

DANCING ACROSS BORDERS

Directed by
Anne Bass

Produced by
Anne Bass
Catherine Tatge

88 minutes, Color, 2010
35mm, HDCAM-SR
1.85, Dolby SR



First Run Features
(212) 243-0600/Fax (212) 989-7649

Website: www.firstrunfeatures.com
Email: info@firstrunfeatures.com

PRAISE FOR *DANCING ACROSS BORDERS*
{OFFICIAL SELECTION SEATTLE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2009}

“Even if you don’t know your pliés from your battements frappés, the dance sequences in *Dancing Across Borders* are a delight.” –Jeanette Catsoulis, [The New York Times](#)

“An illuminating profile ... riveting, breathtaking performance.”—S. James Snyder, [Time Out New York](#)

“Moving, Cinderella-esque documentary film ...a powerful story.” –Todd Eberle, [Vanity Fair](#)

“Dazzling to behold.”-Michelle Orange, [The Village Voice](#)

“A joy to witness.” –*New York Magazine*

“Astonishing, uplifting story... an unusual and exhilarating behind-the-scenes peek at the rigorous art form of ballet.” –Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, [Spirituality and Practice](#)

“A heartwarming true-life tale ...the film undoubtedly will be appreciated by dance aficionados.”

–Frank Scheck, [Hollywood Reporter](#)

“A wonderful and moving documentary ...an Oscar-worthy delight.”

–Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, [The Huffington Post](#)

"This story's a fairy tale come true. It's magical to watch Sar, who seems as light as air but powerful as a gale-force wind. You can applaud now." –Deborah G. Guadan, [San Francisco Chronicle](#)

“Lovely, inspiring, and thought-provoking...well worth your while!” –Alex Kafka, [True/Slant](#)

“Whether or not you're interested in ballet, you should still see this very inspiring film.”

–George Whipple, [NY 1](#)

“Sy is such a compelling personality and his story is so fascinating that you don’t have to love ballet to appreciate it.”-Rick Warner, [Bloomberg News](#)

“Informative and flavorful..Sar's evident sweetness and talent seem to be guiding him to acclaim from the beginning.”-John Neumaier, [New York Daily News](#)

“Remarkable...absorbing.”-Ed Scheid, [Box Office Magazine](#)

“The compelling odyssey of a Cambodian dancing genius.”-George Christy, [The Beverly Hills Courier](#)

Critics’ Pick! –[Philadelphia Inquirer](#)

“In a mere 88 minutes, “Dancing Across Borders” tells several overlapping stories engagingly...we see deeply into the challenges that every fledgling ballet dancer must face on the road to prowess.”

–Lewis Segal, [LA Times](#)

“A wonderful mix of ballet rehearsals and performances, the saga of a young artist's struggle and success, and a personal story of dealing with cross-cultural conflict and resolution.” –[San Francisco Classical Voice](#)

“A well-researched, nostalgic trip into this bygone era.” –William Wolf, [Wolf Entertainment Guide](#)

“(A) rich panoply of ballet on display.” –Ronnie Scheib, [Variety](#)

“Celebrating human achievement even as it raises questions about the sacrifices demanded for art...Sy’s progress is astounding but agonizing.”–Michelle Velucci, [Brooklyn Rail](#)

“Intensity and passion is evident in every frame of this affecting documentary...a bird's-eye view of what it means to transform a young, raw talent into a ballet dancer.”

–Christopher Kelly, [Fort Worth Star-Telegram](#)

“Charming... A young dancer's journey from Cambodia to Pacific Northwest Ballet.” –

John Hartl, [Seattle Times](#)

“A remarkable story...engaging documentary.” –Heather Wisner, *Dance Studio Life*

“Satisfying, remarkable... *Dancing Across Borders* is bound to inspire a great deal of aspiring dancers from all walks of life.”-Matt Fagerholm, [HollywoodChicago.com](#)

“A work of optimism and belief in hope ... every young person connected to Dance should see it; as well as every other young person and all adults.”

Merrill Brockway, Producer and Director, *Camera Three* and *Dance in America*

“I was floored and riveted ... an ode to possibility, risk, discipline, and passion...sincere and smart, earnest and heartfelt but profoundly about art and love.”

-Jerry Saltz, Senior Art Critic, *New York Magazine*

SYNOPSIS

On a trip to Angkor Wat in Siem Reap, Cambodia in January 2000, filmmaker Anne Bass came across a sixteen-year-old boy who moved her immensely with his amazing natural charm and grace as a dancer. A longtime devotee of the world of dance, Bass felt compelled to give this young boy the opportunity to leave his home and follow a dream that he could not yet have fully imagined. From the serene countryside of Southeast Asia to the halls of New York's School of American Ballet to the stage of the Pacific Northwest Ballet in Seattle, **DANCING ACROSS BORDERS** peeks behind the scenes into the world of dance and chronicles the intimate and triumphant story of a boy who was discovered, and who only much later discovered all that he had in himself.

LONG SYNOPSIS

DANCING ACROSS BORDERS is a feature-length documentary about change, growth, and the powerful interaction of many talented people. Produced by Anne Bass and Catherine Tatge and directed by Anne Bass, **DANCING ACROSS BORDERS** premiered at the 2009 Seattle Film Festival.

In January 2000, Sokvannara (Sy) Sar was performing in a temple with a traditional Cambodian dance group when American dance patron Anne Bass saw him. His abilities made a strong impression on her and after she returned to America the memory of Sy's performance lingered. After much deliberation she asked the World Monuments Fund, who helped sponsor Sy's dance troupe, to contact his teacher and parents to see if Sy would like to visit America and audition in New York for the School of American Ballet (SAB) which is considered America's premier ballet training academy. What unfolds is a tentative negotiation between Sy and the world of American ballet culture—and between Sy, Bass, and his new dance teacher, Olga Kostritzky.

At sixteen Sy was already considered old to study ballet, and so trained privately for two years with Kostritzky, the head of the boys program at SAB. Kostritzky first worked with Sy in a private studio, helping him catch up with his peers— most of whom had already been training for at least six years. A few months after beginning his training, Sy entered SAB where he studied for five years. Then, Peter Boal, a principal dancer with New York City Ballet and one of Sy's instructors at SAB, became the artistic director of Pacific Northwest Ballet (PNB) and invited Sy to join PNB School's Professional Division.

The first time that Sy performed ballet in Cambodia was when he was invited to be part of a theatrical performance of Cambodian and American artists to celebrate the rededication of the US Embassy in Phnom Penh. A few months later he was coached by Kostritzky for the International Ballet Competition at Varna, Bulgaria, the world's oldest and most prestigious ballet competition, where he reached the semifinals. Eventually, Sy was asked to be an apprentice and to join the corps de ballet at PNB.

The film follows Sy's training and development as a dancer through footage that was originally made to inform his parents of his progress in America, and it offers a view behind the scenes of the world of ballet. There is also extensive footage of his performances for the US Embassy in Phnom Penh, and the competition in Varna and as a company member with PNB in Seattle and at the Vail International Dance Festival. Many people who have aided Sy since he left Cambodia are also interviewed and they include former Cambodian Ambassador to the US, Roland Eng; founder of the Nginn Karet Foundation, Ravynn Karet-Coxen; and the founder and director of AMRITA, Fred Frumberg.

In addition the film follows Sy as he visits his parents and his old school of Khmer dance, and as he attempts to come to terms with the challenge of adapting to a new country while not losing touch with Cambodia. His story is one of growth, adaptation, and belonging as well as of the development of talent and the mastery of an art form. It is hoped that his story will be an inspiration to all young people and especially those of Cambodia as they struggle to regain their identity and hope for a better future following the lingering upheaval of the Khmer Rouge era.

