

## 'A Perfect Statue'

*Modified passage from Romi's upcoming book, (working) title: 'Hip Hop & Hope, from the slums of Phnom Penh.'*

I am brought downstairs from my office to see where the show is up to. I have explained to death the importance of the task at hand. They are to think about their life stories, share this with each other and then turn that in to a twelve-minute performance. They have exactly twelve minutes, no more and no less. My final instructions, harsh as they were, "if I am not laughing or crying and completely immersed, then you have not done your job."

Maybe I have asked too much of them. Can break-dancers switch hats and create a real-life story telling performance? Can a bunch of young teenagers who grew up begging and doing drugs on the street understand themselves and their complicated histories well enough, and have the skill and courage to map that out on a dance floor?

Sokha has called me down to see his solo. I haven't seen any of the choreography yet but I sure have done a lot of yelling and stressing. The show must be timed altogether, with my speech leading in to their dance. The panic for my own speech is as high as the anxiety I am feeling about their role. The Tedx Phnom Penh presentation is in two weeks and I am yet to witness a thing. This year is the first time ever it will be held in Cambodia and we are invited to be a part of it. Ted is, in my eyes, possibly the biggest thing I, they, or anyone, is ever going to be a part of.

I sit on an old rickety wooden bench. I sit right in the middle so the wonky legs don't sway. I am excited to see what Sokha has come up with and secretly terrified it won't be good enough.

The twenty-one year old has a son to a young woman he tries to see when she lets him. Their relationship is skewed by her need for drugs, which worked just fine when they were first dating and enjoying each other's high. Sokha has lived a lifetime of family abuse and has recently been able to get clean off drugs, but is now slowly following his father's footsteps of becoming a violent alcoholic. He is somewhat aware of his situation, well he is mostly aware only after it has turned violent and there is real trouble.

All the dancers move back a step to give him space. They are milling around the edges of the dance floor, chatting and eating 2000 Riel (40-cent) *mee chaa* noodles from the street vendor outside. Shirts off, everyone is hot, sweating from rehearsing in the mid day sun.

Seventeen-year-old Sovann who has the best English at the centre can see that I have my serious face on and tries to make light of the situation. He teases Sokha "you must make her cry now." Sokha with no understanding of English just looks at him, and then looks at me and shrugs his shoulders. Sovann winks at me and steps back to give Sokha back his space.

The music begins and I am immediately surprised and confused. Sokha, an incredible break-dancer has a slow, melodic violin piece playing that you instantly feel pulling at your heartstrings. He is standing alone on the floor in old, ripped jeans and runners, with his dancer's body; bare chest, stomach muscles rippled down, broad strong shoulders and tiny waste. He looks like a perfect statue.

He moves slowly as if the violin is pulling him gently around the dance floor. He drops down onto his fingertips and toes and alternates his fancy foot work from slow to fast and slow again, keeping in time with the music. He is back standing. He falls to the side gracefully as if in slow motion and rolls through and back in to standing position. It is magnificent.

The violin raises its tempo and goes off in to a high pitch sound of urgency and Sokha keeps up. He doesn't so much dance now as act, crawl, scream, claw and beat at his chest. He starts running around the dance floor, eyes wide open, panicked and searching. He is in full character but is completely himself. He is himself dying for a hit, waiting, wanting, hoping someone will come and save him. He is not sure if saving means finding him drugs or helping him stay clean. His angelic body falls to the ground as if the wind was suddenly knocked out of him.

He crawls back to sitting and stares straight at me, through me, with pleading eyes. He moans. It is so loud I feel uncomfortable, it is too close. He points at me, points to himself, to his heart. He wants my help. He beats on his chest again and moans. He is in so much pain. Tears roll down his cheeks and all I want to do is reach out and hold him. My tears mimic his and I completely forget where I am, that I am watching him rehearse a piece of choreography. It is his choreography though and I know this is his story he wants to tell. He drops to the floor exhausted and curls up like a child. He lays there on his side, knees up against his chest and his head in his hands. He is still now.

Dancers start coming forward from the back of the dance floor. Were they there all along? I hadn't noticed. Is this part of the show? They slowly edge closer, all staring at Sokha. He is scared and starts backing away, stumbling as he scrambles backwards on hands and knees. When they get close enough they stop, now surrounding him in a semi-circle. He stops too. His eyes wide with fear. The music has faded out in to nothing.

Do they want to hurt me? You feel him whisper through the silence. Nin takes off his jacket, leans in and wraps it around Sokha's bare shoulders. Sokha is still holding his breath. They outstretch their arms to him ... and slowly, hesitantly he reaches back out to them.

Their fingertips touch.

He breathes.

They clasp hands.

He is no longer alone.