



Golden (r)Age: A new stage for Cambodia

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Lyer Von in *Finding Myself (In Mirages)*, one of thirteen productions in the *Golden (r)Age Performing Art Festival*, running June 4-14 across seven Phnom Penh venues. Supplied

Something has been building in Phnom Penh. Over the past few years, a quiet infrastructure has taken shape – a school that isn't quite a school, a stage at the edge of the river and a community of actors, filmmakers, translators and choreographers finding their footing together. From June 4-14, that infrastructure goes public in the most visible way yet: the first official edition of the *Golden (r)Age Performing Art Festival*, a ten-day celebration of contemporary theatre and performance spread across seven venues in the Cambodian capital.

Thirteen productions. Cambodian and international artists. Works in Khmer, French and English. Stories about marriage, memory, identity, exile and what it means to speak in your own voice when that voice has been long suppressed or simply overlooked. If Year Zero, the festival's exploratory 2025 edition, was a proof of concept, Year 1 – as the organisers prefer to count it – is a declaration.

"I'm super excited and I feel such a buzz of energy this year," says Niyalic Khun, a co-founder of the Acting Art Academy and director of one of the festival's opening productions. "I think it's going to create a movement, and an understanding for a lot of young Cambodians who want to express their passion."

The school that isn't a school

To understand *Golden (r)Age*, you need to understand the institution behind it. The Acting Art Academy and its performance home, The Last Stage, are the festival's organisers and animating spirit – and they have an origin story that resists easy categorisation.

The academy was co-founded in August 2022 by French theatre-maker Karim Belkacem Saadi (widely known as KB Saadi), director and artist Armelle Despeyroux, cinema teacher Sansitny Ruth and Niyalic Khun, then a political science student who had grown up between Cambodia and France. The founding was pragmatic: Saadi had come to Cambodia to make a film and needed trained local actors. Demand for the workshops grew. What began as a practical arrangement became something more expansive.

"I wouldn't say we are a school," says Khun. "I would say we are more like an art association. We have had different acting coaches and professors from different

schools of acting – it’s really special because we have intervenants (guest instructors) from around the world that can stay for three months, six months, and then others join in after. It’s a very organic structure.”

Instructors, past and present, have included Shawn O’Docharty in Jacques Lecoq technique, Igor Bychkov in Meyerhold’s biomechanics, John MacLaren in Uta Hagen and Vicky Lemaire Dahmani in a method drawn from contemporary dance.

“We don’t have any donations or big grants,” Khun says. “Everyone involved pours money out of their own pockets – from cents to hundreds, from directors to actors – for the sake of art. In a hyper-capitalistic society that’s paranoid about anything remotely socialist, it’s very hard to find passion as a motivator and not money. Actors come in with the promise of nothing but *carpe diem*, radical experience and the friction of contact with the public.”

What the academy has created, Khun explains, is less a curriculum and more a community – one built on trust, experimentation and a shared commitment to making theatre in Khmer. The Last Stage, the performance venue that grew from the academy’s training programme, was conceived as the final stage of that journey: the place where students become artists in public.

Khun arrived not as an actor but as an intermediary – trilingual, curious, willing. “I myself don’t come from a background of art,” he says with humility. “I came here and drew inspiration from how KB mentors and coaches the actors. I picked up on all of that and then kind of just built this community with them.”

The festival is both a showcase and a statement of intent. “What makes me excited [for this edition],” Khun says, “is more the community aspect. I’m really happy that people have this outlet here now.”



A still from Heritages, directed by Karim Belkacem Saadi, co-founder of the Acting Art Academy, and one of the driving forces behind the festival. Supplied

What it is and why it matters

Described by the French Institute of Cambodia (IFC) – a co-producer and original partner of the event – as Cambodia’s first contemporary theatre festival, it takes its name from the country’s own cultural mythology: the pre-war era of Cambodian music, cinema and arts that was so violently interrupted by the Khmer Rouge.

The 2026 edition spans ten days, thirteen productions and seven venues across the city. The vast majority of works are performed in Khmer, with French and English surtitles – a deliberate choice that reflects both the academy’s founding commitment to Khmer-language performance and the festival’s ambitions for international reach.

Running alongside the festival, from June 5-11, is Chakto II: the first professional programme fully dedicated to contemporary live performance in Phnom Penh, bringing together nearly one hundred Cambodian and international programmers, presenters, artists and journalists.