DIRECTOR'S Q&A^{with ANNE BASS}

Q: *What was the genesis of this particular project and what inspired you to direct this as your first film?*

I did not originally set out to make a film. When Sokvannara (Sy) Sar first came to New York I photographed and filmed his dance classes in order to be able to send a record of his progress to his mother in Cambodia. Some years later, there was Cambodian TV footage from Sy's performance that was part of an evening to celebrate the dedication of the new US Embassy building in Phnom Penh. The summer following this performance Sy competed in the International Ballet Competition in Varna where the officials filmed the performances of all the competitors. Many of my friends had come to know Sy and follow his progress as he studied ballet, and so after the Varna competition where Sy's performance had been quite remarkable, I wanted to show these specific performances to a number of my friends. I then found a film student to help me string together Sy's five Varna variations as well as some performances of other competitors. While we were editing these, I had the idea of incorporating some of the other footage I had collected, and so we added pieces of this as well as some hastily conducted interviews with his teacher and coach, Olga Kostritzky. The whole idea had only been to entertain a few friends for an evening, and then, to my surprise, it was well received by my peers.

Thinking about this over the next few days, I became increasingly affected by their reactions, and I began to see more clearly that within the facts and the context of Sy's story and his development as a person and as a dancer under the guidance of a remarkable teacher, there really was a potentially interesting film. I did not know if I would be able to grasp this potential and transform it into a convincing and enjoyable film, but I thought it might be fun to try. And since I was in the privileged position of being able both to make this attempt and to fail at it, I decided to go ahead.

Q: *What were your biggest challenges on this project before or during filming?*

Initially I had assumed that I would simply choose and hire a director to make the film that I envisioned. But it quickly became clear that given my relationship to Sy, my intense feelings about ballet, and my strong—even if as yet unformed—ideas about what the film could be, it was not fair to subject experienced and professional filmmakers to what they might perceive to be the flaws and limitations of my vision and aptitude, and so early in this process I resolved to do the work myself, and, for better or worse, make the film that I wanted to make.

The biggest challenge after this was to take all the material I had, as well as what I knew I could still document, and to craft a story. Then, after I had begun, I felt an increasing responsibility—to Sy, to Olga, and to the many people who had helped him in this country and in Cambodia—not to mess it up.

I wanted the film to respect the different levels of the story that I knew were implicit within it, and this was very confusing because there were so many directions in which we could have gone. I wanted to avoid too much ballet because I hoped it would be more than a movie for balletomanes. I wanted to honor and express the role of teachers generally, of their dedication, and of the rapport that the best teachers are able to develop with their students. I hoped to draw some attention to Cambodia, its beauty and its heritage, and to the consequences of the lethal destruction that America did so much to catalyze. And I wanted the film to be honest and true to Sy's character, and although he is often shown in a flattering light, I also wanted to include more challenging parts of his nature. I wanted the film to inspire other kids, privileged or very underprivileged, to seize whatever opportunities are in front of them, while still showing that nothing comes without discipline and relentless hard work.

Q: *What were some of your biggest learning experiences working on this film as a first-time filmmaker?*

Well, since I had never made a film before, and was learning everything on the job as I went along (even though with some gifted collaborators), the entire process was a learning experience.

Q: *The film allows viewers to watch as the main character (Sy) grows up. How long of a time period was it from the first moment of preproduction to the final moments of postproduction work?*

Not counting the first "film" we put together in five days in August 2006, we worked on the film from November 2006 through December 2008. Then there were an additional two weeks in April 2009 when I completely redid the 5.1 and the stereo sound mix. Of course the film includes scenes from film that I had casually shot starting in May of 2000 after Sy had first arrived in this country, but this had all been done simply to have something to send his mother in Cambodia, with no idea whatsoever that I might one day want to use it for something more ambitious.

DIRECTOR'S Q&A with ANNE BASS_(CONTINUED)

Q: *What is your favorite scene in the final cut of the film?*

At different times, different scenes feel like my favorites. I have tried to leave out anything that could never seem to become a "favorite" at some time or another.

Q: *What would you like people to take away from watching the film?*

Perhaps most of all I hope that some people who come to the film with no feeling for ballet might develop an interest in dance from seeing the film. Beyond this of course, what people will take away from the film will to a large extent depend upon what they bring to it. I hope that there is enough there to ensure that when people who bring their own individual histories and sensibilities to the film see it, they will enjoy the experience, and also will be moved by it in different ways and on different levels. If the film is successful I anticipate I will not have foreseen many people's individual responses to it. However, I will be pleased if the film also has the effect of encouraging young people to pursue and achieve goals of their own. It would be an additional bonus if it prompted some viewers to offer their support in cases where they recognize unusual talent.

Dancing Across Borders

FILMMAKERS

ANNE BASS

DIRECTOR/EXECUTIVE PRODUCER/PRODUCER

Anne Bass has a long history of involvement in the arts and Cambodia. She has served on the Board of Directors and Executive Committees of the Fort Worth Ballet where she founded the company's ballet school, New York City Ballet, the School of American Ballet, and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. She is also on the board of the American Friends of the Paris Opera Ballet.

In Cambodia, Bass is Vice President of the Board of the Center for Khmer Studies—the only Southeast Asian member of the Council of American Overseas Research Centers. In 2006, working with the Center and with The Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library, Bass initiated the Khmer Dance Project which will:

Identify existing documents relating to Khmer dance

Film and document the dance of the Khmer people as it is practiced and remembered by Khmer dancers today

Preserve the Khmer dance heritage for future generations of Khmer people and for the world, bringing the Khmer dance heritage to the attention of a global audience

Bass is a graduate of Vassar College and is a former contributing editor of *Vogue* and *House and Garden*. In addition, she was a member of President Reagan's Task Force on the Arts. DANCING ACROSS BORDERS is her first film.

CATHERINE TATGE

PRODUCER

Catherine Tatge is a producer and director of film and television, and a partner with her husband, Dominique Lasseur, in Tatge/Lasseur Productions. For over twenty-five years, her work has encompassed many genres, from public affairs, performance, and dance, to biographies and the world of ideas. Past works of Tatge's include *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth with Bill Moyers*, *Walter Cronkite: Witness to History*, and *Breaking the Silence: Children's Stories*, which premiered on PBS in October 2005. Tatge has been honored with numerous awards including an Emmy Award, a number of CINE Gold Eagle Awards, The Gracie Award, The DuPont Columbia Award, The ACE Award, The Humanitas Prize, The Chicago International Film Festival Gold Hugo Award, and The San Francisco International Film Festival Golden Gate Award, among many others.

CINEMATOGRAPHERS

BOB ELFSTROM

Bob Elfstrom's signature as a documentary cameraman is unmistakable. His vision is defined by a confident, clear ability to focus on the essence of any given situation. He has an intuitive sense of story, a feature-film feel for lighting, and an athletic agility with a handheld camera. His work commands attention with its visceral beauty, fluid grace, and basic human compassion. Among the best in his field, Elfstrom has earned awards not only for himself as Director of Photography, but also for countless productions he's worked on over the years, including *Art 21*, *Outsider*, *The Life and Art of Judith Scott*, *Life Beyond Earth* for PBS; *Cathedrals of the Sky*, *Tales of Wind and Water* and *Citizen Carter* for the Discovery Channel; and the feature-length documentary *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster*.

ANTHONY FORMA

Since June 1994, Forma has lived in New York working for Network News Magazine shows *20/20*, *PrimeTime*, *ABC Documentary Unit*, *Nightline*, *Now*, *Bill Moyers Journal*, *Nova scienceNOW* and *60 Minutes*. In 2007 Forma worked on *Hot Politics*, which examined the politics of Global Warming. Forma is currently working on *Dirty Business: The Selling of Clean Coal* and *Rediscovering Alexander Hamilton*.

TOM HURWITZ

Tom Hurwitz is one of our country's most honored documentary cinematographers. Winner of two Emmy Awards and a Sundance Award for Best Cinematography, Hurwitz has photographed films that have won four Academy Awards and several more nominations (most recently for *Dance Maker*). His television programs have won literally dozens of awards over the past twenty-five years: Emmy, Dupont, Peabody,

Directors Guild, and film festival awards for Best Documentary. Most recently, the PBS series *Franklin* won this year's Emmy Award for Best Documentary Special. Other award-winning films and programs that he has photographed include: *Harlan County USA*, *Wild Man Blues*, *My Generation*, *Down and Out in America*, *The Turandot Project*, *Liberty, Faith and Doubt at Ground Zero*, *I Have a Dream*, for ABC, and *Questioning Faith*, for HBO. In addition, films that he has directed have won the Cine Golden Eagle (*Bombs will Make the Rainbow Break*) and have been shown in festivals around the world. As well as photographing several projects, he is presently producing and directing a film, in development with Lumiere Productions, on world wide religious fundamentalism.

