



## HEART AND SOUL

### Epic Arts in Cambodia empowers disabled individuals through art

By Naima Morelli

“The arts are the tools of the soul. They have the power to allow people with disability to see the positive in themselves,” says Sokny Onn. She is the co-director of Epic Arts, a Cambodian organisation which uses art as a form of expression to bring people with and without disabilities together. Through inclusive education, community and social enterprise programmes, the Kampot-based organisation spreads the message that every person counts.



Epic Arts’ founder, British dancer Katie McCabe, first came to Cambodia in 2003 and moved to Kampot in 2006. Back then there weren’t many NGOs working with arts, especially outside the capital Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. McCabe decided to start her own art organisation in Kampot. This also filled a gap for an artistic space in the town, whose cultural activities relied solely on the Khmer Cultural Development Institute.

The organisation started small, from a café. It was good intuition; the Epic Arts Café quickly became an important place for creative people both with or without disabilities to hang out together and become part of the local arts community.

“Before that, as a person with disabilities in Cambodia there was no way you could be part of the artistic environment” says Sokny Onn. “People used to tell you that when you have disabilities that’s it, that’s your life, it’s the end. There was no way you could be an artist.”

Sokny knows this first hand. Graduating in business management, she never dreamt of being involved in the arts as a child. Her interest for the arts was sparked by one creative workshop at Epic Arts which she joined in 2005 and found incredibly empowering. “It made me think about myself differently. It opened up so many possibilities about what I’m able to do,” she says. “It’s so amazing how very small achievements connect with the everything else in life.”

Today, she is eager to let Epic Arts students experience the same mindset shift. “When I interview new perspective students, I often see them being a bit scared to talk with me or other staff members,” she says. “I can see they can do and be so much more, but they cannot see it for themselves.”

In order to let students overcome these mental and physical

barriers, Epic Arts has developed a number of programmes. One of the most successful is the Inclusive Arts Course, a full-time, two-year arts training course. Students from the deaf, disabled and non-disabled communities follow an arts-based education program in Dance, Theatre, Art, Film, Music and Literacy.

Students with a knack for the stage have now become part of the local theatre company Epic Encounters, the first fully inclusive contemporary performance company in Southeast Asia. Working collaboratively with guest choreographers they create dance and theatre productions based on issues Cambodia faces. The team regularly tours nationally and internationally, performing and delivering inclusive movement workshops.

A major success for Epic Encounters has been the hour-long show called ‘Come Back Brighter’, featuring contemporary and traditional performances. The show celebrates Cambodia’s arts scene and narrates the country’s journey from the swinging sixties to the present day through the use of physical theatre, video and movement. It was set in the iconic surroundings of The Old Royal Cinema in Kampot and was the first show of its kind in Cambodia, helping to turn turning the spotlights on the artistic growth in Kampot.

As for the students and artists realising handicrafts and design products, the organisation provides a commercial outlet through the shop Epic Creations. The most popular items are a T-shirts series designed by Chok, a young man with Downs Syndrome, and the Diffadooos, a bunch of characters developed as a fun teaching resource to explain diversity and inclusion to children.

This is related to the ‘Arts in Schools Project’, where Epic Arts brings art to local schools, changing children’s views about people with disabilities and promoting the message that art is for all. Indeed, along with self-empowerment, the work of Epic Arts also aims at changing the public’s perception of disabled people and focusing on their capabilities.

The results are already visible in the public perception and openness of Cambodian society towards people with disabilities. In the bigger picture of the re-emergence of the arts in Cambodia, Epic Arts is making the little town of Kampot part of an artistic resurgence, which is coming into being in the most unexpected, inclusive and humane of ways. 

Top Left to right: Epic Encounters Dancers wow audiences during their flagship performance ‘Come Back Brighter’ Professional Dancer, Socheat, shows his ability during a solo show. A student on Epic Arts’ Inclusive Arts Course expresses himself through drawing. Bottom: Katie Goad, one of three founding members of Epic Arts set up the UK registered charity in 2001