

Anne Bass places her eye for the arts behind the camera

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On a warm Friday night last November, Anne Bass stood inside the auditorium of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, greeting dozens of well-wishers. She seemed cool, reserved, maybe a little tense. Perhaps this was because of the unusual circumstance: A woman whose name is well-known in Fort Worth -- she was married to billionaire Sid Bass for 20 years, before their much publicized split in 1986 -- was returning to town under an entirely new guise. Her debut documentary, *Dancing Across Borders*, was screening as part of the Lone Star International Film Festival.

The crowd was populated with dozens of friends and family members, as well as curious filmgoers, many of whom likely didn't know what to expect. Bass, 68, is best known for her philanthropic support of organizations such as the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth and the New York City Ballet. It's her daughter, Hyatt, who is the filmmaker and artist in the family. (Hyatt's debut film, *75 Degrees in July*, premiered at the Montreal Film Festival in 2000; her first novel, *The Embers*, was published in 2009.) Was this a movie to be taken seriously -- or just the vanity project of one of the wealthiest women in America?

"I think that when friends started talking to me about it, they were surprised how much I was involved in the film," explains Bass, a few months later, calling from her apartment in New York City. "They thought I would just tell other people what I wanted them to do [in making the movie]. But I was completely involved in all aspects of it."

That intensity and passion is evident in every frame of this affecting documentary about Sokvannara "Sy" Sar, a poor Cambodian teenager who journeyed to the United States to study ballet and eventually earned a spot in the company of the Pacific Northwest Ballet in Seattle. Bass first encountered Sar during a 2000 trip to Cambodia and subsequently sponsored him to travel to the United States to study ballet; she gives us a bird's-eye view of what it means to transform a young, raw talent into a ballet dancer.

The documentary, which Bass financed, had its world premiere at the Seattle Film Festival in May 2009. It went on to secure a theatrical distributor -- something increasingly rare in the financially strapped world of independent filmmaking. It opened Friday in New York, with at least 15 more cities scheduled to follow. It returns to Fort Worth on Friday for a weekend-long engagement at the Modern. (Bass will introduce the 5 p.m. screening Saturday and conduct a question-and-answer session afterward.)

Anne Bass, it turns out, is a very real filmmaker, with a movie that a lot of people are taking very seriously. The irony, of course, is that she never intended to make a movie. She began filming Sar only after he was turned down by the School of American Ballet and began working with a coach -- and even then the videos were primarily intended as a way for Sar's mother in Cambodia to keep abreast of his progress. (He was eventually accepted at the School of American Ballet.) Her friends encouraged her to use the videos as the basis for a longer film, but Bass thought it would be a project for someone else to execute.

"I was going to co-produce it," she explains. "I had an idea of the story I wanted to tell, but I was expecting someone else to figure out how to tell it. I would give them an outline, and they would do it."

Eventually, Bass realized that she was the one who could best tell Sar's story. The woman she initially hired to direct, Catherine Tatge, became co-producer. As recently as last month, Bass was still working on the film, helping to transfer the digitally shot images to a 35mm print. ("I didn't even know what any of this stuff was a few years ago," she says.)

Dancing Across Borders is not without its moments of first-time-director awkwardness. Bass periodically appears on camera, recounting her involvement in the story -- moments that have the unavoidable effect of making you feel as if you're watching some sort of fundraising commercial for underprivileged youth. But what's remarkable about Dancing Across Borders is the vigorous attention it pays to ballet. Over the course of the picture, Bass takes us to prestigious dance competitions in Vail and she introduces us to a variety of important figures in the ballet world. Much like Robert Altman's *The Company*, this is a movie that manages to feel both insider-ish and yet completely accessible to ballet neophytes.

A curious postscript to all this: A few weeks after the film screened at the Lone Star festival last fall, Bass received a phone call from Sar, who told her that he was quitting dancing for good. "I couldn't understand what was going on," she says. "He was determined he was going to quit, and he did. I cried for several days."

As it turns out, though, Sar changed his mind. The Pacific Northwest Ballet wouldn't have him back, but, according to Bass, he's currently auditioning with a number of other companies.

Did *Dancing Across Borders* -- which shows Sar poignantly caught between two worlds, struggling to reconcile the machismo of Cambodian culture with the fussy reputation of ballet -- in any way influence his original decision to quit?

Bass doesn't think so. But like many first-time documentarians, she is discovering that turning a camera on a subject inevitably alters your relationship with the subject. "I wasn't trying to guide him." But, she acknowledges, "it's very possible."