

 PRINT

Cambodian ballet bombshell

by David Lamble

One of the first things you spot in *Dancing Across Borders*, Anne Bass' personal account of how she assisted an extraordinary Cambodian youth literally to leave the ruins of Angkor Wat and ascend to the pinnacle of the American dance world, is the luminous smile of that youth, Sokvannara Sar, known to his friends as "Sy."

"One day my teacher said, 'Sy, there's somebody who saw you during a performance who would like you to come to America.' I was like, 'It can't be that simple!' They sent some ballet videotapes. We had this crappy TV that works from time to time. I no idea what they were doing – they were wearing leotards and pointe shoes, standing on their toes. I was like, 'I don't think I like this.'"

As even those of us with the most cursory knowledge of ballet know, Western dancers following a hoary tradition developed in Russia and refined in America are recruited practically out of the cradle. By six, eight years old, 10 at the very latest, kids learn if they have what it takes. Sy was going to jump into this pond as an old man of 16. The odds against his even surviving the audition process at New York's School of American Ballet (SAB) were staggering, let alone graduating the three-year course and landing a spot in a top US company. But Sy's story enters into the realm of sheer fantasy as we watch him emerge as a star of Seattle's Pacific Northwest Ballet Company, culminating in a magical night as he debuts a solo piece, sharing the spotlight and curtain calls with composer Philip Glass.

Dancing Across Borders documents the perilous journey of a young man from a large family of rice farmers who survives the Gotham culture shock by discovering a surrogate Cambodian family a subway ride away in the Bronx. We see Sy's tirelessly learning English as well as the special language of ballet, where even a half-inch mistake with a hand movement

can be a sign that a student can't hack it. Bass gives us a lovely backstage pass, access to private rehearsal tapes and the shrewd comments of Sy's instructors who are themselves astonished that he's able to bridge the enormous gap in the traditions and techniques of Eastern and Western dance. Ultimately, it's Sy's interpersonal skills that make him not only a premier performer but a true cultural ambassador.

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