

FILM

Patron Turns Home Movies Into a Feature

By SYLVIANE GOLD

HAVING spent the day climbing ancient temples in debilitating jungle heat, Anne Bass didn't want to leave her hotel room again. Not even for a dance recital at Preah Khan, the 12th-century complex that is one of the jewels of Angkor, in Cambodia.

For Ms. Bass, a mainstay of the society pages and a longtime arts patron, dance is a passion. She returned to ballet class when her daughters, now grown, began lessons; at 68, she still attends religiously. But this performance, in January 2000, seemed one obligation too many.

"I said, 'I just can't, I'm too tired,'" she recalled this month, while sipping tea in the Greenwich Village studio of her companion of 15 years, the painter Julian Lethbridge. Ms. Bass was in Cambodia with the World Monuments Fund, which had arranged the recital she was about to skip. But at the last minute something — she still can't figure out what — sent her out the door.



TONY CENICOLA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Anne Bass documents the metamorphosis of a young Cambodian dancer into American ballet performer.

That snap decision started her and a young man named Sokvannara Sar on a cross-cultural adventure that, improbably, turned a poor Cambodian teenager into a ballet dancer and, just as improbably, Ms. Bass into a documentary filmmaker.

In her "Dancing Across Borders," which opens Friday at the Quad Cinema in Manhattan and then barnstorms through more than a dozen other cities, Mr. Sar travels from the rice paddies of his small village to Ms. Bass's sprawling estate in Connecticut; from a dance studio in New York to the outdoor stage of the famed ballet competition in Varna, Bulgaria; and, ultimately, to Seattle, where he joins the Pacific Northwest Ballet. Along the way the film's talking heads — ballet-world stars like Jock Soto and Peter Boal, Cambodian culture experts and Ms. Bass herself — elucidate Mr. Sar's journey. "Dancing Across Borders" also shows the irrepressible ballet mistress Olga Kostritzky at work as she points Mr. Sar's feet, turns out his hips and teaches his 16-year-old body to speak ballet's arcane language.

Mr. Sar, known as Sy (rhymes with 'we'), is now 25, and looking for another berth after leaving Seattle. But when he first caught Ms. Bass's eye, he was performing with other students of the Wat Bo School of Traditional Dance at Preah Khan. In 2000 dance, like all the arts in Cambodia, was rebuilding after the chaos and destruction of the Khmer Rouge years. Back in the United States, Ms. Bass recalled: "I started thinking about Sy's performance and the fact that he didn't have a future there. And I couldn't bear to think of that talent going to waste."

So without giving it too much thought — "It was quite naive" — Ms. Bass, one of the richest women in the United States thanks to her 1988 divorce from the Texas billionaire Sid Bass, offered to bring Mr. Sar to the United States to study ballet. Then on the board of the prestigious School of American Ballet, she had a plan: "I thought that I would announce to the school that I had found this really talented dancer, that he would move into the dorm, and occasionally I'd take him out for dinner or something."

It wasn't quite that simple. The elegant curlicues and stylized movements of Cambodian dance are difficult to learn but, Mr. Sar found, not particularly germane to ballet.

"Cambodian dance is very slow and low to the ground," Mr. Sar said in a telephone interview. "There are no turns and very little jumping. It is not as demanding as Western ballet."

He'd had no idea "this ballet thing," as

Continued on Page 24

The arts patron Anne Bass, right, with Sokvannara Sar, the dancer she discovered in Cambodia 10 years ago. Her film, "Dancing Across Borders" follows his progress, including taking part in the ballet competition in Varna, Bulgaria, last year.

