

CULTURE SHOCK

Dancing Across Borders follows Sokvannara Sar's incredible journey from Cambodia to the U.S.

By Heather Wisner



As a young folk dancer in his native Cambodia, Sokvannara Sar never dreamed of pursuing a professional ballet career; not long ago, in fact, he was unaware that ballet even existed. So how he got from his village to the corps of Seattle's Pacific Northwest Ballet—with an extended layover in New York City and a side trip to Varna—makes for a remarkable story. Anne Bass has captured it in her en-

gaging documentary, *Dancing Across Borders*, which came out last summer.

A bold move

The story begins in 2000, when Bass, on a visit to Cambodia, saw Sar perform with a local folk dance troupe entertaining tourists at Angkor Wat. "His performance really struck me," she says. "He was very musical, with perfect proportions, and full of joy, which

is important for a dancer. He was very charismatic onstage. He just stood out."

Sar, called Sy (pronounced "See") for short, had started dance training in fifth grade, mostly for fun, but later as a way to supplement his family's income. After his training, he moved on to the performance stage, then to the company. He enjoyed performing with his friends and making extra money for school—"a dollar or two, which would

help us with books and pencils."

Bass thought about Sar long after her trip was over; she believed he deserved greater access to dance training than he was getting. She mulled over the idea of bringing him to the United States to study at New York City's School of American Ballet (SAB), where she had served as a board member for many years. "In a way, when I look back on this, it surprises me,"

Photo by Erin Baiano

"His performance really struck me. He was very musical, with perfect proportions, and full of joy."

—Anne Bass

Bass says of her involvement. "It's not something I might usually do; it was like I was being made to do it."

Eventually, the invitation was extended to him through the World Monuments Fund, which helped

ABOVE: Sokvannara Sar demonstrates his elevation as he dances in Benjamin Millepied's *Etude No. 5*—that's the composer, Philip Glass, at the piano—at the Vail International Dance Festival in Colorado in July 2008.

Corps member Sokvannara Sar (bottom) performs with Pacific Northwest Ballet in the world premiere of Benjamin Millepied's *3 Movements*.



sponsor his dance troupe. The WMF, which helped him obtain a visa, told Sar's family that it could be a good opportunity for him and that he would be in good hands.

"I always heard a lot about America; I saw it on TV and thought it was pretty remarkable," Sar says. "When someone told me to travel

there, I didn't know what to say. I didn't think it was going to happen, but I said, 'OK, I'll go to America.' It's a big move, to go to the other side of the world."

Culture shock

Sar and his chaperone arrived in New York in May 2000. He thought he

had come just to look at SAB, but he wound up staying for the next few years, with Bass as his sponsor, making the school's dorms and studios his new home.

The situation became complicated almost immediately, as everyone recalls.

Bass had brought photos of the

16-year-old Sar to SAB's offices, but hadn't mentioned his age to Peter Boal, who was teaching men's classes at SAB. Boal says he trusted Bass' eye for dance, but after he and colleague Jock Soto gave Sar his first ballet audition, they were skeptical. The audition "wasn't a disaster," Boal says. "He was handsome and well proportioned and he had great elevation. But he was untrained, and we had the language problem. The level of a 16-year-old was just not there."

Although Sar had dance experience and knew how to charm an audience and respond to music, Boal says, launching him into a professional ballet career was "a one-in-a-million shot."

Enter Olga Kostritzky, a longtime SAB teacher who retired last summer. "When I first saw him, he was tiny, tiny, tiny. I thought he was 12," she says. Rather than giving him a ballet audition, she asked him to perform Cambodian dance. "I lift his leg, I touch his foot, and because he is a dancer, he can follow. I tell Anne, 'He has a good jump, good feet, a good plié. He is musical; he is elegant. I think in a previous life, he was a prince. He makes a statement. He has a presence.'"

A compromise was struck: Bass proposed that Sar study privately with Kostritzky over the summer, then see how he progressed.

"It was sort of like *My Fair Lady*—a good challenge for a great teacher," says Boal. "She had the time and wanted to take it on. You could see the frustration in the studio, but that's how you get where you want to go."

