

A group of artistes in Bhutan measures up to the country's need to preserve its tangible culture

Guardians of culture

BY KAREN GREENSPAN

Coming off the excitement of attending the Punakha Tshechu, I made my way to Thimphu to visit friends at the Royal Academy of Performing Arts (RAPA). After all, they were the folks responsible for choreographing, producing, and training the lay dancers for the grand event at Punakha.

I spent the morning strolling around the grounds and observing students enrolled at the institute as they prepared for their upcoming exams. In a remarkable example of peer teaching, small groups sprinkled about the campus helped one another rehearse and review various dances and songs. A

co-ed group performed folk dances on the court. Two young men practised in the parking lot – one dancing the *Juging* masked dance, the other working on the *Dramnyen Cham* (both are core pieces of the sacred dance repertoire performed at the local *tshechus*, sacred festivals).

A couple of musicians rehearsed on the porch to the main performing hall. Then I lifted my gaze to observe the silhouettes of three young women dancing between the stately evergreens. The sight was pure poetry.

Mr Tshering, the assistant principal of the academy, explained that RAPA was established in 1954

under the leadership of the third King of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, to provide formal training in the lay masked dances (*bod cham*). Later, in 1970, folk dance and folk music were added to the curriculum. Today, RAPA continues to offer three separate disciplines of study – masked dance, folk dance, and music.

I spoke with two female first-year dance majors, Khandro Pem (her name, *Khandro*, translates from Tibetan as “sky-walker”) and Yangdon, to find out about their exam requirements. They informed me that the first-year folk dance students had to perfect 50 dances along with the songs that accompany

them. By the end of the four-year programme they will need to show proficiency in 241 dances and songs.

The masked dance majors learn the *bod cham* repertoire – sacred dances frequently performed by lay people. Many of these dances, including *Juging*, are attributed to the beloved saint and treasure revealer, Pema Lingpa (1450-1521). He was responsible for revealing and teaching many dances from his visionary experiences that are performed at *tshechus* throughout the country today. These RAPA students are all male because in Bhutan *cham* are solely performed by men. By the end of their first

year, they must master six *cham*. These dances can be quite athletic and long – sometimes lasting more than two hours. By the end of their fourth year, the students are required to perfect 31 dances.

The music majors study the four traditional (non-ritual) Bhutanese instruments –bamboo flute (*lim*), two-stringed fiddle (*piwang*), hammered dulcimer (*yangchen*), and Bhutanese seven-stringed lute (*dramnyen*).

I asked Khandro about the admission procedure. She shared that it had been quite a selective, three-part process – including an assessment of physical qualifications, a written exam, and a presentation of a song and dance. This is not unlike performing arts conservatories in other parts of the world.

There is no tuition fee for attending the institute as the RAPA faculty are civil servants and paid by the government. Housing in the dormitories is

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covered by the government, leaving food and living expenses to be paid for by the students.

When I asked about career opportunities for the graduates, I learned that I had broached a sensitive topic. Khandro explained that under the current set-up, there were no professional possibilities for RAPA gradu-

ates, and yet, Assistant Principal Tshering told me RAPA had over 100 applicants for 24 entrance slots last year. I wondered why on earth they were auditioning and signing on to a four-year dead-end path. These students seemed to hold on to the promise that there were plans in the works to address this problem.



Left: RAPA musicians perform at Thimphu Tshechu

Below: RAPA dancers perform a *zhungdra* at Dochula Tshechu. Photo: Royal Office for Media

Later, when I spoke with Mr Tshering about this, he confirmed that currently RAPA graduates have no professional future. He thinks the institute applicants are attracted by possible foreign travel and performance opportunities through participation in cultural exchange programmes. He further explained that there are currently 41 RAPA artistes assigned to the various districts for two months to train local volunteers to perform dances at their local *tshechus*. For example, in preparation for the Punakha Tshechu I had just attended, RAPA had sent two male *cham* artistes and one female folk dance artiste to train the locals for two months. In addition, RAPA sent four musicians for two weeks of final rehearsals with the dancers and to perform live at the *tshechu*.

As things stand now, there is minimal turnover within these 41 RAPA positions (partially because they receive such a paltry exit stipend). In order to create more job opportunities for upcoming RAPA graduates, the new government wants to implement a plan where graduates would stay at RAPA for two more years as 'artistes-in-training'. Then they would be permanently assigned to the various districts as civil servants,

to provide full-time training in the schools and communities. This new plan seems to be a positive step in fulfillment of Section 1, Article 4 of Bhutan's constitution which mandates, "The state shall endeavour to preserve, protect, and promote the cultural heritage of the country...to enrich society and the cultural life of the citizens."

RAPA, mandated by the government to be the custodian of Bhutan's unique intangible cultural heritage, does a superb job of preserving the country's performing arts traditions. The new plan would put this rich heritage back into the communities to which it belongs. It is also giving these dedicated, hard-working muses hope for a professional future. In the meantime, these students must practise, practise, practise!

RAPA artistes can be seen at the Thimphu Tshechu (sacred festival held in the capital city every fall) as well as at many national events and celebrations. ■■■



Karen Greenspan is a former professional dancer with several modern dance companies in New York city, where she lives. Greenspan spent many years performing and teaching international and Israeli folk dance.



A RAPA dancer at Thimphu Tshechu. RAPA artistes are regular performers at the tshechu.



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