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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.