The sheer determination of both dancer and teacher is evident in the film, which features extensive studio footage. If nothing else, the film offers an unvarnished look at the plain hard work it takes to be a dancer. (Sar didn't speak any English when he arrived, so in addition to studying with Kostritzky, he started English classes through Berlitz.) That summer he also trained at the New York State School for the Arts in Saratoga and at the Rock School in Philadelphia.

According to Kostritzky, their early relationship had its ups and downs. "It was very difficult: He didn't speak my language, I didn't speak his language, everything that was beautiful to me was ugly to him," she says. "When you are a foreigner, you miss your parents, you miss your country, people make fun of the way you speak. I understood him, so we had a bonding experience. We were nice to each other, but it was also rough. Where he comes from, a woman

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doesn't tell a man what to do. We talk about, 'Oh, I miss the food,' but then I tell him what to do and he becomes a man! We didn't fight, but it was boot camp, for him and for me."

Everything seemed difficult to Sar at first. Turning out was a foreign concept and his teachers were frustrated when he didn't finish combinations. "Olga had to break me a little bit. She would yell at me a lot and I would get mad, so I would try to do better so I wouldn't get yelled at," he jokes. But as he improved, he became more enthusiastic about coming to the studio and trying new things. With his teacher's patience and persistence, he

began to enjoy the new dance idiom bit by bit.

"In the beginning I don't think he liked it; he just wanted to prove to himself he could do it," Kostritzky says. "But when we went to the center floor, started to jump, do some exercises, I see his interest changed. We motivated each other, actually. I was amazed at the speed he learned."

Sar especially enjoyed jumping, which he said gave him a feeling of freedom. He began to catch up with his peers. "Olga is the teacher of many professional dancers, so the fact she would spend her time with me was great. It made me work a little bit harder," he says.

The experience stretched Kostritzky as well. "Every day was an enormous amount of learning," she says. "It was the biggest, hardest, and most satisfying experience of my life. I have a lot of beautiful dancers, but when you have someone come from the other side of the world—from the moon!—you learn a lot about yourself."

Transition time

The hard work paid off. In the fall of 2000, with the approval of teachers who evaluated his progress, Sar started at SAB's Boys 3 level. By January, he had moved up to Boys 4. The next three years brought intermediate training and the year after that, advanced. The visit had turned into an extended stay.

Sar faced both physical and cultural challenges in class. "Poor Sy had some problems with leg cramps, moments where he felt like his legs would freeze," says Boal. "Sometimes he wanted to do his own interpretation of the combination, and that can be difficult. It comes through on the film—he's one of the sweetest human beings with good intentions, but he was facing strict pedagogy."

Bass and Boal noted that Sar did have some natural gifts: a big jump, musicality, stage presence, good proportions, and a very stretched Achilles tendon. ("Cambodians don't sit on chairs; they sit on their heels,"



Dancing Across Borders captures Sar in a 2006 performance of Pacific Northwest Ballet's *Nutcracker*.

Bass says.) He also possessed a strong work ethic and a fair amount of grit. When he began training, he was taking class with children half his age, as well as battling culture shock and a language barrier. Besides a rigorous dance training schedule, he had enrolled in the Professional Children's School. Boal recalls that Sar had high expectations of himself—and was often hard on himself.

"You have to study all these subjects in English, so it was hard, but there are other students there who aren't too much better than me," Sar says with a laugh. "I had some English tutor a little bit, but a lot of it was my own studying. I used my own dictionary and stuff like that. Just walking around, I heard a lot."

To combat homesickness, he spent time with SAB's director of student life, who took him out for pizza, and visited the Cambodian family of his translator, where he could relax over familiar foods and conversation. Over time, he made friends and began to have a social life. "Everyone breathed a sigh of relief" about that, Boal says. "He's very likable."

Bass says that Sar was something of a stoic, working quietly and without complaint. "The hardest thing was not the work, it was the culture," she says. "It was very isolating and lonely for him. That was the point where I said to myself, 'What have I done?' To this day, I don't know what was going on in his head. I think he didn't want to disappoint me, which was hard. We had multiple conversations—at the end of maybe four or five years, I was really sure he loved it. I wasn't sure he loved it at first, but I wonder how someone could do something so well if they didn't love it."