EDITORS

GIRISH BHARGAVA

Girish Bhargava is President and Senior Editor of Telstar Post, Inc., a video post-production facility located in New York City. In his thirty years of broadcast editing, Bhargava has won two Emmy Awards, several Monitor Awards and numerous industry citations. His work on the *Adams Chronicles*, a thirteen-hour dramatic event in 1976 earned him his first Emmy Award. In 1991, Bhargava received his second Emmy for the CBS Television special, *The Muppets Celebrate Jim Henson*, directed by Don Mischer. Also that year, he edited the Peabody Award winning, *Everybody Dance Now* for the PBS series, *Dance In America*. Other Emmy Award nominations include *Bob Fosse: Steam Heat* and *The Hard Nut*, both for *Great Performances*. In 1994, Bhargava won the Monitor Award for Best Editor for his work on George Balanchine's *The Nutcracker*.

MARK SUTTON

Mark Sutton has been editing documentary and arts-related programming for more than twenty years. He is currently Series Editor for PBS's *Wide Angle* and is cutting two one-hour shows for *Art 21: Art in the Twenty-First Century* which will air on PBS in October, 2009. He lives in upstate New York.

FILM SUBJECT

SOKVANNARA (SY) SAR

Sokvannara (Sy) Sar was born in Siem Reap, Cambodia, where he studied traditional Khmer dance from the age of ten at the Wat Bo School. He often performed with the School's troupe at Preah Khan Temple for guests of the World Monuments Fund. In 2000, Anne Bass, an American enthusiast and supporter of ballet, saw him there and was impressed by his talent and invited him to visit the School of American Ballet in NY.

Sar studied at the School of American Ballet for five years and ultimately joined Pacific Northwest Ballet in Seattle when his teacher, Peter Boal, became Artistic Director.

Sar was a semifinalist in the International Ballet Competition, Varna, where he performed variations from *Giselle*, *La Sylphide*, *Coppelia*, and *Le Corsaire*. He was also a guest artist at the cross cultural evening at the Chatomuk Theatre to celebrate the opening of the new United States Embassy complex in Phnom Penh, where he danced variations from *Square Dance*, *Tschaikovsky pas de deux*, and *Le Corsaire*. He has originated roles in Benjamin Millepied's *On the Other Side*, *28 Variations of a Theme by Paganini*, and *3 Movements*. In July, 2008, Sar performed *On the Other Side*, accompanied by Philip Glass, for the opening night of the Vail International Dance Festival. In addition, he has danced featured roles in George Balanchine's *La Sonnambula*, William Forsythe's *One Flat Thing, reproduced*, Kent Stowell's *The Nutcracker*, and Twyla Tharp's *Waterbabies Bagatelle*.

While still in Cambodia, Sar placed third in the National Japanese Language Competition. During his years at the School of American Ballet, Sar also attended Professional Children's School, from which he graduated in 2003 with honors. He has attended Fordham University and Seattle Community College.

TEACHERS & COACHES

CAMBODIA

BORAN KIM

Madame Boran was a dancer with the Royal Cambodian Ballet before the Khmer Rouge regime. As one of the few dancers to survive the genocide she later established her own school in Siem Reap, at Wat Bo. Her troupe has appeared at many venues in Siem Reap and their performances at the ancient Khmer temple of Preah Khan, whose restoration was sponsored by the World Monuments Fund, were always a highlight for visitors to the temple.

KEO SA ROEUM

This master teacher worked with Madame Boran at her school at Wat Bo. He is now the Director of the School of Dance and Music at Banteay Srei. The school was founded by Ravynn Karet-Coxen, chairman of the Nginn Karet Foundation for Children, and it is under the patronage of the celebrated Khmer dancer, HRH Princess Buppha Devi, and is the first academy to bear her name.

UNITED STATES

OLGA KOSTRITZKY

Olga Kostritzky is a world recognized ballet teacher/mistress. For the past twenty years, she has served as a faculty member at the School of American Ballet at Lincoln Center, the official school of The New York City Ballet. During her tenure at SAB, Kostritzky created and developed The Boys Program. In 2009 she was the guest teacher for Igor Zelensky, the director of the Ballet Company of the Novosibirsk State Opera and Ballet Theatre. During the 2007–2008 seasons Kostritzky was the Teacher/Mistress for the acclaimed Morphoses, The Wheeldon Company. Kostritzky also served as the Ballet Teacher/Mistress during the 2007–2008 season of The Vail International Dance Festival. In 2004 – 2005 she was a teacher for Benjamin Millipied at the Choreographic Institute in East Hampton, New York.

Recipient of The Senate State of New York Award for her contribution to the arts, Kostritzky also received the Mae L. Wien Award for her distinguished service to the art of ballet. Known for extreme attention to detail, she is highly respected as a teacher/coach, among her peers, students, and dancers.

PETER BOAL

Peter Boal has been the Artistic Director of Pacific Northwest Ballet and Director of PNB School since 2005. During his twenty-two-year career as a dancer with New York City Ballet, Boal worked with Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, and Peter Martins, and originated roles in over thirty new works. He received his training at the School of American Ballet, joined New York City Ballet in 1983, and was promoted to principal dancer in 1989. From 1997 to 2005, he was a full-time faculty member at SAB. In 2004 he founded Peter Boal and Company, a critically-acclaimed chamber ensemble. In 1996 Mr. Boal received the Dance Magazine Award, and in 2000 he received a New York Dance and Performance Award.

JOCK SOTO

Acclaimed during a twenty-four-year performing career at New York City Ballet for the incomparable skill and artistry of his partnering technique and for his versatility as a performer in both traditional and contemporary neoclassical ballets, Jock Soto has been a faculty member at the School of American Ballet since 1996, where he teaches partnering, male technique, and classical variations classes to pre-professional, intermediate, and advanced students.

At the age of five, he began studying ballet with local teachers after seeing a television special featuring Edward Villella in the “Rubies” section of George Balanchine’s *Jewels*. Beginning in 1977 Soto continued his studies at SAB, where he danced the role of “Luke” in Peter Martins’s *The Magic Flute*, which was choreographed for the 1981 Workshop Performances. That year he became a member of New York City Ballet’s corps de ballet. In June 1984, he was promoted to the rank of Soloist, and one year later he was named Principal. He retired from performing in June 2005. Soto’s extensive repertory at New York City Ballet included principal roles in numerous works by George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, and Peter Martins. He also inspired the creation of roles in many new ballets, including Peter Martins’s *A Schubertiad* (1984), *Ecstatic Orange* (1987), *Fearful Symmetries* (1990), *Jazz (Six Syncopated Movements)* (1993), *Sinfonia* (1993), and *Morgen* (2001); Christopher Wheeldon’s *Slavonic Dances* (1997), *Mercurial Manoeuvres* (2000), *Polyphonia* (2001), *Morphoses* (2002), *Liturgie* (2003), *Shambards* (2004), and *After The Rain* (2005); and Lynne Taylor-Corbett’s *Chiaroscuro* (1994).

BENJAMIN MILLEPIED

Benjamin Millepied was born in Bordeaux, France, and began his dance training at the age of eight with his mother, a former modern dancer. He studied in 1992 at the School of American Ballet, the official school of New York City Ballet, and returned a year later with a scholarship from the French Ministry to study full-time. Millepied originated a principal role in the world premiere of Jerome Robbins's *2 & 3 Part Inventions* at SAB's 1994 Spring Workshop performance. He joined New York City Ballet in 1995 and was promoted to principal dancer in 2001.

In addition to his career as a dancer with NYCB, where his repertory includes featured roles in works by Balanchine, Robbins, and Martins, Millepied began choreographing in 2001, creating his first work, *Passages*, for the Conservatoire National de Lyon. He has since created works for American Ballet Theatre (*From Here On Out*), Pacific Northwest Ballet (*3 Movements*), Paris Opera Ballet (*Amoveo, Triade*), and the School of American Ballet (*28 Variations of a Theme By Paganini*). In 2005, Millepied choreographed a full-length production of *Casse-Noisette* for the Grand Théâtre de Genève, featuring sets and costumes designed by artist Paul Cox and returned two years later to create a new production of *Petrouchka* with the same design team. The Joyce Theater presented seasons of his choreography in 2006 and 2008 each with a world premiere: *Closer* with composer Philip Glass playing his own piano score and *Without*. He collaborated with filmmaker Olivier Simola on a solo work for Mikhail Baryshnikov in 2006, and served as "choreographer in residence" to the Baryshnikov Arts Center, New York, that same year.

