

ARTFORUM

Moving Picture

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Anne Bass, *Dancing Across Borders*, 2009, color film, 88 minutes. Production stills. Left: Sokvannara “Sy” Sar at the International Ballet Competition in Varna. Right: Sokvannara “Sy” Sar performing at the International Ballet Competition in Varna. Photo: Stoyan Lefedzhiev

IN 2000, American dance patron and philanthropist [Anne Bass](#) spotted a Cambodian teenager perform in a classical Khmer dance recital in Angkor. Impressed by his grace and charisma, Bass spirited the kid—Sokvannara “Sy” Sar, then sixteen years old—to Manhattan to study at the School of American Ballet. Thus begins *Dancing Across Borders* (2009), Bass’s documentary about Sar’s arduous progress and uneasy assimilation into the role nominated for him: a ballet prodigy, modeled after [Rudolf Nureyev](#)’s unconventional rise. (Nureyev, too, began his ballet training in his late teens.)

Undeterred by frustrations during Sar’s first SAB audition (he is judged too old, too untutored, and too monolingual), Bass engages [Olga Kostritzky](#), the founder of the school’s boys’ division, for Sar’s private instruction. Three months later, he enrolls in the school and, after another six years, is promoted to the corps of the Pacific Northwest Ballet. In the interim, he struggles with his technique, with alienation and estrangement, and with an ambivalence toward his place in ballet—an ambivalence that is certainly his alone. He also turns out splendid performances, many of which feature in *Dancing Across Borders*—alongside interviews with such ballet notables as [Jock Soto](#) and [Peter Boal](#), and sessions documenting his dazzling apprenticeship under Kostritzky, initially intended as video reports to Sar’s parents. These videos record the maturation of an astonishing gift as well as the theft of a youth’s sense of belonging. Midfilm, we follow Sar back to Cambodia, where he performs solos from *Le Corsaire* and “Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux” before a bewildered audience that includes his parents, to whom his talent is both unmistakable and incomprehensible. At such moments, Sar seems to embody the absolute subjection required by genius—even when the genius is actuated by someone else’s conviction. Yet if *Dancing Across Borders* is Bass’s dream, it remains Sar’s extraordinary movement, grace, and leap of faith.

— [Joanna Fiduccia](#)