

She's a first-time filmmaker, he's a Cambodian classical dancer turned ballet star. Their story together made a movie that, indeed, involved a little bit of magic.

# Feet First

By Marilyn Bailey

**A**nne H. Bass: Philanthropist, arts patron, Texas ex-pat, style icon and now professional filmmaker. A major backer of the New York City Ballet and founder of the Texas Ballet Theater's school (back when it was Fort Worth Ballet and she was married to local billionaire Sid Bass), dance is her main love. "I've studied ballet since I was 7 or 8 years old and still take a class every day," she says, "so it's a lifelong interest."

A special ballet project has consumed her life in recent years. A young Cambodian dancer she discovered and brought to the U.S. is the subject of her documentary, *Dancing Across Borders*. A film festival fixture, it's now being released commercially across the country — a rare achievement for a documentary — and screens at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth the first weekend in April.

The film tells the story of Sokvannara Sar (he's called Sy, pronounced "see"), whom Bass first saw on a trip to Cambodia in 2000. Performing a native classical dance with a group of teens, he stood out immediately. Returning home, Bass was haunted by the memory of Sy.

"The thing that first caught my eye is that he's a performer — you're just mesmerized by his performing quality. He's very charismatic, and he was very musical."

Slowly the idea took hold of sponsoring him in the U.S. It was crazy: Sy had never even seen Western ballet, and he was already 16, considered too old for a beginner.

But against all odds, Sy would become a standout student and get hired after graduation by Pacific Northwest Ballet.

Through it all, Bass filmed his progress to send tapes back to his mother in Cambodia, and friends encouraged her to turn the footage into a real film.

*Dancing Across Borders* follows Sy's story, showing his charisma in the studio, onstage and in interviews. In a particularly moving part of the film, we see him return home and dazzle his countrymen in a nationally televised performance.

Bass appears onscreen, too, as a key component in Sy's success. This novice filmmaker led a professional crew, including a cinematographer and an editor

Photo by Brigitte Sire



Sokvannara Sar danced to the accompaniment of Philip Glass at the opening night of the 2008 Vail International Dance Festival.

Photo by Erin Baiano

who specializes in dance films. "I had very specific ideas about how I wanted the film to look." She'd seen enough documentaries that paid scant attention to aesthetics, with interview subjects sitting in poorly lit rooms "next to fake flowers."

The challenges didn't end with the filming. "When the film was finished, I didn't like my sound mix, so I did another." And, she says, "I had no postproduction plan, where you do all the color correcting. I did that all by myself, and I had to learn as I went."

Bass can (and does) talk in great detail about technical issues, sounding like a film-school graduate. "If someone had told me what I would go through, I wouldn't have attempted it. I have done nothing else for 2 1/2 years."

Sy's own story is ongoing. He resigned from Pacific Northwest Ballet last winter in a moment of self-doubt ("I think I cried nonstop for 24 hours," Bass says), but he's now rededicated to ballet and is looking for a fresh start this fall.

He's made his mark on Bass' life and on people back home. She is now vice president of the Center for Khmer Studies in Cambodia and is involved in preservation efforts there — the Khmer Rouge tried to wipe out the nation's cultural memory, and she's helping to document native dance for historical archives. She also supports a Cambodian dance school, naturally. "For \$200, you can sponsor a child at the school and save them from the fields. And they're unbelievable, these children," Bass says. Just watch Sy.

## THE DETAILS

*Dancing Across Borders*, April 2-4 at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth. Anne Bass appears at a Q&A at the 5 p.m. screening April 3. \$8.50. [www.themodern.org](http://www.themodern.org)

Sy and his mentor, Anne H. Bass