Financed by the French Institute of Cambodia through an initiative dedicated to CCI (cultural and creative industries) and organised in cooperation with the Acting Art Academy and Cambodian Living Arts, the gathering confirms the festival’s ambitions beyond the capital.

Confirmed guests include Paul Rondin, director of the Cité internationale de la langue française and former deputy director of the Festival d’Avignon; Shireen Binte Abdullah, senior programmer at Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay in Singapore; and Jeff Khan, creative director of Asia Triennial of Performing Arts (TOPA) in Australia.

The message is clear: *Golden (r)Age* is not just a local event. It is a bid for a place on the international stage.



Lyer Von (centre), Madalina Constantin (left) and Phanit Yim (right) in Finding Myself (In Mirages), directed by French theatre-maker Frédéric Fisbach, which returns to The Last Stage Riverside from June 10-11 after selling out its March run. Supplied

Finding oneself

When *Finding Myself (In Mirages)* returns to Phnom Penh, it will do so with six sold-out performances already behind it. The production, directed by French theatre and opera director Frédéric Fisbach and performed in Khmer, French and English with live surtitles, first opened in March 2026 – marking Fisbach’s debut collaboration with Khmer artists.

The work follows a woman whose partner disappears. Searching for him, she enters a world most people go to lengths to avoid: addiction, prostitution, survival on the margins. She has little obviously in common with the women she meets, and yet they speak to her, confide in her. From those encounters, something unexpected emerges – a recognition across difference.

The raw material comes from Marseille-born photographer Antoine d'Agata. Over years spent moving through the world's harder places, d'Agata recorded the testimonies of women living on society's margins. That body of written work – adapted here under the title *White Noise* – became the foundation for Fisbach's production.

The cast brings together Khmer performers from the Acting Art Academy – Von Lyer, Vinich Virak and Phanit Yem – alongside Franco-Romanian actress Madalina Constantin. The process of embodying these women's stories was not a neutral one for those involved.

“The topics around the stories of these women have existed and continue to exist in every society, including Cambodia. To be able to work through these texts and learn about their stories and embody them – it has been truly an experience and a revelation,” says Virak.



A LITTLE BIT ALL OVER THE PLACE, a dance work directed and choreographed by Michael Laub with co-choreographer Vanthy Khen, premieres at Chenla Theatre on June 5-6 and sets the ancient codes of traditional Khmer dance against the visual world of TikTok. Oyen Rodriguez

Ancient and algorithmic

Belgian director and choreographer Michael Laub – whose four-decade career has made him one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary European performance – arrives at Chenla Theatre with a collision that shouldn't work and somehow does: classical Apsara dance set against TikTok. *A LITTLE BIT ALL OVER THE PLACE* features nine dancers as they move between the slow, centuries-old articulation of wrists and fingers and one of the most transient mediums alive, with an original score by Cambodia-based musician Mute Speaker.

The result is neither cautionary nor celebratory – more like a sustained act of looking at something most of us never stop to examine. The production is co-produced by IFC and Phare Ponleu Selpak, with support from OCIC Group. Alongside *Finding Myself (In Mirages)*, it is one of the festival's signature international co-productions and one of its most anticipated premieres.

For an in-depth look at the production and the director behind it, see [Michael Laub brings TikTok to the temple](#) in *The Post*.



Thong Sopheanith in The Cambodian Dream, directed by Niyalic Khun, which traces a young Cambodian woman's journey through marriage, desire and self-discovery – told in reverse. Supplied

A dream of Cambodia

The Cambodian Dream, directed by Niyalic Khun, opens the festival on June 4, its four-actor cast drawn from among the academy's closest collaborators.

The title is deliberately double-edged. “*The Cambodian Dream* is a bit of an allusion to the American dream,” Khun explains. “But it's equally the dream as in the dream state and also the dream as in an economic dream. I wanted to explore what's going on in Cambodia at the moment and what it means to have a dream, and where it comes from.”

The work draws on classical Western source material – Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage* and Alfred de Musset – but Khun's interest is not in staging these works so much as interrogating what they leave out.

