
EXCLUSIVE

PHARE PONLEU SELPAK

The Cambodian Circus School of Battambang "the brightness of the Art" photographed by Matthieu Lunard.
Photography and Story by Matthieu Lunard.

Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals or nations live by and tell themselves, and you change the individuals and nations.
—Ben Okri, Nobel Prize for Literature

This quote from Ben Okri could easily be applied to the thousand and something students a year whose life is changed through free arts education at the Phare Ponleu Selpak (PPS) schools of the arts in Battambang, Cambodia.

That certainly was the philosophy of French Artist and PPS co-founder Veronique Decrop when she started giving drawing classes in 1986 to the children of “Site II” a refugee camp at the Thai Cambodian border after the end of the Khmer Rouge regime.

Art is a life changer, states Veronique, that mends traumas and allows people to move forward, get inspired, regain hope and reinstate a sense of belief in oneself. This is the genesis, the original idea behind Phare Ponleu Selpak schools of the arts.

The original goal was for orphans to learn how to express their emotions through their creations in order to expel various traumas.

In 1992, after the closing of “SITE II” camp, Veronique along with nine of her students settled down in Battambang where they founded an art school aiming at helping the destitute children of the surrounding communities, whilst preserving and promoting Cambodian arts and culture.

After a lot of dedication and hard work the school welcomed its first students in 1995. Phare Ponleu Selpak (“the brightness of the arts” in Khmer) was born.

Its vision constitutes of three pillars. Firstly, the power of art for social and personal human evolution. Second a mission to provide a creative environment for youth to access quality arts training, education & social support. Lastly to invoke four main core values of creativity, professionalism, collaboration, accessibility.

First created with simple drawing classes, the school integrated performing arts in 1996 beginning with a music school followed by a circus school in 1997 initiated by Khuon Det, one of the original founders of PPS. The school thanks to Khuon Det has been focusing on developing international exchanges to perfect the student practices with links to renowned foreign...
“When I came back to Battambang, the beginnings of Phare Ponleu Selpak were hard, we were lacking everything but it created a deep sense of solidarity among us. Unlike the other founders, I felt drawing was not sufficient to channel my energy and overcome my own trauma, so I decided to create a circus school in 1997. I have been working on developing international exchanges since then, building capacity in performing arts and bringing the good practices from renowned foreign companies to our Performing Arts School. My work is directly linked to the duty of remembrance: our shows bear the weight of powerful symbols related to Cambodia’s history.” – Khoun Det

Upon finishing the vocational training program in either circus (up to 9 years), theater, dance and music, the degree opens a pathway to employment as a performer, giving students the opportunity to perform and teach in Cambodia and for the luckiest ones abroad. Battambang circus performances are held on campus every week.

But education isn’t the only support provided by PPS, it also places an emphasis on social support and community outreach. The social support department plays a huge role in the structure of the NGO. The social workers are the ones working the most closely with the children and their families. Their work focuses on protecting them against abuse and providing them with dignity in society.

Pho Samet is the social support program manager for PPS. He is a firm believer that wherever you come from, if you are taught that you have a creative talent, you can regain your dignity through the learning process. The social department focuses on promoting PPS free education and children rights awareness to families around Battambang. The activities are featured through meetings and campaigns with the help of the village chiefs and commune councils. They are the ones who direct social workers to the families considered the most in need, to whom PPS offer extra financial support through child monthly sponsorship program.

The schools are open to every kid from every surrounding community without assessment. All of them benefit from free lunch on the campus every day. PPS is also monitoring families/kids with issues and mediate to other NGOs in case they need more specific care, especially for the new generations that are suffering from sensitive issues like drugs, human trafficking, forced labour, domestic violence and extreme poverty. What they can find in Phare is a safe environment and holistic studies opportunities to help their self-development and later contribute in strengthening their chances on the growing creative industry market.

Their responsibilities are also to follow up on the families after the kids have been accepted in the school. For instance, if some kids are not attending the mandatory public school activities in the morning they will check whether the reasoning is sufficient for missing class. When some students have a part time job, PPS makes sure that the money they earned isn’t spent by a family member to buy abused substances. If something wrong is noticed, they will first address the issue to the village chief, then to the police.

It had been reported that drugs related issues had become a problem. Today, the region is more and more confronted with drug consumption, especially among the poorer communities. If a student is caught he is sent to a rehab center in Battambang, and upon assessment and approval later reintegrated back into the school and community. Drug tests are planned to be administered starting next year.

This relation established between the management of the schools, the social services and the students families provides a shelter in which the students have a chance to get out of their misery: Phare Ponleu Selpak provides a chance to travel the world as a performer, a chance to study several foreign languages in contact with many international volunteers (foreign languages are not yet part of the school’s curriculum). It is an escape with no boundaries. As Pho Samet specifies, unlike big international organization, PPS unique sense of community provides the children with a strong sense of family, protection and most important of all hope.

Special thanks to Morgane Darrasse & Pho Samet but also of course to the students of PPS: Chhunleang, Kimheng, Chomreoun, Sovann, Bunsak, Seanlong, Rachnhra, Sreyneang, Samnang, Dara, Sitha, Mann, Makara, Nisay, Chanthy, Makara, Nisay & teacher Sari.