

Seattle
The Seattle Times
DANCING ACROSS BORDERS
Friday, April 9, 2010
Writer: John Hartl (Special to the Times)
Review
Rating: 3 out of 4 stars
Photo: N/A
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A dancer's journey: from raw talent to grace

BY JOHN HARTL
Special to the Times

It isn't every day that a Cambodian dancer (especially one who started ballet training in his midteens) is asked to perform with Pacific Northwest Ballet.

"Are you sure about this?" asks Sokvannara "Sy" Sar, who has been chosen to dance by PNB's artistic director, Peter Boal.

Much earlier in Anne H. Bass' charming documentary, "Dancing Across Borders," Boal had expressed reservations that sounded a lot like rejection.

But that was then, this is now (or relatively recently), and the child has become a professional under the tutelage of a harsh but fair mentor, Olga Kostritzky.

Thanks to Bass, the transformation is captured on film and videotape over the course of several years. A longtime dance enthusiast, Bass was visiting Angkor Wat when she singled out Sy from a small troupe. In New York, she helped him with an

audition with the School of American Ballet.

Without her recognition of his raw talent, and without her perseverance, Sy might never have been able to express himself so persuasively. In carefully edited clips from his Cambodian years (brief mention is made of Pol Pot's devastating influence), as well as later performances in the United States, Bass demonstrates his stunning leaps and graceful partnering.

While he may have had some trouble with the latter, his struggle becomes an important part of the movie's narrative.

Sy's ambivalence is reflected in several scenes in which he seems torn between two very different homes: the lush landscapes of his country (he recalls fishing in the rice fields) and the sweaty rehearsal halls of his profession (McCaw Hall has rarely looked less romantic).

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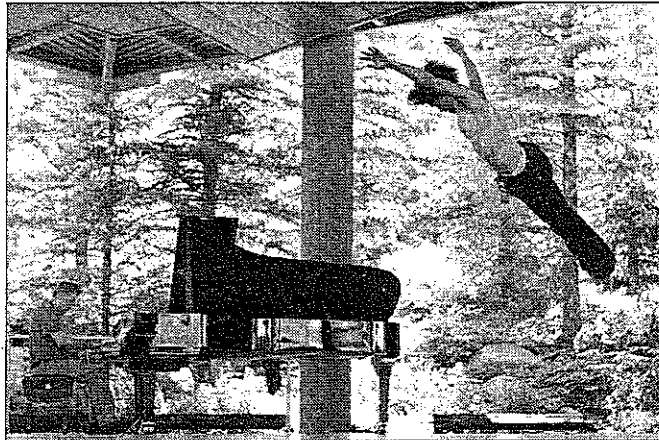
Photo: B&W

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According to Boal, Sy's "extraordinary" face "represents who he is as a dancer." The soundtrack sometimes hints at a conflicted nature, most memorably with a Khmer-language performance of Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now."

Note: Bass and Sy, who is no longer with PNB, are scheduled to appear at the evening shows Friday and Saturday at the Varsity (206-781-5755 or landmarktheatres.com). Kostritzky appears in Darren Aronofsky's new film, "Black Swan," for which she coached the dancers.

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ERIN BALANO / FIRST RUN FEATURES

Sokvannara (Sy) Sar dances to a piece written and performed by Phillip Glass in "Dancing Across Borders."

MOVIE REVIEW ★★★

'Dancing Across Borders,'

documentary directed by Anne H. Bass. 88 minutes. Not rated; suitable for general audiences. In English and Khmer, with English subtitles. Varsity.