“When I read that book, I wanted to rip it up,” he says of Bergman, laughing. “That's what inspired me. I felt like there was something missing – usually, what does that entail for the women in general? What does it mean for their dream, their aspiration in life? It just cuts short to the marriage and then doesn't have anything else after. So I thought: this could be an interesting way to rehash everything and build on top of it.”

Language, inevitably, is central to the work. The performance is in Khmer, with French and English surtitles, and Khun speaks with particular thoughtfulness about the responsibility of that work.

“You're not only translating a word with a specific set of definitions, but you're almost translating a cultural heritage, a cultural way of moving, social norms,” he says. “In art spaces, you create – but you also normalise. For example, the certain use of words. That's a big debate within our group of actors during these processes.”

The result, Khun suggests, is something recognisable to Cambodian audiences in particular. “I think they'll see something a bit triggering. With my actors, we sit and we're like: does my mom say it like this? Does my uncle say it like this? Who has this experience?” he says. “It's almost an anthropological work on Cambodian people.”



Jean-Baptiste Phou in Out of My Skin, a solo work written and performed by Phou exploring race, sexuality and identity, directed by Sasapin Siriwanij. Jeff Yong

Out of one's skin

Jean-Baptiste Phou is a French-Cambodian writer, performer and multidisciplinary artist based in Phnom Penh. His memoir *La Peau hors du placard* – published in 2023 as *Coming Out of My Skin* – traces the experience of a gay man of Cambodian and Chinese descent navigating race and sexuality in a white-dominated environment. This year, he performs the material himself.

The path to this version has been longer than the title change to *Out of My Skin* might suggest. The book came first, then readings. A Khmer stage adaptation opened *Golden (r)Age Year Zero* in 2025. Now Phou himself steps onto the stage, directed by Thai artist Sasapin Siriwanij, in a stripped-down French-language solo with English and Khmer surtitles. The two versions, he says, are not in competition.

“It’s very different from last year’s performance, which was pretty similar to the original book. What we did for this version is we only kept the essence of each scene. And for me, that is exciting because it’s really like a new work. The people who would come to see it would absolutely not experience the same thing,” he says.

Choosing Siriwanij as director was a deliberate act of distancing himself from the material. “Working with Sasapin helped me create a distance, and that’s what I wanted,” Phou explains. “The idea was not to relive or to replay these events. But more to take an external view. It’s the me today that is able to look back at the events that I’m describing – me now at 45, being able to go back to the events where I was a teenager, a young adult – but without emotionally reliving all of it.”

The production itself has been shaped by circumstance in ways that turned out to be formally generative. The 2025 Thailand-Cambodia border tensions complicated rehearsals: Siriwanij was detained at the border travelling to Cambodia; Phou was detained travelling to Bangkok. Online rehearsals replaced in-person ones. The time they had together shrank.

“Despite the border conflict, it was very important for us to maintain the project,” Phou says. “At some point we almost had the temptation to cancel the whole thing because it became very complicated. And she’s Thai, I’m Cambodian, and we were in the middle of this whole crisis. But we are artists – we’re not supposed to get influenced by all these things happening. And at some point we had a very open

conversation: this is politics. Our countries are fighting against each other. But this is exactly why we need to maintain this project.”

What emerged from those constraints is a production that is, in Phou’s word, “naked”. Minimal set. Few props. A body and a story.



Leo Sok in Burning Mouth Syndrome, a solo performance written and performed by Sok drawing on memory, family history and the experience of growing up between cultures. Supplied

Burning mouth

Leo Sok is a Franco-Khmer writer and transdisciplinary artist based in Cambodia since 2015. Having worked for a decade as a Southeast Asia correspondent and authored *Les Cambodgiens*, a portrait-based survey of contemporary Cambodian society, *Burning Mouth Syndrome* represents a different register entirely.

The performance began as what Sok originally called “Daddy’s Project” – a file on her computer accumulating for years: photographs, fragments of text, video footage, administrative documents and a pair of leather shoes that had belonged to her father and that, when she tried them, fit.

The title arrived as most good titles do: unexpectedly and already meaning something. Two days before the work’s first public presentation last December, Sok developed the syndrome itself – a condition causing the mouth to feel intensely, persistently hot.

“I was anxious,” she recalls. “Checking the internet, I read that it was a syndrome. I thought it would be a good name for this performance.”

