

# 'Dancing' Follows Cambodian Teen

BY PHIL PARKER  
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**B**ehold the power of "Dancing Across Borders": It makes ballet cool.

Really cool. The film centers on one dancer, a Cambodian teenager named Sy (pronounced like "see"). Plucked from his home country and dropped head-first into rigorous tutelage from a German instructor named Olga, Sy worked like a maniac to become a professional ballet dancer in America. It's impossible not to appreciate how hard he works on choreographed tip-toe sprints that explode into flying, spinning leaps.

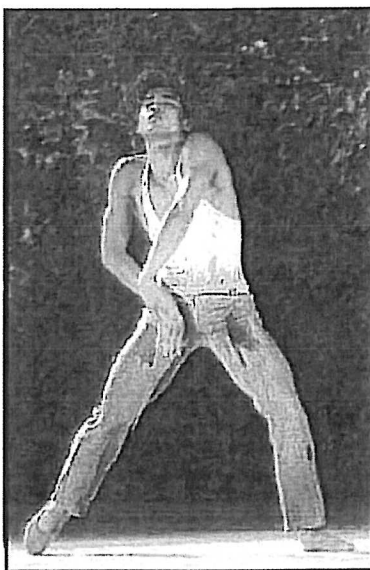
By the end of the film, you'll be a fan of both Sy and ballet itself, tights and all.

The director of the film is Anne Bass. She was visiting Cambodia in 2000 when Sy, then 16, caught her eye. He had a natural charm and was a graceful, though very small, dancer.

Cambodian dance moves sometimes deploy clinking coconuts and are nothing like ballet, but Bass thought Sy was a natural. With the proper schooling, he could be great.

Bass spoke with the Journal last week and said she's continued for years to try and help Cambodia, still a rebuilding society after Pol Pot and the ruthless Khmer Rouge communists essentially erased the country's history in the 1970s (and killed about a fifth of its population).

Cambodia is beautiful, and



Sokvannara "Sy" Sar dances in the semifinals of the 2006 Varna International Ballet Competition in a scene from "Dancing Across Borders," a documentary film by Anne Bass.

"Dancing Across Borders" captures its lushness. But Bass said the people there are poor and under educated. Over the past few decades, they've practically been rebuilding a culture from scratch.

"Anything you do there makes an enormous difference," she said. "Anything you do, like sponsor one dancer."

Bass had never made a movie before "Dancing Across Borders." She filmed Sy's training with Olga so she could show the videos to his parents. As he improved, she kept filming. When she wanted to edit her footage she was blown away by Final Cut Pro's simplicity, and a full-fledged movie was born.

More than half of "Dancing Across Borders" is the grueling training, a conscious choice by Bass the dance lover. We actually see Sy's muscles get bigger as the movie progresses.

"It's very unusual to have a dancer literally develop in front of your eyes like that," Bass said. "You saw him from when he was a little boy, and at the end he's a professional dancer. It's really important for the understanding of the art to present that studio footage because it gives an idea of what it takes."

The movie is mostly about dance, but Sy's slow acceptance of American society is a highlight as well. He explains how difficult it was for him moving to New York City when he couldn't speak English, adjusting to school and life in the dorms. He says late in the film that he sometimes feels like he doesn't have a true home.

At the end he's a pro and seems on the verge of real greatness. Bass said, though, that Sy recently quit dancing because "he didn't think he was doing it for himself." Five weeks later, he was back at it.

"He called me... and said 'It wasn't until I quit that I knew it was what I wanted, and I really miss it,'" Bass said.

He's had a remarkable journey, powered by Bass and dance. "Dancing Across Borders" is short, easy entertainment, but Bass finds real soul in this story. And who knew ballet practice could be so fun to watch?

The film opens today at The Screen.