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Arts hub to raise \$300,000 for 30th birthday

Peter Olszewski / Khmer Times



Madison Now dance rehearsal in Phnom Penh. Supplied

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First up is the inaugural 30km Sangker River run and cycle tournament on January 20. The run was planned in September 2023 by the school's founders Khuon Det and Tor Vutha, and registration closed on December 20, 2023. All up, 160 runners and cyclists have registered from 12 countries: Cambodia, Vietnam, Pakistan, South Korea, Japan, Australia, Germany, Belgium, Spain, France, the UK and the US and, as of January 16, the run had raised \$22,314.54, or 7% of the 2024 fundraising goal.

The run will be followed by an arts programme in Phnom Penh in the early part of the year, with more celebrations to be announced down the line.

This year's celebrations are a highlight in the organisation's three-decade history, but Phare Ponleu Selpak executive director Osman Khawaja notes that as significant as this celebration is, it is just one in a long list of highlights.

"Phare Ponleu Selpak has accomplished so much over the past 30 years, but there have been some key milestones that stand out from all the rest," Osman says.

"In 2013, Phare Ponleu Selpak created Phare Performing Social Enterprises, of which we are the majority shareholder. This social enterprise – which includes Phare, The Cambodian Circus in Siem Reap and Phare Creative Studio in Battambang – creates jobs for our graduating performing and visual arts students, while also generating income for the non-profit school. Having this vital source of self-funding has been critical to Phare's survival over the past eleven years.



Cabaret of Dreams workshop rehearsal. Supplied

"In 2021, Phare Ponleu Selpak set the Guinness World Record for the longest circus show performance at 24 hours, 30 minutes, and 10 seconds. The world record put Phare and the circus arts on the world map, and it gave Cambodia its fourth Guinness World Record nationally."

Phare Ponleu Selpak also helped conceive, organise, and support a number of arts festivals in Battambang including the Tin Tinou International Circus Festival, the S'Art Urban Art Festival, the Chumnor Art Festival and the Ros Battambang Festival which was set up during Covid.

All this activity, according to Osman, has further developed Battambang "as an art and cultural hub," as will no doubt the 30th anniversary offering this year and the organisation of the 12th and largest edition of the Tini Tinou International Circus Festival on June 3-9.

“These successes are rarely flashy enough for headlines, but they have had real, meaningful impact on the lives of thousands of Cambodian students and their families over the past three decades.”

Osman also points out that the Sangker River Run on the weekend is a measured celebration of the school’s accomplishments.

“Each kilometre of the run stands for one year of Phare Ponleu Selpak’s success within the province,” he says. “We hope the run also helps our community of supporters look to the next 30 years and what Phare might accomplish, and that’s why we’ve made the Sangker River Run a fundraiser for our 30th anniversary.”

Osman will certainly have plenty of time to further ponder the success of the school as he fronts the start line of the big run.

“Yes! I’m running 10k as part of a relay team with two other members of the Phare admin team,” he says. “Our team name is Neak Torsu Teang Bei: literally ‘the three fighters’ or ‘the Three Musketeers’.”

Following the run in Battambang, celebrations will embrace the artistic in Phnom Penh on March 1-3 with a dance performance titled “Madison Now” on March 1 and 2; a fundraising gala at the Rosewood Phnom Penh on March 2; and a special preview of the forthcoming contemporary theatre show “Cabaret of Dreams” on March 3.

“The Rosewood Phnom Penh has graciously hosted an annual fundraising gala for us over the past few years, but for Phare’s 30th anniversary we wanted to make it an extra special weekend for our supporters, so we decided to put on more performances to showcase our students’ amazing talents,” Osman says

The dance performance “Madison Now”, will be held at the Canadian International School of Phnom Penh – Koh Pich Campus, and is directed and choreographed by Cambodian dancer-choreographer Khen Vanthy and Belgian director-choreographer Michael Laub, an internationally accomplished and acclaimed stage director, dance choreographer and video artist whose avant-garde works are out there who more recently has been involved with Phare Ponleu Selpak.

“Michael Laub has previously worked with artists and performers from Cambodia,” Osman Khawaja says. “He wanted to give back by doing another production with Cambodian artists and because Phare is one of the few creative institutions in Cambodia with a dance school, he approached us for potential performers. We’ve been partnering with him for several years now.

“The ‘Madison Now’ dance production in particular has been in the works for much of 2023, and they’re ready to show it off to the world this March.”

The location for the other artistic work – a contemporary theatre work titled “Cabaret of Dreams” – is still being finalized.

According to organisers, “This work tells the story of each artist’s dreams and aspirations. While not strictly autobiographical, each student-actor was told to bring their personal experience to their portion of the play, resulting in a blended anthology of each individual’s hopes, dreams, and aspirations.”

As for the next 30 years, hopes are also high.

“Phare Ponleu Selpak is keen to close the missing gap in the arts ecosystem in Battambang and in Cambodia as a whole,” Osman says. “We believe that starts by fully integrating the arts into the curriculum at Phare Public School as a test case for future schools in Cambodia.

“We also have plans to further professionalise the visual and performing arts programs at Phare Ponleu Selpak to become tertiary-level diploma programmes. Battambang is ready for a higher level of education in the arts, and we’re ready to provide it.”