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Dance Review

Grand Themes, Conveyed in Movement and in Paint, in 'Cambodian Stories'

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"Cambodian Stories: An Offering of Painting and Dance," performed at the Asia Society on Saturday night, more than stands on its own as haunting theater and dance filled with suggestions about great human themes. But its story is as fascinating as the piece itself, which came about after the duo Eiko and Koma were invited in 2001 to work with students at the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture in Phnom Penh.

Founded eight years ago, the school, a nongovernmental organization, offers young people substantial free training in traditional and contemporary painting and drawing. Eiko and Koma, New York-based choreographers and dancers, taught their Delicious Movement workshop at the Cambodian school and were

impressed with the students' openness to dance. Last year the two returned to create "Cambodian Stories" with a cast of volunteer students, followed by this national tour in the United States.

Eight young men and one teenage girl, ranging in ages from 16 to 22, are the chief performers. Eiko and Koma glide like gentle presiding ghosts through the ritual story, which unfolds on a stage covered with sand and framed by hanging painted panels of stylized female dancers.

By the end of the 80-minute piece a young man, played by the 17-year-old Setpheap (Peace) Sorn, has fallen in love with 16-year-old Chakreya So, who dies and is commemorated in a huge backdrop portrait filled with wild beauty, painted on the stage by the men.

"Cambodian Stories," which is set to Cambodian popular songs and instrumental music chosen by the Cambodian-American musician Sam-Ang Sam, is about love and also about painting, which the men do as they climb across wooden structures, bending to wield their brushes and paint. It is about transforming traditional dance styles into a new vocabulary of stiff sideways motion for eerily slender young bodies, limbs akimbo, that also suggests the discomfort of youth.

"Cambodian Stories" is also about decay, as pieces by Eiko and Koma often are. The front curtain, battered panels and backdrop all fall and crumple eventually. But the backdrop rises, like the lovers, at the end, still wet, its lines and colors blotting to add to the imagery. New beauty comes of old, as it does at the school this piece celebrates.

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