Bass and Kostritzky also persuaded Sar that competing at Varna might be

a good experience. At first, he balked. "I just don't like competing so much, and there wasn't time to prepare much," he says. "So we decided to go there and just have an experience. But I'm glad I went—it's a popular competition, it's a big one, and I think I'm the first Cambodian there. They flew my flag, so that was good. A lot of people would do the same thing but do it differently, so it was interesting. I learned some tricks."

Sar also managed to visit home, on one occasion performing ballet for many first-time balletgoers at the reopening of the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh. There were surprises on both sides of the curtain. "The first

time going back home—it's really different, really strange," he says. "You don't see how things change in the village when you go away so far and come back. You get shocked a little bit. I do get homesick. I just have to remind myself that I have my whole family back there."

A new life

Toward the end of his advanced classes, Sar began thinking about his next step. "I couldn't decide at the time if I wanted to stick with it or do it a little bit and go back home," he said. "But I kept doing it—nobody told me to do it. There was a little bit of pressure, but I decided if it gets too much, I'll stop. There was some pressure from my family. It's hard for someone to leave the country; people expect something. But they kept encouraging me, telling me, 'It's a good opportunity, so do what you can.'

"I did put some pressure on myself—for me to catch up, I have to do that," he continues. "At some point, I thought 'It can't be too difficult,' so I kept working myself." (In an on-camera moment many dancers will recognize, Sar's parents tell Bass that they're proud of his progress, although his father says he wishes Sar did something more stable, like taking a government job.)

Sar took as many auditions as he could, said Boal, who at that time was transitioning from teaching at SAB to becoming the artistic director of Pacific Northwest Ballet. Boal felt that Sar deserved a chance, and made personal calls to directors to plead his case.

But at 5-foot-7, Sar was not the 6-foot-tall romantic lead that many directors were looking for. So Boal invited Sar to try the PNB School for the summer. Sar liked it and was enrolled as a student; eventually, PNB became his next home. "At the end of that year, I didn't have a lot of boys, so I hired my best girl and my best boy, which was Sy," Boal says.

So pleased was Boal with Sar's progress that he offered Sar a job

with Pacific Northwest Ballet as an apprentice in 2006; he was promoted to the corps de ballet in 2007. Since then, he has danced a few featured roles—the Sword Dancer doll and Dervish in *Nutcracker*, the jester in *La Sonnambula*. He also danced a solo in Benjamin Millepied's *3 Movements*, choreographed at PNB.

Nobody is sure what the future holds. "He has challenges every day in his dancing that he knows about and is working on," Boal says. "Because of his height, it's difficult [for him] to partner a ballerina, so he's hard to cast in some roles. He'll have to see in the long run if this is the right fit for him. We usually ask if people are interested in doing choreography and he hasn't expressed that to me. He's still immersed in learning roles."

Kostritzky, who periodically speaks with Sar by phone, thinks he just needs a partner his own size. "I told him, 'Get a girl from the corps and practice the *Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux*. It would be good for both you.'" She doesn't think his stature should necessarily hinder him. "He could do the first movement from

Symphony in C, Coppélia. He could do the first pas in *Swan Lake*. He could do a lot of things," she says.

Sar plans to stick with ballet for the next five years. "I'm also looking forward to going to school and picking up something I'm interested in, so when I quit dancing maybe it will help me," he said. "I have to think what I like to do, and what is good for the long run." ♦

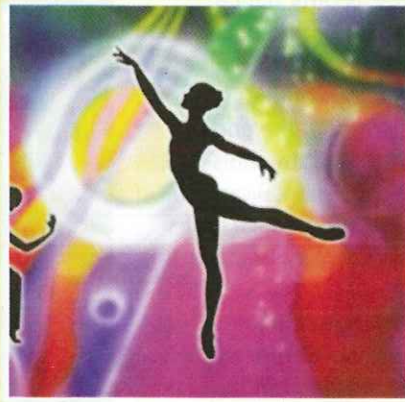
Editor's note: Just as Sokvannara Sar never set out to be a ballet dancer, Anne Bass never intended to be a documentary filmmaker. *Dancing Across Borders* began as a video record of Sar's progress to send to his parents back home, then developed into a full-length documentary. It debuted at the 2009 Seattle International Film Festival and was shown at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in August and at the San Diego Asian Film Festival in October. Theatrical release and distribution are still in the works.

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