DAMIAN WOETZEL

Damian Woetzel is a producer and director of dance and music performances. He is the artistic director of the summer Vail International Dance Festival, the Artist-in-Residence of the Aspen Institute, and is a frequent speaker on arts policy. Woetzel was a Principal Dancer at New York City Ballet from 1989 until his retirement from the stage in June of 2008, and he has choreographed a number of ballets for NYCB among other companies. Woetzel was the artistic director of the New York State Summer School for the Arts School of Ballet from 1994–2007, and he holds a Master in Public Administration Degree from Harvard's Kennedy School. Woetzel works and resides in New York City and Connecticut.

BALLET SCHOOL

THE SCHOOL OF AMERICAN BALLET

The School of American Ballet, established in New York City in 1934 by George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein, is the preeminent ballet academy in the United States today. The peer of state-supported schools in England, France, Denmark, and Russia, SAB has trained countless dancers who have gone on to join New York City Ballet and dozens of companies worldwide.

BALLET COMPANY

PACIFIC NORTHWEST BALLET

Pacific Northwest Ballet, one of the largest and most highly regarded ballet companies in the United States, was founded in 1972. In July 2005, Peter Boal became Artistic Director, succeeding Kent Stowell and Francia Russell, Co-Artistic Directors since 1977. The company presents more than one hundred performances each year at Marion Oliver McCaw Hall and on tour. The company has toured to Europe, Australia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Canada and throughout the United States. Founded in 1974 and currently under Boal's direction, Pacific Northwest Ballet School is nationally recognized as setting the standard for ballet training and offers a complete professional curriculum to over 950 students, as well as comprehensive dance education to over 10,000 adults and children each year through classes and outreach programs.

BALLET COMPETITION

INTERNATIONAL BALLET COMPETITION, VARNA

The International Ballet Competition, Varna was established in 1964. Its first edition was held from July 2 to 13 at the Open-Air Theatre in Varna—the biggest sea resort of Bulgaria. It is the first professional international ballet competition in the world. In Bulgaria a remarkable creative atmosphere and a perfect organization have been established. One can speak of "the spirit of Varna" with respect to ballet on an international scale. In complexity and scope, the competition's requirements exceed, in some cases several times over, those of similar events in other countries. Dancers must perform three works of classical choreography and two contemporary works. This optimum balance allows dancers to display the full range of their creative and technical abilities. <http://www.varna-ibc.org>

EMBASSY PERFORMANCE

US EMBASSY PERFORMANCE JANUARY 2006

A Celebration of American and Cambodian Music and Dance took place in Chatomuk Conference Hall, Phnom Penh on January 16, 2006. Nearly five hundred guests were treated to a special evening of entertainment to mark the opening of the US Embassy's new facility in Phnom Penh. This multi-act performance featured a variety of American and Cambodian entertainers, including Sokvannara Sar, Kung Nai, Suon Peng, CoCo York, and D. D. Jackson. The event was taped by TVK.

http://cambodia.usembassy.gov/january_16_2006.html

SUPPORTING CAST

ROLAND ENG

Roland Eng served as Cambodian Ambassador to the United States from 1999–2004. Prior to his posting in Washington, Ambassador Eng resided in Bangkok from 1994–1999. During that time, he re-established Cambodia's diplomatic relations with Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand.

Ambassador Eng's career in public service has taken place amid some of the most turbulent times in the country's history. In 1979, he served as Private Secretary to His Majesty Norodom Sihanouk, King of Cambodia. He enlisted the non-communist resistance from 1981–1990, operating primarily along the Thai-Cambodia border. Eng also participated actively in the Paris Peace Agreement which established the United Nations Operation in Cambodia in 1992 and was appointed Ambassador of the Supreme National Council of Cambodia to the United Nations in New York. With a return of democracy in Cambodia, he ran for election and served as a Member of Parliament and concurrently became the first member of Tourism of Cambodia in 1993.

Eng graduated from the University of Law and Political Science with a degree in public administration from Aix en Provence, France. He is actively involved in various foundations and NGOs, including Sobbhana Women Foundation and Global Fairness, and he is president of the Angkor Photo Festival and vice-president of Friends of Khmer Culture Inc (FOKCI).

FRED FRUMBERG

Frumberg worked for many years in opera houses and theaters throughout the US and Europe including seven years as assistant stage director to Peter Sellars, head of production for the Paris Opera, and staff stage director for the Netherlands Opera. In June 1997, Frumberg moved to Cambodia to assist in the revival and preservation of Cambodian traditional performing arts and in July 2003 founded AMRITA Performing Arts, a nonprofit production company based in Phnom Penh, committed to producing contemporary Cambodian dance and theater for local audiences and international tours with a focus on national capacity building in creativity and all areas of production and arts management.

RAVYNN KARET-COXEN

Founder of the Nginn Karet Foundation for Children, Cambodia in 1994, whose primary purpose is securing basic needs for the rural village people of Cambodia, Karet-Coxen has developed programs focused on clean water, hygiene, health care, vaccination, nutrition, malaria awareness, agricultural training, education, and literacy. The foundation works with 2,334 families in fourteen villages of the Banteay Srei district. She has also founded a traditional Khmer dance school for the children of these families under the patronage of HRH Princess Buppha Devi.

SELECTED MUSICIANS

DENGUE FEVER

Formed in 2001 by brothers Ethan and Zac Holtzman, who were inspired after a trip to Cambodia, Dengue Fever combines psychedelic and surf-rock with vintage Cambodian pop music to create a unique and genre-bending sound.

With a Cambodian lead singer, Chhom Nimol, who sings primarily in Khmer, and a backing band of American rock and rollers, Dengue Fever's sound is unique and addictive. The members of Dengue Fever include:

Chhom Nimol, LEAD VOCALS Zac Holtzman, GUITAR, VOCALS Ethan Holtzman, ELECTRIC ORGAN Senon Williams, BASS Paul Smith, DRUMS David Ralicke, BRASS/HORNS

Their song *Both Sides Now*, originally written and recorded by Joni Mitchell, appears in the film.

SAPOUN MIDADA

Cambodian singer/songwriter, Sapoun Midada, 29, has been in the music industry for only a short time, but he has become a megastar almost overnight by singing and performing his self-written songs, a majority of which have become instant hits.

Midada graduated in French literature and music. He was a police officer and a journalist before entering the music industry. His meteoric rise is largely attributed to his songwriting talent and unique voice, which have made him one of the best-known musical stars in Cambodia today. His song *Dear Father, Dear Mother* is featured in the film's opening, a center montage, and the credits.

FLORA ARBITMAN

Born in the Ukraine, Flora Arbitman started playing the piano when she was five and was accepted to attend a school for gifted children. Beginning her unique style of classical improvisation at an early age, she performed frequently at prestigious concert halls in the Ukraine. She graduated from the Kirov Conservatory of Music with honors and immigrated to the US in 1979.

Arbitman's style of playing is refreshing; her talent for creating a counterpoint between rhythm and movement makes her music most appropriate for ballet class. Her ability to shape not only rhythm but mood ensures she is much in demand at Steps and the School of American Ballet. She has recorded her original arrangements for ballet class on a CD, which is distributed through Roper Records. Arbitman's music and original compositions appear throughout the film.

PHILIP GLASS

Through his operas, his symphonies, his compositions for his own ensemble, and his collaborations with artists ranging from Twyla Tharp to Allen Ginsberg, Woody Allen to David Bowie, Philip Glass has had an extraordinary and unprecedented impact upon the musical and intellectual life of his times. The operas—*Einstein on the Beach*, *Satyagraha*, *Akhmaten*, and *The Voyage*, among many others—play throughout the world's leading houses, and rarely to an empty seat.

