed integrated dance groups StopGAP and Candoco.

The programme at the Eastleigh theatre, one of the South's leading venues for contemporary performance, is designed for young people aged between 15 and 25 years old already in or aspiring to be in vocational dance training.

For the Cambodian dancers it was a journey of firsts: the first time visiting another country; the first time encountering professional disabled dancers.

Epic Arts Cambodia managing director Hannah Stevens explains: "Working with professional integrated dance companies, seeing what is possible. These opportunities just don't exist in Cambodia. It is a wonderful opportunity."

The five Cambodian dancers – two of whom are deaf and two who use wheelchairs – all teach contemporary dance >



Right: Lucia Blash
Far right: Epic Arts dancers
Mat Not and Puan Nadenh,
Elevate:Integrate, The Point.
Photo: Crispian Cook
Below: Elevate:Integrate,
The Point. Photo: Crispian Cook





Epic Arts' Noth Samneang, Elevate:Integrate, The Point.
Photo: Crispian Cook

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through Epic Arts in the southern region of Kampot. Although still viewed with suspicion, the group is slowly introducing contemporary performance to audiences in Cambodia.

Elevate:Integrate saw the Cambodians join a class of 22 young dancers on the integrated intensive. Over the week, they worked on choreography with members of StopGAP and Candoco, performing a sharing to an invited audience after each choreographic task.

As part of the inventive programme, StopGAP workshopped with the young dancers for three days, starting each day with a technique class, and introducing them to the theme of adaptation and the importance of challenge.

On hosting the workshop with her StopGAP colleagues, dancer Laura Jones says: "It was such a joy teaching such an enthusiastic and creative group. All the participants were open and receptive."

"Personally, I found it exciting working with Epic Arts. It was a good experience working with different people from other cultures and abilities. It was interesting working with the deaf dancers from Cambodia as I have only worked with deaf dancers on a small number of occasions. However, a lot of our teaching techniques are non verbal/visual, so these worked well – even crossing cultural divides and language barriers."

The Point's Elevate:Integrate offers a unique opportunity to young dancers who are interested in pursuing a career in dance. It forms part of The Point's visionary Domicile Project, launched last year to give young and emerging artists career opportunities, guidance and performance platforms. With just 22 places available this year, Elevate:Integrate was a golden opportunity for young dancers to extend their dance vocabulary.

Fifteen-year-old Brandon Clarke, a member of The Point Youth Dance Company and Hampshire Dance Company, was one of the privileged participants. In many of the choreographic tasks, he worked closely with the Cambodian dancers.

"Working with them [the Cambodian dancers] and StopGAP was amazing," he says. "By the end of the first day, I didn't see disability only ability.

"I gained brand new ways of moving. In fact, I have just started to create a piece of dance without using my legs that I hope to perform at The Point next year."

His partner in many of the sessions was Cambodian Puon Nadenh who has used a wheelchair since being struck down with polio as a child. He joined Epic Arts, with no dance training, in 2005 and since then has gone on to play an integral role as dancer and teacher with the organisation. In Kampot, he has become somewhat of an inspirational figure to the many disabled children he teaches. His ambition is to study integrated dance in London and become a full time performer and facilitator for Epic Arts.

For him the course was about exploring his own movements under the professional guidance of StopGAP and Candoco. The 20-year-old says: "It was an honour to work with the dancers. It has really helped me to develop my own technique and movement. I feel I have improved as a performer. This, I believe, will help me with my teaching back in Cambodia. I feel very lucky to have been part of this group; it has shown me what is out there for me as a performer."

His colleague, Mat Not, joined Epic Arts three years ago and despite having had no previous dance experience has shown a natural talent for performance. The 19-year-old is deaf after an ear infection at the age of four, left untreated due to a lack of health care facilities, led to permanent hearing loss. Through an interpreter, he signs: "In Cambodia, we do not see contemporary dance or integrated performances. Everything is based around traditional dance. This has been exciting to see what we can do as dancers. I will take the memories back and show people that you can do anything you want to."

Summarising Elevate:Integrate, The Point's Dance Development Officer Vicki Hargreaves says:

"Elevate:Integrate has given young dancers the opportunity to work with two of the leading integrated dance companies in the UK – StopGAP and Candoco. To attract young dancers with disabilities from Cambodia to the project shows how we are raising the level of dance training opportunities for young people. All 22 participants have expressed how this experience at The Point has taught them so much about inclusive dance. This amazing work is a groundbreaking, nationally-significant project that we hope to build on in years to come."

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