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NATASINH DANCERS & MUSICIANS

LAO MUSIC AND DANCE FROM IOWA

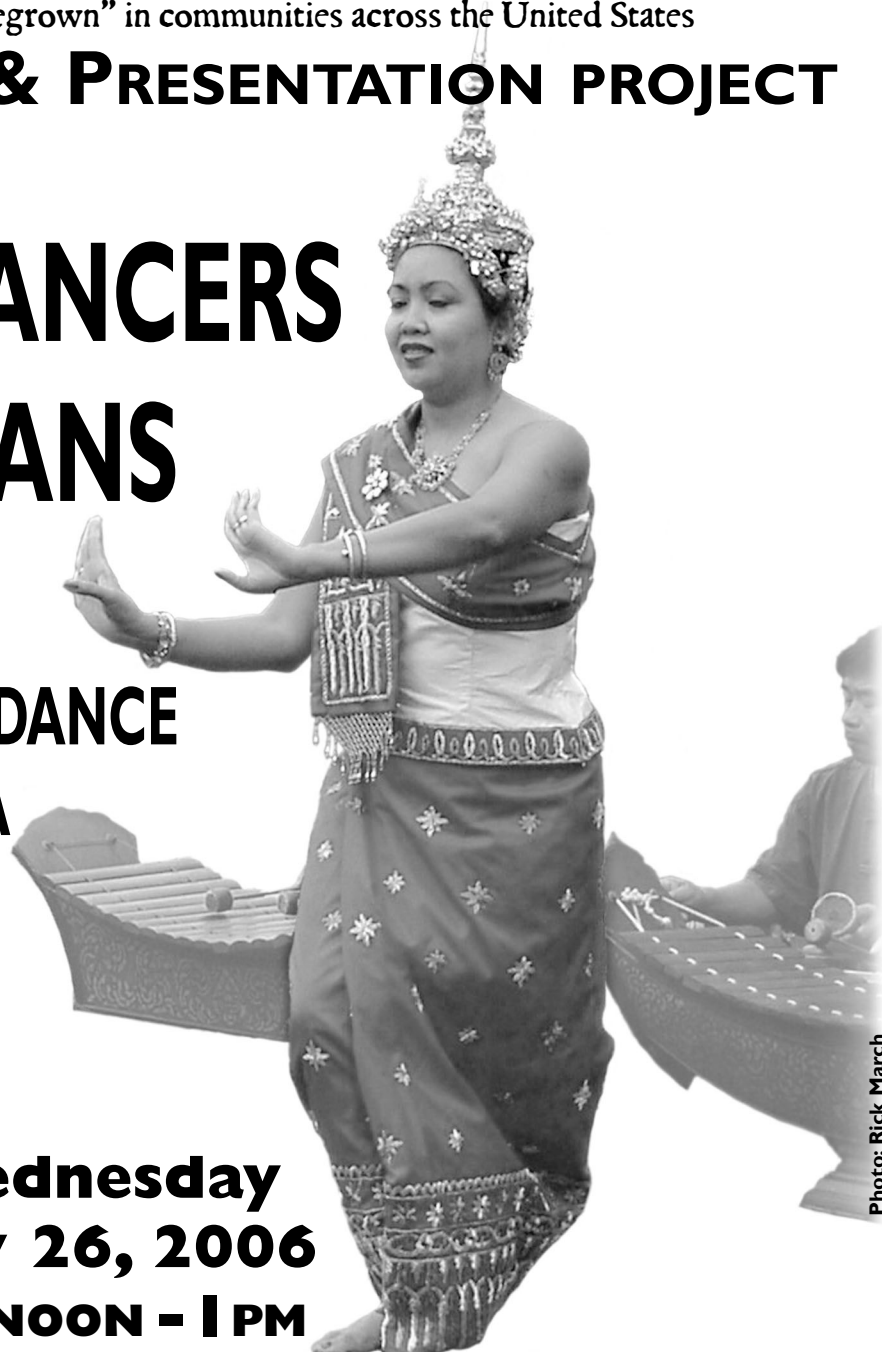


Photo: Rick March

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NATASINH DANCERS & MUSICIANS

LAO MUSIC AND DANCE FROM IOWA

Music is ubiquitous in Laos. It is heard at Buddhist Temple functions, at celebrations and festivals, and at social events, accompanying sung poetry, dance, and religious rituals. As in other Southeast Asian cultures, music and dance in Laos can be divided into classical and folk traditions, though the division rests more on performance context (whether performed in a temple/court setting or a village environment), rather than in the repertoire or social class of the artists. Traditional Lao music and dance likely originated in Cambodia—it is believed that the Khmer, who ruled the region for nearly one thousand years, brought this tradition to Laos in 1353.