“I’ve been living in Cambodia for ten years and the reason that brought me here was connected with my father,” she says. “He left France when I was sixteen. The rupture was radical, igniting a desire, so I came to visit. Then Cambodia, which had long been kept off-screen, took centre stage.”

The documentary she wanted to make about her father couldn’t happen because he passed away. Over time, and through a cross-disciplinary approach, the project pivoted.

‘It’s not only about him, who he was, or our relationship – it’s more about what I needed to discover, what I needed to explore,’ she says.

The play weaves together intimate, poetic narratives and collective history – drawing on objects, archive, multimedia and embodied movement. Much of the

performance circles around presence-absence, and the unsaid.

“I grew up across several cultures, with a father who didn’t talk much,” she says. “For the second generation of Cambodian exiles, scars are mostly invisible. But we still feel them, inherited. And I’m trying to give this invisible world a shape, a voice.”

Performing her own material has been a powerful process of filling the gaps with words, feeling them in her mouth, and searching for the breath to incarnate her burning story.



Performers in Falling Bodies, a dance-theater piece by Vicky Lemaire-Dahmani. Supplied

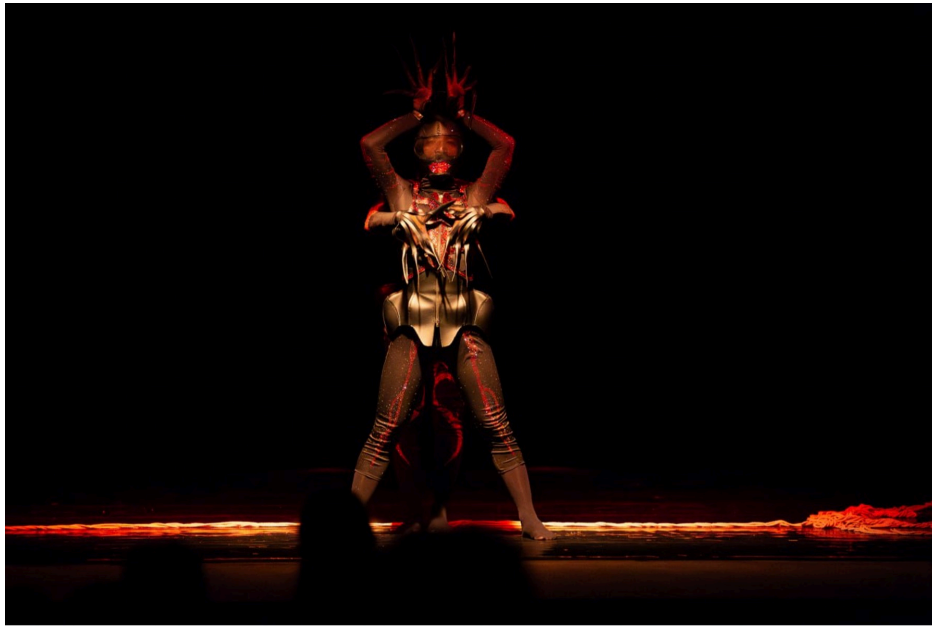
A festival, a moment, a claim

For Niyalic Khun, the appeal of *Golden (r)Age* comes down to something he puts plainly.

“I know it’s pretty simple to say,” he says, “but there’s a power in a community-led festival, rather than one performance that is transcending. You feel that if you join in, you have a real [support structure]. You’re not relying on one person, but joining in on a movement.”

What that movement is making, show by show, is a case for Cambodian contemporary performance as a form with its own voice, its own vocabulary, its own claim on the international stage. The stories being told this June – of fathers and daughters, of women on society’s margins, of marriages, of exiled bodies, of what it means to speak in Khmer and be heard beyond it – are stories that, in various forms, could be told anywhere. The festival’s argument is that they should be told here.

Tickets for individual performances during the *Golden (r)Age Performing Art Festival* are priced at \$10 full price or \$7.50 with a festival pass. Bookings for *A LITTLE BIT ALL OVER THE PLACE* and *Out of My Skin* can be made through the IFC website at <https://www.ifcambodge.com/fr/culture/en-ce-moment/spectacles/goldenrage/> For the full programme, other bookings and venue information, visit the IFC website or contact The Last Stage on Telegram.



A scene from Home?, choreographed and directed by Puthik Dy, which explores generational trauma, queer culture and healing through contemporary dance. Supplied

Phnom Penh Post



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