

# Heartache and joy



◆ The white monkey Hanuman falls in love with the golden mermaid in "Dancing Through Death: The Monkey, the Magic and the Madness of Cambodia," a film by Janet Gardner of Rocky Hill.

Courtesy Angkor Dance Troupe

## Local filmmaker focuses on ancient Cambodian dance

By CHRIS JORDAN  
STAFF WRITER

**T**he ancient Cambodian monkey dance brings joy.

"It's quite unlike anything I've seen before," said filmmaker Janet Gardner of Rocky Hill. "There are circular gongs on the floor, and the Southeast Asian instruments perform very delicate music. I was quite enamored of the monkey dancers. They'd frolic and scratch themselves - very playful."

But the joy happens amid the echoes of tragedy and pain. Ninety-percent of the Cambodian monkey dancers were among the one million intellectuals, artists and government opponents who were either killed or starved in the unspeakable horror of the Khmer Rouge's 1975-'79 reign.

### MOVIE PREVIEW

"It was extremely poor — the country was threadbare," said Gardner of her initial 1990 visit of Cambodia as part of a reconciliation delegation. "It was also a fairly dangerous place . . . there were many victims of land mines who were missing arms or legs. And when you see the children missing limbs, it's particularly disturbing."

Gardner's new documentary, "Dancing Through Death: The Monkey, Magic and Madness of Cambodia," focuses on monkey dancer Thavro Phim, whose father, brother and grandfather were killed by the Khmer Rouge.

Phim, who came of age during the Khmer Rouge years, now lives in Berkeley, Ca. He travels back to Cambodia in the film to visit surviving family members and teachers.

"The dance is timeless there," Gardner said. "But there have been

### DANCING THROUGH DEATH: The Monkey, Magic and Madness of Cambodia

A documentary film  
by Janet Gardner

7 tonight  
WNET, Channel 13

modern adaptations. Dr. Toni Shapiro (Phim's wife) developed a version of 'Othello,' which was quite a daring experiment."

The dance is in danger of extinction, as so many dancers were lost during the Khmer Rouge's terror.

"It's sumptuous dance," Gardner said. "The dancers were originally trained in the royal palace and they were considered messengers to the gods. In its original role, the dance was a sacred rite and the dancers would pray for the fertility of the land."

"The white monkey represents good and it duels with the giants," Gardner said. "The giants represent evil."

"Dancing through Death" is not Gardner's first film on Southeast Asia. The filmmaker also produced and directed the award-winning documentaries "Vietnam: Land of the Ascending Dragon" in 1993, and "A World Beneath the War," a 1993 work on the tunnels of Vietnam.

Gardner's interest in the region was piqued when she was a reporter for the Home News, a forerunner of the Home News Tribune, in 1986.

"I was looking suspiciously idle when a pile of clips landed on my desk," said Gardner, who was assigned to cover Agent Orange hearings in New Brunswick.

"I had a long personal history with anti-war activity and it all resonated with me," Gardner said.

Gardner visited Vietnam as a

part of a peace delegation and would later write about the country's post-war problems and the Agent Orange issue for The New York Times and the Boston Globe Magazine.

Gardner, who had also worked for the Asbury Park Press after her tenure with the Home News, formed her own film production company, the Gardner Group, in 1990. Her first film was "The United Nations: It's More Than You Think" for the educational market. That was followed by a two-part series on runaways, "Children of the Night" and "Starting Over."

The graduate of the New York University film school then turned her camera toward Southeast Asia.

"It's more prosperous now with foreign investment," said Gardner of Cambodia today. "But there's still grinding poverty. It's a heartbreaking situation."