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Culture Monster

All the Arts, All the Time

Movie review: 'Dancing Across Borders,' a Cambodian ballet

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In a mere 88 minutes, “Dancing Across Borders” tells several overlapping stories engagingly. It focuses on Sokvannara (Sy) Sar, a teenager in 2000 when he was spotted by arts philanthropist and filmmaker Anne Bass doing Cambodian folk dances near the great Khmer ruins of Angkor Wat.

The documentary is in one sense a validation of Bass’ belief that Sy had the makings of a major ballet dancer — though he had never seen ballet at the time.

Drawing on home-video footage, news clips, recently shot interviews and other sources, most of the film is devoted to charting Sy’s development in Western classicism, and as we listen to Olga Kostritzky — his esteemed teacher and coach — we see deeply into the challenges that every fledgling ballet dancer must face on the road to prowess. Other major voices include Jock Soto of New York City Ballet and Peter Boal, now artistic director of Pacific Northwest Ballet in Seattle.

Abundant dance excerpts provide both entertainment and evidence of Sy's progress. But soon, as he becomes a returning hero in Cambodia and then a corps member at Pacific Northwest Ballet, the film illustrates a larger issue: the difficulties immigrants must face everywhere in holding onto their heritage while succeeding in an entirely new set of circumstances.

As we are told early on, all Cambodian art comes from a sense of the sacred — but Western art doesn't. And in millennial America, ballet as an art form is no longer connected to the culture as a whole. In a 2008 interview at the end of the film, Sy has earned a place in the professional dance world but sounds very much like a displaced person, talking uneasily about "fun" but admitting that he doesn't feel at home in either Cambodia or America.

He may not be as rudderless as some of the great ballet defectors from communism who succumbed to obsessive promiscuity (Rudolf Nureyev) or alcoholism (Alexander Godunov), but he's in the same predicament that Eliza Doolittle faced after her unlikely transformation in Shaw's "Pygmalion" (and, of course, "My Fair Lady"). "Where am I to go, what am I to do?" Eliza asked. "What's to become of me?"

In a telephone update, Bass revealed that Sy quit Pacific Northwest Ballet last November and announced that he wanted to give up dancing altogether. But after he stopped, she said, he rediscovered his love of the art and is now training and rehearsing for a new chapter in his remarkable career.

From a cute kid, he has grown into an extraordinarily handsome young man, with fine classical proportions, a secure mastery of ballet technique and a liquid quality of movement all his own. There is nothing in this film about his personal life, but we can hope that it gives him a stability hard to find in our frenetic, increasingly hyphenated society and the isolated, high-pressure realities of the ballet world.
-- Lewis Segal

"Dancing Across Borders" screens Friday through Thursday at the Landmark Nuart, 11272 Santa Monica Blvd., West L.A. (310) 281-8223. Daily at 5:10, 7:30 and 9:50 p.m. Plus Friday and Saturday matinees at 12:30 and 2:50 p.m. Filmmaker Anne Bass appears in person at the 7:30 and 9:50 p.m. Friday and Saturday shows. (Q&A after the 7:30 p.m. shows; intro only for the 9:50 p.m. shows.)
Photo: Sokvannara Sar and Philip Glass. Credit: First Run Features