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New film on Cambodia's most famous ballet dancer

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The American ballerina, Kristy Nilsson, once said that when it comes to dance, no translation is needed.



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That proved to be the case for one Cambodian teenager. Ten years ago the philanthropist, Anne Bass, saw Sokvannara Sar perform a traditional Khmer dance at Angkor Wat. She was so impressed that she invited him to the United States to study ballet. After years of intense training, Sokvannara, or "Sy" has risen to become one of Cambodia's most successful ballet dancers. Now a documentary about his journey is about to be released worldwide, and it's director hopes it will inspire other young dancers.

Presenter: Helene Hofman
Speakers: Anne Bass, Director and Producer; 'Dancing Across Borders'; Olga Kostritzsky, former teacher, School of American Ballet; Sokvannara "Sy" Sar, Cambodian ballet dancer

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(sound of movie trailer)

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BOAL: This was impossible. Already the cards are stacked against him. He has dance training but it's not classical ballet training . . . It really was quite remarkable. I would have said it was a one in a thousand chance that this could work and I think that we found that one.]

- September 2010
August 2010
July 2010
June 2010
May 2010
April 2010
March 2010
February 2010
January 2010
December 2009
November 2009
October 2009

HOFMAN: Peter Boal, the Artistic Director of Pacific Northwest Ballet, was sceptical when he first saw Sy Sar dance.

As he explains in the documentary, "Dancing Across Borders", Sy was already 16, and had none of the poise ballet dancers spend years cultivating.

But the world-renowned ballet teacher Olga Kostritzsky, saw potential and spent the next two years privately coaching Sy.

KOSTRITZSKY: You know when he came to the country and I first time saw him, I thought he might be 12. He was very tiny. Secondly, when I checked his extension, you know, he has the physical possibilities and thirdly, because I'm an immigrant myself, I thought he deserves a chance. And I saw the talent.

HOFMAN: Just months after beginning his training, Sy was accepted into the School of American Ballet. Five years later he joined the Pacific Northwest Ballet company in Seattle, where he has just finished his contract. A real-life Cinderella story and one Anne Bass - the philanthropist who first spotted his talent in Cambodia - wanted to tell the world. Her documentary, "Dancing Across Borders", has already been screened across the United States, where it will be released on DVD next month.

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Negotiations to have it released internationally are in the final stages. Anne Bass says she hopes it will inspire dancers but also teachers and the general public.

BASS: It isn't just a boy from one side of the world goes to another and has a great success against all odds. I mean there's that of course, but I thought the film would allow people to have a look inside the ballet world in a way that they hadn't been able to before. That it would make ballet as an art form more accessible to them. So that was one thing that I hoped to accomplish, and another was that I hoped other people who were able, no matter how great or how small their means, to help talent when they recognised it because I think that's so important and also I hoped it would serve as an inspiration for other younger people to persue their goals even though they might seem quite insurmountable at times.

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HOFMAN: "Dancing Across Borders" is also a tribute to Cambodia and its rich heritage of arts and culture. Before moving to the United States, Sy studied traditional Khmer dance at the Wat Bo School in Siem Reap. He returns to the school regularly, and believes his story encourages some of the other young dancers:

SAR: It's really up the people what they take from seeing the film or hearing about me as one of the first , if not the first Cambodian ballet dancers. So, for little kids, especcially when I go back to my old school they look at me, they really admire what I've done and they think it's a beautiful art form and even though they don't get to do ballet it inspires them to do whatever they're doing in a different

mentality. It's all up to them.

(fade out to music and cheers)

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