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Dancing Against Odds

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*What does traditional Khmer dance and classical Western ballet have in common? If nothing else, then at least Sokvannara Sar. Words by **Nora Lindstrom**.*

FROM A KHMER DANCE school in Siem Reap, to the New York School of American Ballet and the stage of the Pacific Northwest Ballet in Seattle, Sokvannara (Sy) Sar's life has over the past decade changed dramatically. Having caught the eye of American arts patron Anne Bass on her visit to Cambodia in 2000, the then 16-year-old Sy was by all accounts too old to learn classical ballet. "It is almost impossible to begin studying ballet at that age and become a professional dancer," Anne says, though admits she did not know this when she first contacted the World Monuments Fund about sponsoring Sy's trip to the U.S.

With Anne as his patron and powered by his own determination, the talented young dancer nevertheless made it in the tough world of Western classical ballet. His difficult journey from Cambodia to the international stage has been documented in the recently released film *Dancing Across Borders*. Directed by Anne, the film has been well received at numerous film festivals last year where it featured as part of the official selection.

"I am often asked what I want people to take away from the film," Anne says. "Of course what they take away will in large part depend upon what they bring to it, but I hope that it inspires young people to persevere and believe in their dreams, that it makes the world of ballet more accessible and broadens the audience, and that it will inspire others to support talent when they see it no matter how modest or how great their resources may be."

Like any good story, Sy's is one of triumph and survival over odds. "I did not have doubts about Sy succeeding in becoming a professional ballet dancer," Anne says. Yet she admits she did not fully comprehend the challenges the youngster might face in adapting to his new life in the West.

Sy himself describes his first few years in the U.S. as lonely. "I had two schools a day, almost every day, and didn't speak English," he says. "But there were a number of things to do, especially in New York, which kept me entertained. I made some friends and got to know new places; over time, my way of getting along with the new culture and society improved."

Despite his talent, learning new ways of moving in a foreign environment was also difficult. His age and lack of ballet training meant that in order to have a chance at gaining admission to the prestigious New York School of American Ballet (SAB) he had to start by taking private lessons with Olga Kostritzky, head of the school's boys' programme, to catch up with his peers.

"Khmer dance is very different from Western classical ballet," Sy says. "It is usually slow and low to the ground. It can be difficult to learn, but it's not as demanding as Western ballet which requires young age muscle memory, flexibility, and there're lots of turning and jumping, which you don't find very much in traditional Khmer dance."

Following private tutorship, Sy was admitted to SAB where he spent five years in training. He reached the semi-finals in the esteemed International Ballet Competition in Bulgaria, and was finally asked to join the Pacific Northwest Ballet corps, where he remains to this day.

Dancing Across Borders is to a large extent made from footage that was originally shot to allow his family follow his progress in America. It also includes a visit to his family and his previous dance school in Cambodia. During this visit Sy performed at the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh.

Sy says he likes the film. "It is hard for me to describe exactly how I feel since the person on screen is myself," he says. "It just amazes me how much has changed and how fast time travels. Also, what's amazing is how Anne managed to piece everything together, things that I barely remember at all."

As Sy's friend and patron, as well as the director of the film, Anne says she felt very protective of him. "That is one reason there is very little of his life out of the ballet studio," she says. "He was generous in letting us tell his story but I felt there were limits. Several people have said they wanted to know more. Maybe that will be a sequel."



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