

Apr. 26 2010 - 9:52 pm

'Dancing Across Borders': A beautiful leap

By ALEX KAFKA

Note: At the end of this review, for those days when you're in a big hurry, I'm instituting a simple summary-rating system in lieu of the common star-rating system.

Globalization sounds so abstract sometimes. Then you see it in action, as in the lovely, inspiring, and thought-provoking *Dancing Across Borders*, New York socialite and ballet patron Anne Bass's impressive film debut about a Cambodian dancer, the astonishing Sokvannara (or Sy — pronounced See) Sar, whom Bass brought to America for training in ballet.

First off, let's get the unpleasant political static out of the way, shall we? I mean, sure, there's an undeniably disquieting Pygmalion aspect to this saga. Wealthy patron goes to Angkor Wat in Siem Rap, Cambodia, in 2000, spies a beautiful, charming 16-year-old boy dancing in a troupe at an ancient temple, comes home, and is haunted by him. She looks into sponsoring his coming to America to study ballet, of which she's already an influential patron. Mystified but grateful, he and his family say yes. He comes to New York, auditions for the School of American Ballet, the pedagogical Olympus of the country's ballet elite. At about twice the age when most ballet students might get ultra-serious about learning that art, he seems hopelessly behind, not to mention the seemingly insurmountable cultural and language barriers.

Bass hires Olga Kostritsky, former teacher of Mikhail Barishnikov and Jock Soto, among many others, to tutor Sy and bring him up to speed. Amazingly, she is able to. He not only joins the School of American Ballet, but then goes on to become an apprentice to, and then a member of, the Pacific Northwest Ballet under one of his teachers, Peter Boal, on the way appearing at the Varna, Bulgaria, ballet competition where Nureyev and Baryshnikov both leapt into world stardom, at the Vail International Ballet Dance Festival (in a gorgeous solo by Benjamin Millepied to the piano accompaniment of Philip Glass), and in an American embassy performance in his native Cambodia.

So, can we ask colloquially and impolitely, what's Bass's deal? I mean, let's, just for fun, turn the tables. Some rich Cambodian dame spies a beautiful Bass child in a Broadway jazz open-house performance in Central Park, makes the Bass family an offer they can't refuse (I'm not sure just what such an offer, to the Bass family, would look like, but ...), and takes the beautiful Bass child back to Cambodia to groom him or her for a life performing traditional Khmer movement. How'd she like that? Ridiculous? Sure. But I couldn't help but run the absurd tape through my mind.

But here's the thing. It's not like Bass kidnapped the lad. She went through channels, paid for his unbelievable, world-class dance and academic training, and took great pains to keep him in touch with his family, including making videotapes for them that constitute much of the fabulous footage here. Did she, in the back of her mind, have thoughts of a film to cap the process? Who knows? More to the point, who cares? Just because she's a patron of the arts doesn't eliminate Bass from the community of artists, right? Does she have some kind of romantic notions about her handsome leading man? (Again, an incredibly rude question—but look at the picture halfway down [this](#) page and try not to ask it.) Again, who cares? Dance stars, whether Khmer darlings or Balanchine proteges, are meant to transport us into fantasy. And if the fantasy involves ushering them into a glorious career on the ballet stage, is that a capital crime?

More to the point, Bass's film admirably addresses most, if not every, concern we'd have about Sy and doesn't always give us reassuring or pat answers. It doesn't make his American journey into some kind of fairy tale. It makes very clear how disoriented and sometimes lonely and stressed out he's been, and that his parents don't really see the magic (his father thinks the dance is all well and good, but would just assume see his son an engineer or doctor).

But the movie also makes clear that, if she was somewhat irrationally, perhaps even childishly, captivated by the teenage tourist entertainer in Angkor Wat, Bass is also a talented ballet talent scout. Don't believe me? Watch the film, and watch Sy, at Varna, perform solos from [Coppelia](#), and [La Sylphide](#), and so on. Funny, though—what's most touching about his embassy performance isn't just that it's gorgeous, it's that it's spotty. The stage isn't optimal, he's nervous, his parents and countrymen are in the audience, and his balance and timing aren't at their best. He looks like an amazing dancer, of course, but he looks human. You see the cracks in a dazzling performer's armor, just like you do when he's trying to partner in a corps section for PNB, and it makes you admire his determination and talent and stage glow that much more. It's always seemed like a slightly amusingly insolent crime against regular old incredibly hard-working American ballet dancers that they've been overshadowed by economic, political, or other kinds of refugees or dissidents from Russia, Cuba, Cambodia, or wherever. The only story more compelling than a hard-won place in the world of the arts is one about a foreigner's hard-won place.

But that's globalization for you—the irresistible allure of what's different but the same, and what's the same but different. Rail against it, you pampered Midwestern bun heads working your tutus off to get to the ABT or Ailey, but for better and for worse, it'll never change. For it confirms the beauty of what you love, and the possibilities of that love conquering the world with its grace.

On the Cine Synapse rating scale, this film receives a:

Nah

Take It or Leave It

Well Worth Your While

Must See