Glass has written music for experimental theater and for Academy Award-winning motion pictures such as *The Hours* and Martin Scorsese's *Kundun*, while *Koyaanisqatsi*, his initial filmic landscape with Godfrey Reggio and the Philip Glass Ensemble, may be the most radical and influential mating of sound and vision since *Fantasia*. His associations—both personal and professional—with leading rock, pop, and world music artists date back to the 1960s, including the beginning of his collaborative relationship with artist Robert Wilson. Indeed, Glass is the first composer to win a wide, multi-generational audience in the opera house, the concert hall, the dance world, in film and in popular music—simultaneously.

Glass was born in 1937 and grew up in Baltimore, before studying at the University of Chicago, the Juilliard School and in Aspen with Darius Milhaud. Finding himself dissatisfied with much of what then passed for modern music, he moved to Europe, where he studied with the legendary pedagogue Nadia Boulanger (who also taught Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, and Quincy Jones) and worked closely with the sitar virtuoso and composer Ravi Shankar. He returned to New York in 1967 and formed the Philip Glass Ensemble—seven musicians playing keyboards and a variety of woodwinds, amplified and fed through a mixer. Glass

has collaborated with Paul Simon, Linda Ronstadt, Yo-Yo Ma, and Doris Lessing, among many others. He presents lectures, workshops, and solo keyboard performances around the world, and continues to appear regularly with the Philip Glass Ensemble.

A Film by
Anne BASS

Producers
Anne BASS
Catherine TATGE

Editors
Girish BHARGAVA
Mark SUTTON

Assistant Editor
Daniel OH

Directors of Photography
Bob ELFSTROM
Anthony FORMA
Tom HURWITZ

Additional Camera
Robert RICHMAN, VAIL
John Gordon HILL, SEATTLE

Sound
Ray DAY
Michael KARAS
Charlie TOMARAS

Graphic Design
Richard PANDISCIO

Associate Producers
Jill CAMPBELL
Anna MILLER

Advisors
Holly BRUBACH
Nancy DALVA
Julian LETHBRIDGE

Translator and Advisor
Supharidh HY

Still Photography
Anne BASS

Additional Photography
Erin BAIANO, VAIL INTERNATIONAL DANCE FESTIVAL
Paul KOLNIK, SCHOOL OF AMERICAN BALLET
Rex TRANTER, PACIFIC NORTHWEST BALLET
Stoyan LEFEDZHIEV, VARNA INTERNATIONAL BALLET COMPETITION
Anton STOYANOV, *MORSKI TRUD*

Additional Footage

Anne BASS

Gwendolen CATES, "WATER FLOWING TOGETHER"

TVK Cambodia

Gunawadh KEM, GENERAL-DIRECTOR

INSA Electronics, Varna, INTERNATIONAL BALLET COMPETITION

Zeida Cecilia MENDEZ, "BUJONES: WINNING AT VARNA"

Camera Three, CREATIVE ARTS TELEVISION, 1966

Graphics

Pandiscio Co.

William LOCCISANO

Class Pianists

Flora ARBITMAN

Sophie CHANDLER

Anna GORELIK

Alla REZNIK

David NICHOLS, NYSSA

Stephen BARNES, PNB

Dianne CHILGREN, PNB

Allan DAMERON, PNB

Christina SIEMENS, PNB

Cambodia Unit

Kulikar SOTHO, COORDINATOR

Phan NARITH, PRODUCTION COORDINATOR

Srey OMNOTH, TRANSLATOR

Ros SOKHAM, PRODUCTION ASSISTANT

Seattle Unit

Neil BESTWICK, GAFFER

David NUGENT, PRODUCTION ASSISTANT

Transfer Services

Chromavision

Transcription

A Plus

Edward MURRAY

Recording of Original Music

Legacy Recording Studio

Assistants to Anne Bass

Sarah BURTON

Sharon MONAHAN

Corey ROBBINS

Whitney RUGG

VERY SPECIAL THANKS TO

Sokvannara SAR

Olga KOSTRITZKY

Peter BOAL

AND **Pacific Northwest Ballet**

Philip GLASS

Benjamin MILLEPIED

Jock SOTO

Damian WOETZEL

AND **Vail International Dance Festival**

CAMBODIA

Ambassador Roland ENG
Ravynn KARET-COXEN
AND children of Chouk Sar Village
Fred FRUMBERG
AND dancers and musicians of Royal University of Fine Arts
Boran KIM
AND students of Wat Bo School
Keo Sa ROEUM
Family of Sokvannara SAR
Sithan SAR
Kimheang CHUNN
Vannareath SAR
Reathana SAR
Reathmony SAR
Vannary SAR
Vannarin SAR

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Hyatt BASS
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Nerou CHENG
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Anthony PAGE
Sokoeun POL
Angelina PRIL
Emily PRIL
Ruoth PRIL
Sinoun PRIL
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Jerry SALTZ
David SHAFFER
Roberta SMITH
Ellen SORRIN
Glen TARACHOW
Deirdre TOWERS
Heather WATTS
Suzanne WEIL
Grahame WEINBREN

Pacific Northwest Ballet

Peter BOAL
Anne DABROWSKI
Paul GIBSON
Otto NEUBERT
D. David BROWN
Doug FULLINGTON
Jill HANSON
Jennifer STEINER
Lia CHIARELLI
Robert NELLAMS
Gary TUCKER

Dancers of Pacific Northwest Ballet

Patricia BARKER
Batkhurel BOLD
Casey HERD
Carrie IMLER
Carla KORBES
Ariana LALLONE
Christophe MARAVAL
Stanko MILOV
Louise NADEAU
Kaori NAKAMURA
Noelani PANTASTICO
Jonathan PORRETTA
Lucien POSTLEWAITE
Jeffrey STANTON
Mara VINSON
Miranda WEESE
Olivier WEVERS
Le YIN
Maria CHAPMAN
Karel CRUZ
Chalnessa EAMES
Rachel FOSTER
Benjamin GRIFFITHS
James MOORE
Seth ORZA
Lesley RAUSCH
Jodie THOMAS
Jessika ANSPACH
Alison BASFORD
Kari BRUNSON
Lindsi DEC
Adrienne DIAZ
Leanne DUGE
Kiyon GAINES
Laura GILBREATH
Taurean GREEN
Eric HIPOLITO Jr.
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Barry KEROLLIS
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Abby RELIC
Liora RESHEF
Carli SAMUELSON
Sokvannara SAR
Josh SPELL
Claire STALLMAN
Jerome TISSERAND
Griffin WHITING
Kara ZIMMERMAN
Angkor Dance Troupe and Orchestra, LOWELL, MASSACHUSETTS
Jerome Robbins Dance Division, NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS
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Michelle POTTER
Jan SCHMIDT
New York State Summer School for the Arts, SARATOGA
Mary DALY
Damian WOETZEL
Professional Children's School, NEW YORK
School of American Ballet, NEW YORK
Vail International Dance Festival
John DAKIN
World Monuments Fund

CAMBODIA
Bophana Center, PHNOM PENH
Rithy PANH
Center for Khmer Studies, SIEM REAP
Philippe PEYCAM
Lesley PERLMAN
Khmer Dance Project
Suppya NUT
United States Embassy, PHNOM PENH
Mark STORELLA
Jeff DAIGLE

Music and Choreography
"Pouk Euy, Mey Euy" (Dear Father, Dear Mother)
WRITTEN BY Mom SOKUNTHEA AND Choum BUNTHOEUN
PERFORMED BY Sapoun MIDADA

"The Nutcracker"
MUSIC BY Pyotr TCHAIKOVSKY
CHOREOGRAPHY BY Kent STOWELL
PERFORMED BY Pacific Northwest Ballet
SCENIC AND COSTUME DESIGN BY Maurice SENDAK

"Fishermen's Dance"
(Traditional)
PERFORMED BY Musicians of Angkor Dance Troupe, LOWELL, MASSACHUSETTS
"Dear 5"
WRITTEN BY Peter WHITEHEAD
PUBLISHED BY Peter WHITEHEAD
COURTESY OF Out of Round Records

"Traditional Cambodian Song"
PERFORMED BY Keo SARATH
Seven Horses Production, CAMBODIA

"Both Sides Now"
PERFORMED BY DENGUE FEVER
WRITTEN BY Joni MITCHELL
PUBLISHED BY Sony/ATV Tunes LLC

“Czardas”

