

Anne Bass is well known as an arts patron and socialite, but on a recent afternoon, seated beneath Picasso's *The Drawing Lesson* in the library of her palatial apartment on New York's Fifth Avenue, the petite, blond 67-year-old sounds more like a tech geek than a grande dame as she gives a reporter a tutorial in sound mixing. It's one of many new things Bass learned to do while directing her first documentary, *Dancing Across Borders*, out in February. "Getting the right balance between the front speakers and the surround was so important," she says after a maid has brought in a fine porcelain tea service. "In the end, I did two edits—one in stereo and the other in 5.1," she adds, referring to a version of surround sound.

Dancing Across Borders tells the story of Sokvannara Sar, a 16-year-old Cambodian boy whom Bass saw perform in a dance troupe while on a visit to Angkor Wat in 2000. Though Bass was not introduced to Sy, as he is known, she continued to think about his extraordinary grace—and his potentially bleak future—months after she had returned to the U.S. So she asked the World Monuments Fund, sponsor of the performance, to find Sar and convey her offer to bring him to New York, where she would underwrite his studies at the School of American Ballet.

But only after he arrived in New York, in April 2000, did Bass learn that Sar spoke no English and that SAB—on whose board she served—refused to admit him because he lacked the requisite formal training for a dancer his age. Bass arranged for intensive private lessons with longtime SAB teacher Olga Kostritzky and hired a coterie of hard-to-find Khmer-speaking translators (including a New York City police officer). That

August SAB admitted Sar, and he graduated five years later, in 2005. The following year he won an apprenticeship with Seattle's acclaimed Pacific Northwest Ballet, moving up to the corps de ballet soon after.

"It's cool," Sar says of the documentary, by phone from Seattle. "I think Anne did a great job." Bass, he adds, not only captured his life on film but helped shape it as well. Describing her as a "mother figure," he points out that "she really tried to understand where I come from and make me feel comfortable. And I was a difficult kid to handle!"

While Sar's cross-cultural odyssey was rich fodder for a movie, the project germinated slowly. For years Bass had videotaped Sar in rehearsal in order to send his parents and five siblings glimpses of his progress. The footage she later shot at a prestigious ballet competition in Varna, Bulgaria, was good enough that her companion, artist Julian Lethbridge, suggested she hire a film student to compile it. Enthusiastic reaction from friends to that compilation prompted Bass to hire a director to make a real film. That arrangement lasted "about a week," says Bass, who is known to be a perfectionist. "Finally, I thought, I have to do this myself. I'll learn on the job."

And she did. Over the next two years, Bass, accompanied by Sar, took film crews to Cambodia, Seattle and her own 1,000-acre estate in Connecticut. Watching the naturally charismatic Sar navigate these contrasting worlds makes for engrossing viewing. On a return visit to his old school, housed in a hut, he beams as he shows photos illustrating his newfound mastery, including his killer jump, to a group of children.

Recently Bass has traveled to film festivals to show *Dancing Across Borders*, which opens in New York at the Dance on Camera Festival at Lincoln Center. For Bass, long a very private person, the circuit, with its requisite Q&A panels, has been surprisingly enjoyable. "I was really nervous before the first one," she says, "but people were so enthusiastic. I had such a good time."

The film, it appears, is one of the many unexpected good turns her life has taken since the 1988 breakup of her 23-year marriage to Texas billionaire Sid Bass. Following their divorce, possibly the decade's most talked-about and expensive (she reportedly received \$200 million, plus property and art), Sid married Mercedes Kellogg; Anne has since formed a very happy relationship with Lethbridge. "I think there should be a positive side when change happens in your life," she says with quiet conviction. "I have done a lot of things that I wouldn't have done if I was with the same person."

With one film under her belt, does Bass plan to make a follow-up? "Well," she answers, "I need a vacation first."

—JAMES REGINATO

All the Right Moves

Social star-turned-filmmaker Anne Bass readies her first documentary.

Photograph by BRIGITTE SIRE

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Sokvannara Sar and Anne Bass at the San Diego Asian Film Festival