

DANCING ACROSS BORDERS



Friday November 20, 2009 - Having just recently expressed a hope of seeing the film [DANCING ACROSS BORDERS](#) I was really delighted to receive an invitation to a showing at The Screening Room on West 57th today.

Filmmaker Anne Bass welcomed us briefly and then the 88-minute film began, promptly transporting us to Cambodia and the Angkor Wat where - in 2000 - Ms. Bass happened to be present at a traditional Cambodian dance performance and was drawn to one of the dancers, 16-year-old Sokvannara Sar. Moved by his expressive dancing, she found on her return to the States that she kept thinking about his performance.

One thing led to another and Anne Bass arranged for Sokvannara to come to the United States and study at the School of American Ballet. At 16, the dancer was considered far too old to start ballet training especially in a curriculum as daunting as SAB's. Peter Boal and Jock Soto, both teaching at SAB at the time, watched Sokvannara and felt that despite his lack of the basics of classical technique there was some intangible spark there and enough inborn talent to merit giving him an opportunity.

The *premiere* dance teacher Olga Kostritzky personally took Sokvannara under her wing to prepare him for his work at SAB. Everything was foreign to the young dancer: not just the language but the whole notion of classical ballet technique - from the very basic concept of turnout - had to be learned from scratch.

Persevering through his difficulties, Sokvannara slowly began to look like a ballet dancer. Frustrations simply made him work harder and Madame Kostritzky's ideal combination of strictness and kindness made her a perfect mentor. He finally began taking class with boys much younger than himself. For three years he laboured patiently while in the meantime securing his high school diploma with honors.

Sokvannara entered the Varna Competition; a slight glitch in the **GISELLE** solo did not discourage him and his second variation, from **SYLPHIDE**, won the audience's accolades. He went all the way to the semi-finals.

By 2006, Sokvannara had (amazingly enough) developed his technique to a point where he was accepted as an apprentice at **Pacific Northwest Ballet** and eventually joined the *corps de ballet* of that Company, now headed by Peter Boal. In his most recent assignment there, the solo **MOPEY**, Sokvannara scored a fine success.

Ms. Bass has put together a very moving and visually striking film, her first effort in the genre. Included are grainy footage of Sokvannara in his early Cambodian performances and excerpts from classical ballets which he danced at a gala in Phnom Penh in 2006, the first time most of the audience would have experienced 'live' Western balletic dance. His family and first teacher are interviewed and the process of the decision to come to America is detailed from their perspective. In part he accepted the invitation because he felt he could help improve his family's life. He still returns to Cambodia each year to visit.

His time at SAB is generously documented with dance footage and wonderful interviews with Peter Boal and Jock Soto. Madame Kostritzky is a constant presence in the film; in a way it is as much about her dedication and inspiration as it is about Sokvannara's steadfastness and talent.

Sar is seen in Damien Woetzel's class at Saratoga and later in a brief scene at SAB, where Sokvannara partners the delectable Katie Morgan. In another clip, from **TOMBEAU DE COUPERIN**, one has a momentary sensation of watching a young Jock Soto dancing but it's actually Sar. Peter Boal coaches Sokvannara in the Harlequin's dance from **SONNAMBULA** (using a video of NYCB soloist Benjamin Bowman as a guide). The film ends with a passage from **SQUARE DANCE**.

Partnering is now considered Sar's biggest remaining challenge as a dancer; he's working on it good-naturedly at PNB.

Sokvannara Sar, know as "Sy" (pronounced "see"), dances with **Pacific Northwest Ballet** and we should be having an opportunity to see him onstage when the Company appear [at the Joyce](#) from January 5th - 10th, 2010.



[Erin Baiano](#)'s incredible photo of Sy at the Vail International Dance Festival 2008 with Philip Glass at the piano; their performance of Benjamin Millepied's **ON THE OTHER SIDE** is perhaps the dance highlight of the film.

Anne Bass's film shows us not only the journey of a young man from one culture into another but also the ancient beauty of his Cambodian homeland juxtaposed against his life in America where he has charmingly mastered the language and where he dresses and behaves like any other young person these days. But there is something special about Sy which always shines thru: a spiritual quality which Ms. Bass has allowed us to experience in her beautiful film.

UPDATE: I have just learned that the film will be shown at the Walter Reade Theatre at Lincoln Center on January 31st at 2:00 PM, in addition to the [Dance on Camera](#) screening on January 29th.

From the film's press release:

"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 and seemingly natural charms and grace as a dancer. Having been a longtime devotee to the world of dance herself back in the United States, Anne felt compelled to give this young boy the opportunity to leave his home and follow a dream that she felt he hadn't even yet seen for himself. From the serene countryside of Southeast Asia to the halls of the 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."

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