



'It was a responsibility to be a chosen one and to give up would have been a failure'

Leap of faith: Sy Sar was accompanied by Philip Glass at the Vail International Dance Festival

Sy Sar, subject of a dramatic documentary, was plucked from Cambodia by an American patron who turned him into an international ballet star. His journey, he tells **Neil Norman**, was sometimes painful – and always emotional

THE notion of taking a young Khmer folk dancer out of Cambodia and turning him into a ballet dancer sufficiently convincing to impress international audiences is positively Shavian. This Pygmalion-like idea is the subject of the award-winning documentary *Dancing Across Borders*.

Eight years in the making, it was directed and co-produced by American philanthropist and arts patron Anne Bass, who was also the default Henry Higgins or, more properly, the facilitator of the various Professor Higginses involved in the extraordinary story of Sokvannara "Sy" Sar.

Sy (pronounced "See") was among a group of dance students who performed for a bunch of wealthy Americans in the 12th-century temple of Preah Khan in Angkor in January 2000 in acknowledgement of their support for the World Monuments Fund. Among the audience was Bass, whose wealth derives from her divorce settlement from Texan billionaire Sid Bass, and who, apart from her discreet engagement with international conservation, is also a keen balletomane.

Impressed by 15-year-old Sy's natural performing qualities, she thought that he might be good enough to get into the prestigious School of American Ballet in New York, where George Balanchine was one of the founders. Using her considerable influence, Bass set about transferring the boy from a Cambodian village to the ruthlessly competitive environment of Gotham ballet.

"I was naïve," Bass tells me on the telephone from Connecticut. "I thought I would introduce him to the school and that would be it."

Her subsequent role in Sy's journey involved far more than signing a fistful of cheques. She began by making short home movies charting his progress to send back to his family. These form the basis of *Dancing Across Borders*, augmented by filmed interviews and television footage of international dance competitions.

Bass's first obstacles were Sy's parents. His father says in the film that he would have preferred his son to become an engineer or a doctor. Clearly there must have been some initial suspicions of this rich, white, older woman whisking away their beautiful teenage son to the US.

"I don't think that was really an issue," says Bass. "The World Monuments Fund helped me explain about the School of American Ballet, so

Sy's parents knew it was the dance equivalent of going to Harvard. In a way they are very trusting. An American family probably would not have allowed their child to go off."

Sy himself tells me that he is unsure of his family's reaction even today. "My parents didn't believe it until it happened. It was hard for them to let me go but they knew it was good in the long run – for them, but most importantly for my own future. They have seen a bit of what I've

done but they never show their emotions so it's hard to tell whether they like what I'm doing or not."

Although the story is as much about Bass's dedication to her protégé as it is about him, she is notably absent from most of the film, appearing only in a couple of scenes in the beginning.

"It was excruciating for me to have any of myself in the film," she says. "I was involved but that was not my intention. There is just enough to understand my role in Sy's story."

I put it to her as delicately as possible that such continuous dedication suggests she might have fallen a little bit in love with him.

"I can't put it quite like that," she says. "Not fallen in love. I was more so struck with his talent and I saw the effect he had on those around him."

After years of painful and difficult training Sy first joined Pacific Northwest Ballet in Seattle in 2007 and more recently has moved to Carolina Ballet as a soloist.

Even so, Bass's gamble might not have worked. The financial aspect aside, it represented an enormous investment of her time and emotion. How aware was Sy of the magnitude of what she was doing for him?

"I played it down as much as possible," says Bass. "I didn't want him to feel obligated or pressurised by guilty gratitude so I tried to keep as much from him as possible. He comes from an exceedingly modest cultural background and the differences are quite pronounced. But it is very rewarding

when you see an opportunity to help one person."

It hasn't all been plain sailing. The film reveals Sy's loneliness and sense of cultural dispossession as well as his triumphs. His appearance at the Vail International Dance Festival accompanied by Philip Glass at the piano, and his triumphant return to Cambodia to perform ballet for the first time in front of his friends and family at the inauguration of the new US Embassy, are just two highlights that make you want to cheer.

"In the beginning it was really painful physically and the emotional stress was enormous," says Sy. "My body was hurting and cramping all the time. I didn't like ballet. But I never felt I would give up and go back home. Giving up was out of the question. It was a responsibility to be a chosen one and to give up would have been a failure."

The drama continues after the period covered by the documentary. Last year Sy decided that he had had enough and walked away.

"I had a little breakdown last year and quit ballet," he says. "I didn't want to dance at all. But it was not fair on Anne and all the people who had helped me. I came back. Dancing is making me who I am right now. I like to move, I cannot stand still. So I had to come back."

■ There are special screenings of *Dancing Across Borders* tomorrow at Brixton's Ritzy, Clapham, Notting Hill Gate, Greenwich and Stratford Picturehouses as part of the Screen Arts Festival (picturehouses.co.uk/screenarts) which runs until August 15.

Talent spotter: Anne Bass with her protégé, Sokvannara Sar