Johannes BRAHMS

ARRANGEMENT AND PIANO BY **Flora ARBITMAN**

“Ballad from Ukraine”

ARRANGEMENT AND PIANO BY **Flora ARBITMAN**

“Russian Dance”

(UNUSED COMPOSITION FOR “SWAN LAKE”)

MUSIC BY **Pyotr TCHAIKOVSKY**

ARRANGEMENT AND PIANO BY **Flora ARBITMAN**

“Original Composition for Guitar”

Sokvannara SAR

“La Source”

CHOREOGRAPHY BY **George BALANCHINE**

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MUSIC BY **Leo DELIBES**

PIANO BY **Aila REZNIK**

“Tombeau de Couperin”

MUSIC BY **Maurice RAVEL**

“28 Variations of a Theme by Paganini”

MUSIC BY **Johannes BRAHMS**

“Red Angels”

CHOREOGRAPHY BY **Ulysses DOVE**

PERFORMED BY **Peter BOAL**

“Maxwell’s Demon”

MUSIC BY **Richard EINHORN**

“Chiaroscuro”

CHOREOGRAPHY BY **Lynn TAYLOR-CORBETT**

PERFORMED BY **Jock SOTO** AND **Rachel RUTHERFORD**

MUSIC BY **Francesco GEMINIANI**

AFTER **Arcangelo CORELLI’S** Concerto Grosso “La Follia”

“Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux”

CHOREOGRAPHY BY **George BALANCHINE**

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EXCERPT FROM “**Swan Lake,**” Op. 20, Act III

MUSIC BY **Pyotr TCHAIKOVSKY**

“Le Corsaire”

CHOREOGRAPHY BY **Konstantin SERGEYEV**, AFTER **Marius PETIPA**

MUSIC BY **Riccardo DRIGO / Adolphe ADAM**

“Square Dance”

(Male Variation)

CHOREOGRAPHY BY **George BALANCHINE**

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“Sarabanda”

MUSIC BY **Arcangelo CORELLI**

“Konservatoriet”

MUSIC BY **Holger PAULLI**

“A Midsummer Night’s Dream”

MUSIC BY **Felix MENDELSSOHN**

“Giselle”

CHOREOGRAPHY BY **Marius PETIPA**
MUSIC BY **Adolphe ADAM**

“La Sylphide”

CHOREOGRAPHY BY **August BOURNONVILLE**
MUSIC BY **Severin LOVENSKJOLD**
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“Coppelia”

CHOREOGRAPHY BY **Arthur SAINT-LEON**
MUSIC BY **Leo DELIBES**

“Carmina Burana”

CHOREOGRAPHY BY **Kent STOWELL**
MUSIC BY **Carl ORFF**

“La Sonnambula”

CHOREOGRAPHY BY **George BALANCHINE**
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MUSIC BY **Vittorio RIETI**
PERFORMED BY **Pacific Northwest Ballet**

“On the Other Side”

CHOREOGRAPHY BY **Benjamin MILLEPIED**

“Etudes for Piano”

(Etude #5)
MUSIC BY **Philip GLASS**
PERFORMED BY **Philip GLASS**

“Square Dance”

CHOREOGRAPHY BY **George BALANCHINE**
© THE GEORGE BALANCHINE TRUST
MUSIC BY **Arcangelo CORELLI AND Antonio VIVALDI**
PERFORMED BY **Pacific Northwest Ballet**

Filmed on Location in Cambodia

Temples of Angkor Wat (BY PERMISSION OF APSARA AUTHORITY)

Angkor Wat

Bayon

Angkor Thom Causeway and South Gopura

Royal Palace Angkor Thom

Preah Khan

Chouk Sar Village

Wat Bo Monastery

Wat Bo Dance School

Wat Sway Village

Filmed on Location in New York and Connecticut

Baryshnikov Arts Center Studios

Julian Lethbridge Studio

Rock Cobble Farm

Steps Studio

Filmed on Location in Seattle

Pacific Northwest Ballet, The Phelps Center

Marion Oliver McCaw Hall at Seattle Center

Filmed on Location in Vail

Gerald R. Ford Amphitheater

Post Production

Goldcrest

John J. DOWDELL III, HD COLORIST

Jay TILIN, HD FINISHING ARTISTS

Tim SPITZER, HD SUPERVISOR

Jean LANE AND **Chris KENNEALLY**, HD PRODUCERS

Jeanne SISON, AUDIO PRODUCER

Ben LAY, VIDEO TECHNICIAN

Haruko KAWANA, ASSISTANT VIDEO TECHNICIAN

Michael SUAREZ, SOUND EDITOR

Lew GOLDSTEIN, SOUND RE-RECORDING MIXER

Worlds Away Productions

Victor BARROSO, END CREDITS

Accounting

Patrick Admire, CPA

Patrick ADMIRE

Cathy LOVETT

Insurance

D. R. Reiff & Associates

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Production Legal Counsel

Gray Krauss LLP

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Music Clearances

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First Run Features

Patron Turns Home Movies Into a Feature



By [SYLVIANE GOLD](#)

Published: March 19, 2010

HAVING spent the day climbing ancient temples in debilitating jungle heat, Anne Bass didn't want to leave her hotel room again. Not even for a dance recital at Preah Khan, the 12th-century complex that is one of the jewels of Angkor, in Cambodia.

The arts patron Anne Bass, right, with Sokvannara Sar, the dancer she discovered in Cambodia 10 years ago.

Sokvannara Sar taking part in the ballet competition in Varna, Bulgaria.

For Ms. Bass, a mainstay of the society pages and a longtime arts patron, dance is a passion. She returned to ballet class when her daughters, now grown, began lessons; at 68, she still attends religiously. But this performance, in January 2000, seemed one obligation too many.

"I said, 'I just can't, I'm too tired,'" she recalled this month, while sipping tea in the Greenwich Village studio of her companion of 15 years, the painter Julian Lethbridge. Ms. Bass was in Cambodia with the World Monuments Fund, which had arranged the recital she was about to skip. But at the last minute something — she still can't figure out what — sent her out the door.

That snap decision started her and a young man named Sokvannara Sar on a cross-cultural adventure that, improbably, turned a poor Cambodian teenager into a ballet dancer and, just as improbably, Ms. Bass into a documentary filmmaker.

In her "Dancing Across Borders," which opens Friday at the Quad Cinema in Manhattan and then barnstorms through more than a dozen other cities, Mr. Sar travels from the rice paddies of his small village to Ms. Bass's sprawling estate in Connecticut; from a dance studio in New York to the outdoor stage of the famed ballet competition in Varna, Bulgaria; and, ultimately, to Seattle, where he joins the Pacific Northwest Ballet. Along the way the film's talking heads — ballet-world stars like Jock Soto and [Peter Boal](#), Cambodian culture experts and Ms. Bass herself — elucidate Mr. Sar's journey. "Dancing Across Borders" also shows the irrepressible ballet mistress Olga Kostritzky at work as she points Mr. Sar's feet, turns out his hips and teaches his 16-year-old body to speak ballet's arcane language.

Mr. Sar, known as Sy (rhymes with 'we'), is now 25, and looking for another berth after leaving Seattle. But when he first caught Ms. Bass's eye, he was performing with other students of the Wat Bo School of Traditional Dance at Preah Khan. In 2000 dance, like all the arts in Cambodia, was rebuilding after the chaos and destruction of the [Khmer Rouge](#) years. Back in the United States, Ms. Bass recalled: "I started thinking about Sy's performance and the fact that he didn't have a future there. And I couldn't bear to think of that talent going to waste."

So without giving it too much thought — "It was quite naïve" — Ms. Bass, one of the richest women in the United States thanks to her 1988 divorce from the Texas billionaire Sid Bass, offered to bring Mr. Sar to the United States to study ballet. Then on the board of the prestigious [School of American Ballet](#), she had a plan: "I thought that I would announce to the school that I had found this really talented dancer, that he would move into the dorm, and occasionally I'd take him out for dinner or something."

It wasn't quite that simple. The elegant curlicues and stylized movements of Cambodian dance are difficult to learn but, Mr. Sar found, not particularly germane to ballet.

"Cambodian dance is very slow and low to the ground," Mr. Sar said in a telephone interview. "There are no turns and very little jumping. It is not as demanding as Western ballet."