The Lao Natasinh Dance Troupe of Iowa, based in Des Moines, is a group of Lao dancers and musicians trained in the Natasinh style of performance. The Natasinh style refers to the traditional forms, techniques, and character of performing arts taught at the Ecole National de Musique et Danse Laötien (National School of Lao Music and Dance), founded in the capital Vientiane in 1956 to preserve the music and dance traditions of Laos. That genre includes court music for royal ceremonies and the classical dance-drama based on the Ramayana, the epic of Hindu origin that for Lao Buddhists depicts the life and struggles of the Buddha, as well as music and dance performed for social and ritual occasions.

The Indo-Chinese war and then the Vietnam War caused many Lao, including numerous Natasinh dancers and musicians, to flee to refugee camps in Thailand. In the early 1980s, the Natasinh Dancers and Musicians resettled in Des Moines, Iowa, thanks to Iowa's Refugee Resettlement Program and a grant from the Folk Arts Program of the National Endowment for the Arts, which enabled the group to tour the region and the US.

Included in the American Folklife Center's Lao Natasinh Dance Troupe of Iowa performance are eighteen Lao dancers and musicians, as well as a cultural specialist and traditional storyteller from Des Moines. All of these traditional artists are actively involved in passing their skills on to young dancers and musicians in the Lao community of Des Moines.

The Natasinh dancers reflect the influences of Asian Indian, Thai, Khmer, and Lao folk and court dance traditions, the result of hundreds of years of migration and cultural interchange in Southeast Asia. The Natasinh style of dancing is known by the dance form's characteristic graceful movements and gestures with outwardly curved hands and fingers, exaggerated flat feet, and outwardly bent knees. Local Des Moines seamstress, Seng Sihom, custom-makes most of the dancers' outfits of imported silk. A fancy version of everyday Lao dress, the costumes include a sinh (skirt) or pantaloons, a fitted blouse, a phabieng (narrow shawl) draped

across the bodice, and sometimes a golden headpiece, similar to that of Buddha, or a mask, in the case of the monkey dancer.

The Natasinh musicians are integral members of the Lao Natasinh Dance troupe. For the most part, dancers tend to be women and musicians men. Influenced by Asian Indian, Chinese, Khmer, Thai, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions, Lao instruments fall into four basic categories—plucked, bowed, beaten, and blown. The instruments used to accompany and complement Lao classical dance include the lanath (curved wooden xylophone), lanath oum (bass xylophone), khongvong (gong circle), khouy (flute), gong (drum), khene (mouth organ made of bamboo reeds) and ching (small hand cymbals).

Khampheng Manirath, a traditional storyteller originally from Laos, is the Lao storyteller and presenter for the Natasinh Dancers and Musicians. Well versed in the traditional heritage of the Natasinh performers, Khampheng Manirath learned his stories from his Lao grandparents and his mother. His grandfather would gather everyone by the fire in the evenings and tell tales that had didactic as well as entertainment value.

Inpanh Thavonekham, a 2005 Master Artist in the Iowa Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program, performs regularly with the musicians accompanying the Natasinh dance troupe. He also makes a variety of Lao wooden instruments. Born in Atapeu in southern Laos, Inpanh moved to Vientiane at the age of ten. He and his family fled Laos in 1979, settled in a refugee camp in Thailand, and, in 1980, Inpanh moved to Des Moines. For Inpanh Thavonekham, a devout Buddhist, music making is a sacred activity. Before every performance, he pays homage to his teachers, lighting candles and placing flowers on all the instruments.

The Des Moines Natasinh dancers perform for various Iowa community events and for Lao New Year festivities in mid-April. The main purpose of the Natasinh Dance Troupe is to educate and entertain at local Lao Buddhist religious celebrations and social events throughout central Iowa.

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Folklife Center includes the Archive of Folk Culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Check out our web site www.loc.gov/folklife