He'd had no idea "this ballet thing," as he calls it in the movie, would take so long to learn or be so hard on his body. "I was already a performer in Cambodia," Mr. Sar said. "Here I was almost less than a 10-year-old boy."

He was not immediately accepted at the school, so Ms. Bass hired Ms. Kostritzky to coach him. And she bought a video camera to record his progress.

"It was just to give his mother on the other side of the world an idea of what he was doing," she said. "I never thought I was making a movie. If I had," she added with a laugh, "I assure you, it would have been a lot better."

Those home videos revealed Mr. Sar's increasing prowess. In 2006 he made it to the Varna semifinals, and afterward Ms. Bass invited some friends — "two [New York City Ballet](#) dancers, some writers, artists and art critics and a few friends who had a connection with Sy" — to dinner in Connecticut to show them some clips she'd received of the Varna competition.

She enlisted a film student to label the various ballets and edit them into a DVD.

"Once I saw how easy it was, I said: 'Listen, I've also got television footage from his performance in Phnom Penh.' Then there was the classroom footage, and I had photographs. And he just put together this little film that I showed my friends."

Her friends were impressed, and they urged her to turn the story into a feature-length documentary. When she did a reality check with dance-world friends, they concurred. Ms. Bass signed the Emmy-winning documentary maker Catherine Tatge to direct.

"As we were working," Ms. Tatge said by phone, "it became clear than Anne had really been living and breathing this story, had spent a long time nurturing Sy." Ms. Tatge stepped into a more advisory role as co-producer, and Ms. Bass took over as director.

Three years and \$700,000 later, Ms. Bass said, "I surprised myself with how much I was engaged by the process."

She was especially taken with the job of editing: "There were so many different ways the story could have gone. There were stories within stories."

Some of the stories she left out are about her. There's no mention of the dispute that led her to resign from the School of American Ballet board in 2005, or evidence of the bond she now shares with Mr. Sar. ("She's like my American mother," he said.)

"I would happily have not been in the movie at all," she said. "It's very hard to look at yourself. I just ended up trusting my editors. Where they really felt they needed me, that's where I ended up." The film also ignores Ms. Bass's charity work in Cambodia. "Anything you do there makes a difference," she said. "Anything."

And now when she visits a fledgling dance school she's become interested in, she takes her video camera. "If I make a film of them someday," she explained, "I want to have something from the very beginning."



Anne Bass and the Cambodian Ballerino

By [Chris Rovzar](#)

Published Mar 21, 2010

In 2000, philanthropist Anne Bass was on a trip to Cambodia with the World Monuments Fund when she saw Sokvannara “Sy” Sar dance. She was so taken by his performance—Bass is a longtime supporter of ballet—that she helped get him admitted into the School of American Ballet, which ultimately led him to a spot at the Pacific Northwest Ballet. *Dancing Across Borders*, her documentary film about the experience, started out as videos she sent home to Sy’s family. She met up with Chris Rovzar after her daily dance class on the Upper West Side.

What was it about Sy’s performance that spoke to you?

He has complete charisma onstage and has a very natural musicality and grace. His expression of joy is really infectious. I just couldn’t get his performance out of my head.

And yet his parents wanted him to be a doctor.

Like many parents of children who are artists, they have other ambitions for them. In this country, it’s very different because parents worry about their children being happy. In a country that’s poor, they worry about what is going to help support the family the most.

It seemed like he didn’t really know what he was in for.

I honestly think that he was in shock for the first two years.

Why do you think he stayed?

I think he realized how much it would be able to help his family. I also think he was intrigued by ballet finally. Criticisms I’ve heard are from people who say, “How could you have imposed your ambition on him?” And that’s not really the way I felt. It’s something that I thought he would be able to do. I said to him, practically from the first three months, “If you want to quit at any time to just go to school here, just academic school, it’s fine with me.”

The beautiful outdoor shots, is that your estate up in Connecticut?

[*Bass was held captive in a robbery there in 2007*] Mmm hmm.

Did they ever find out who held you hostage?

I don’t really want to talk about that.

You’ve referred to yourself as a perfectionist. How did you feel when he temporarily dropped out of ballet last fall?

It was really hard to be a spectator. At the end of November, he thought he wanted to quit dancing. When I got the call, I was at a film festival. I cried all night. But then I watched the film, and I thought, *You know what, this boy is so wonderful and he has such good character, he is going to be fine no matter what.* About five weeks later, he called and said, “I just realized that I thought I had been dancing for other people. I thought I wanted to do what I wanted to do. Then I realized I had been doing what I wanted to do all along.”

The film plays at [Quad Cinema](#) March 26 through April 1.

THE HUFFINGTON POST

BREAKING NEWS AND OPINION

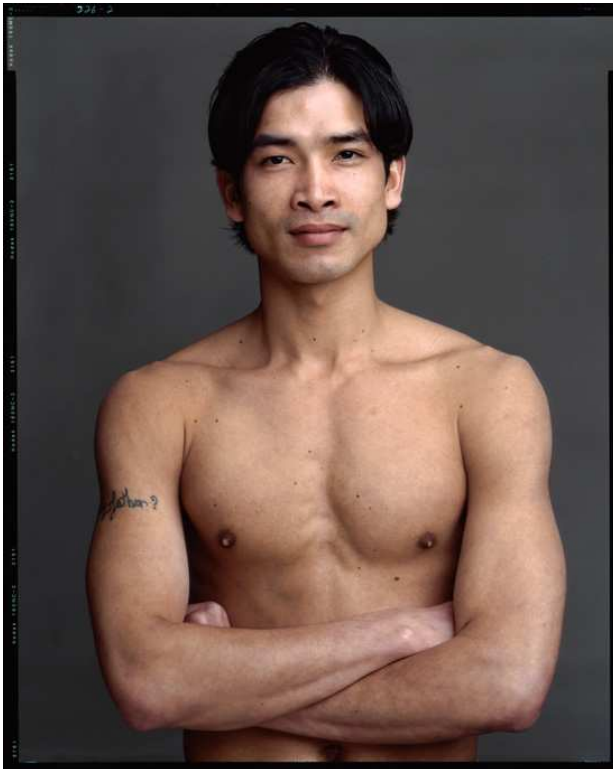


[Timothy Greenfield-Sanders](#)

Posted: April 2, 2010 09:38 AM

Director Anne Bass's *Dancing Across Borders* is a wonderful and moving documentary about the young Cambodian dancer Sokvannaara Sar. Ten years ago Bass discovered Sar performing with a small troupe in Angkor Wat and quickly recognized his remarkable talent. She arranged for him to come to New York and audition for the School of American Ballet.

The film follows Sar's progress as a dancer as well as his ability to acclimate to his new surroundings. From the bucolic Cambodian countryside to the competitive New York dance world, Sar's story is that of an artist, an amazingly dedicated artist.



Portrait of dancer Sokvannaara Sar by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders

The film includes dance greats Peter Boal, Jock Soto, Benjamin Millepied, Damian Woetzel and Olga Kostritzky (with whom you will fall in love). Bass's support and guidance also deserve special acknowledgment.



After screening at numerous film festivals, *Dancing Across Borders* opens its U.S. theatrical tour this week. Merrill Brockway of Dance in America said, "I believe that every young person connected to Dance should see it - as well as every other young person and all adults." That should cover most of you out there!

I think *Dancing Across Borders* is an 'Oscarworthy' delight.

Thursday, May 28, 2009

siff: dancing across borders premiere – a review

Great Expectations, Great Adaptations



Sokvannara Sar at the Varna Competition
(photo courtesy of Dancing Across Borders)

Seattle International Film Festival had a packed house for the public premiere of *Dancing Across Borders* on Monday night. The audience responded favorably to this dance bio pic put together with a high level of cultural awareness and an eye for beauty by first-time filmmaker Anne Bass. The individual video clips vary in clarity and style; the result is uneven but definitely worthwhile.

Dancing Across Borders is an 88-minute love letter to Cambodia, to ballet, and to hard work. Like every good love letter, it conveys the preciousness of the intangible. It feels somewhat guarded, though, as if Bass desired to share this inspirational story and at the same time grant some level of privacy to everyone involved, including its young, true-life protagonist, dancer Sokvannara Sar.

Sar's story begins in his native Cambodia, where he found a way to take dance classes at the school of Boran Kim at age nine. The documentary includes stills of Sar onstage in these early years. He's adorable,

yes, but if you compare his stance to other students, you can see a hint of what caused him to stand out to Bass, who attended one of his performances at an ancient temple in Cambodia. He already displays an awareness of line and an ability to connect with the audience.

What haunted Bass after seeing this talented young dancer was that male dancers don't have much of a future in Cambodia, in part due to the damage done by the Khmer Rouge and, in part, due to the woman-focused nature of their national dance. Bass eventually sent a letter to Sar's dance school, asking if he would be interested in coming to the U.S. to study ballet.

This early part of the story is told mostly through present-day interviews—often on location in Cambodia—with Sar, his mother, Bass, Boran, and others. We see the current students at Sar's former, open-air dance school performing for a crowd, we see Sar's mother in her kitchen, and we visit the ancient temple where Sar and Bass first crossed paths. We also see town shots and striking panoramas of rivers, and lush fields, and rice paddies. Cliché? Token local color? That's what they sound like, but they're not. In the context of this film they take on a greater purpose, providing a sense of place and showing some of what Sar had to lose if he left his homeland.

(I suppose a Seattle-equivalent film would show Mount Rainier and Discovery Park, places Seattleites don't live in, per se, but places that contribute to our sense of self nonetheless.)

Sar accepts Bass's offer of sponsorship and, at age 16, travels to a private audition at the School of American Ballet.

More interviews, this time with SAB teachers Peter Boal and Jack Soto. These are funny moments in the film, as these teachers at America's premier ballet school share their thoughts on being asked to check out a 16-year-old beginner. Rather than asking Sar to perform Cambodian dances so they could see how he moved, they asked him to try some ballet combinations, which, of course, he couldn't quite do.

The prognosis? Not so good: Sar was not to be accepted. However, Bass, a New York City Ballet board member and a donor, begged...and she came up with a stop-gap solution they were willing to consider. Sar would study with master teacher Olga Kostritzky to get up to speed.

Here's where the incredible part of the story occurs. Within only a few months, Sar earned admission to SAB. How is it possible that someone could learn so much so quickly?

Kostritzky, full of personality, her eagle eyes often set off by stylish glasses, talks about how hard she and Sar worked together: "It was a little torture for both of us." Her comment elicited laughter from the audience, but the truth of it was not entirely funny. Sar suffered major cramps, she said, because he was training at a level and intensity that students generally work up to more gradually. Sar's own comment about these early classes elicited a burst of laughter from the audience also: "The first two years I was alone, studying ballet with *Olga!*" Imagine the pressure! No other students around to distract a knowledgeable, passionate teacher who sees your talent and fully believes in you. Lucky, yes, but not easy, especially for a young boy away from his parents, his friends, his country, and his culture. Oh, and the language barrier? Imagine...In addition to general culture shock, Sar was working in two languages he didn't know: English and ballet. Add to that, the Russian fired off between Kostritzky and the accompanist in class...that makes for a lot to sort out.

It's precisely at this incredible part of the story that big questions came up for me. The answers didn't entirely satisfy. The first few months of ballet training—and even the next few years (when he studied at SAB and continued his coaching with Kostritzky)—was it a kind of isolated hell, despite the generosity and goodwill of the adults involved? Why did he persevere? For many ballet lovers, there's no question: the passion for their art form propels them forward. But Sar says that ballet had not been his dream. (He describes with humor how strange this dance form looked to him in the videotape that Bass sent over in 2000, when he was still in Cambodia.) You understand from the documentary that he agreed to come to the U.S., in part because he's game for any adventure (which they don't actually say in the documentary; I'm reading a lot into his smile), and in part to help his parents, who supported a large family on a meager

income. But at this point, earning money as a ballet dancer was still a far-off, not-so-certain eventuality. Even with talent, determination, and top-notch teaching, some kids who start out very young still can't make it into a professional ballet company. It was a huge risk.

These questions fade, however, in light of the stunning beauty that characterizes some of the Kostritzky coaching sessions. Sunset light streams in through the window shades of the Zen-like studio. Some of the film clips here seem to be set up and lit for the documentary; others, I believe, were home videos Bass took to share Sar's progress with his family.

The cameras stay focused on dance rather than resorting to the annoying close-ups other dance filmmakers have experimented with. They capture the relentless hard work and this young dancer's grace. The clips feature exciting bravura jumps, but what really got to me was how the cameras caught Sar's *grace*. The shots of his later work at PNB don't show this. I'd be interested to know which variables (cameraman, camera, angle, environment, steps, time, etc.) were missing. One lovely thing the PNB sessions do share with these earlier ones, however, is the sense of dancing rather than spectacle.

If you're craving dance footage, *Dancing Across Borders* will do it for you. Folks new to the art form get help via story-related voice-overs and cut-ins. Some of these cut-ins prove effective, some jar, but the film progresses at a pleasing pace overall, more or less chronologically.



Sokvannara Sar at Vail International Dance Festival,
Philip Glass at the piano (photo © Erin Baiano)

We see Sar at his first Saratoga summer class and at SAB. We visit a New York Cambodian family that invited Sar home during weekends. We hear briefly about his life at high school and in the dorms. We see him graduate from high school with honors. We see him at PNB School (whither he followed Boal in 2005), and at PNB company (where he was hired as an apprentice in 2006, and promoted to the *corps* in 2007). We see quite a bit of footage from the Varna competition, as well as performances in New York, Seattle, Phnom Penh, and Vail.

The Vail performance of Benjamin Millepied's *On the Other Side* (with Philip Glass accompanying) is, I believe, the most recent performance of those shown in the documentary (July 2008). Sar captures Millepied's style, which isn't, incidentally, so much classical ballet. The documentary doesn't comment on it outright, but we see here again Sar's talent for finding his way into other forms of dance.

Bass had a numerous goals with this documentary. (There's an interview with her on the movie's website.) A first-time director, groping her way with the guidance of a professional team, Bass finds a fair amount of

success with each of her goals. One might say she learns as quickly as Sar.

One of these goals was to inspire other children. Even before the hoped-for wider distribution of this film, that inspiration may have already been at work. In one present-day scene, for example, the girls at Sar's old school perform for a sensitive camera, their graceful movement making them ambassadors at an early age. Master teacher Boran beams at them with pride. An audience crowds under the roof of the school, which seems mostly open to the air. In the back, behind the girls, you can see a little boy peering through the bars of a small window. He barely clears the window's bottom ledge. He looks so intent as he watches the dancers. His journey is just beginning. What, for him, will be the impact of this movie about someone from his very own community?



Q&A After the Premiere: SIFF programming manager Beth Barrett (who brought us this movie), film director Anne Bass, and PNB artistic director Peter Boal (photo © Dan Hawkins)

In her interview, Bass mentions that her first thought had been to hire a director. I'm glad she didn't, since I imagine much of the love we see in this movie comes from her vision.

The person she should have hired, I think, is an interviewer. Some of the conversations and interviews felt a little stilted, robbing us of a sense of these interesting people's personalities—and their relationship. Someone who could have encouraged folks to open up a little more—who didn't already have the answers—would have helped here. For example, at one point, Sar says that ballet wasn't really his own choice. Sometimes, he continues, he just wants to be free to do what he wants to do. We need to understand: Is this blame? Is it regret? Is it the kind of comment most of us make at some point(s) in our life? What would Sar have preferred, in retrospect? Is he happy with his decision to come to the U.S.? An interviewer would have helped here. (I'm happy about his decision: it's a pleasure to watch him dance here at PNB.)

I highly recommend *Dancing Across Borders*, especially to the NPR crowd, to dance lovers, to artists, to Social Studies/English teachers for their classrooms, and to anyone who wants to take a trip but can't just at the moment. This documentary raises interesting questions about cultures, adapting, choices, and dedication—and it does so with beautiful imagery, beautiful portraits, beautiful movement, and a touch of humor.

Dancing Across Borders: 123 Productions, Inc. Directed by Anne Bass. Produced by Anne Bass and

Catherine Tatge. Next appearing at Newport Film Festival and Jacob's Pillow. Future distribution and medium are both TBD, although there are hopes for a DVD.