



Photos courtesy of Timothy Greenfield-Sanders

Dancing Across Borders

Opening April 9

By Scott Rice – SGN Contributing Writer

Dancing Across Borders chronicles the challenges, disappointments, and amazing triumphs of a 16-year-old boy from Angkor Wat, Cambodia, named Sokvannara 'Sy' Sar, and his American patron - and Dancing Across Borders director - Anne Bass.

After seeing Sy dance during a visit to Cambodia, Bass arranged for him to audition for the prestigious School of the American Ballet (SAB) in New York City. The audition turns out to be the first step in an amazing journey of self-discovery as Sy adjusts to Western culture in and out of the dance studio. Sy goes from rural Cambodia to New York City to the legendary stage of the International Ballet Competition in Varna, Bulgaria, and he does it all with a long stopover right here with Seattle's Pacific Northwest Ballet.

The film follows Sy's unusual development as a dancer and offers a remarkable behind-the-scenes look into the world of American ballet. At its heart, *Dancing Across Borders* is an extraordinary story of growth, adaptation, and belonging, as well as of the development of talent and the mastery of an art form. It's also an excellent documentary by first-time director Bass.

Dancing Across Borders opens Friday, April 9, for an exclusive engagement at Landmark's Varsity Theatre. Opening night will include special appearances by dancer Sokvannara Sar and filmmaker Anne Bass.

I got to chat with Bass on the phone from her home in Fort Worth, Texas. Her soft-spoken demeanor is anchored by a palpable but elegant tenacious streak. Neither Bass nor Sy seem the type to give up easily.

Scott Rice: I know you went to Vassar College and worked as a contributing editor for *Vogue*. You've also been heavily involved with the Fort Worth Ballet, New York City Ballet, the School of American Ballet, and the American Friends of the Paris Opera Ballet. Tell me how you came to love ballet.

Anne Bass: I began studying ballet as a child and still take a class every day. I particularly like the choreography of George Balanchine and understand how important the School of American Ballet was to him. Recently I have become interested in the work of young choreographers and particularly admire Benjamin Millepied and Christopher Wheeldon.

Rice: What's the greatest misconception that the average American has about ballet?

Bass: It seems that some Americans think that ballet is an elite and inaccessible art form. Yesterday, a fellow documentary filmmaker wrote to me after he had seen the film, "I loved every minute, and I discovered a new world - and worlds within worlds. & I know nothing about dance, and I now want to know much, much more, and to see much more. Brava!" If my film helps open the world of ballet to people and makes it more accessible to them, that will give me great satisfaction.

Rice: Obviously, your instincts about Sy were right on, but what did you see that day in Cambodia? How did you know Sy had something so special and how did you know that his talents would translate to ballet?

Bass: Sy is a natural performer. He has great charisma onstage and is very unaffected as a dancer. I thought his proportions, his musicality, and the joy he projects to an audience made him perfectly suited for ballet. It is important to know that the reason I invited him to come to the U.S. to see if he would like to study ballet is because there was not much of a future for male dancers in Cambodia. In their Khmer classical ballet, both the male and female roles are danced by women. It is Shakespeare in reverse.

Rice: Do you think Sy understood the sacrifices he would be required to make?

Bass: He was very young and, in many ways, innocent. I think he was surprised by what a challenge it was.

Rice: Did you understand the sacrifices he would have to make?

Bass: I did not realize how very different his culture was. Even though he learned English quite quickly, it was some years before he fit in. I had imagined that because there were many international students at the School of American Ballet he would share their experience in adapting well. Most of the students arrive at SAB with a ballet background, certainly everyone that was his age, so fitting in that world presented an additional challenge for him. I did not know that he was 16 and it is almost impossible to begin studying ballet at that age and become a professional dancer. As Peter Boal says in the film, "it was one chance in a thousand," and after seeing the film at the Seattle International Film Festival, he said, "I should have said one chance in a million."

Rice: One of the most powerful moments of the film for me was a bit fleeting. That's when Sy talks about not totally belonging in the Western world of ballet and yet not feeling at home when he returns to Cambodia. Do you ever have second thoughts about bringing him here and sponsoring

him?

Bass: I wanted to show in the film the ambivalence that Sy has felt from time to time, and of course I worried about him being separated from his family and trying to adapt to so many new challenges. I also constantly asked him if he was sure he was committed to ballet because if he wasn't I was now committed to helping him achieve whatever goal he set for himself [Sy was also an honors student at Professional Children's School]. He always answered that he did want to continue to study ballet and I had no choice but to believe him. But I did have doubts.

Rice: When did you decide to make the documentary?

Bass: When I started filming Sy & in his early classes, it was with the intention of making a record of his progress to send home to his parents. After Sy completed his studies at SAB, he competed in the Varna Ballet Competition where he was a semifinalist. Many friends asked to see the official footage so I asked a student filmmaker to put it together. When I saw how easy it was for him on Final Cut Pro, I said, "well, I have classroom footage and the TV footage from when he danced in Cambodia for the first time," and we put together a short film. To my surprise, my friends liked it, and they encouraged me to make a proper film. Many of them are artists and they felt it was a unique opportunity to take one inside the ballet world. I did a reality check with some dance friends and they also found the story fascinating.

Rice: The New York Times headlined its article about Dancing Across Borders with "Patron Turns Home Movies Into a Feature." Is that accurate?

Bass: There is actually very little of the "home movies" in the film, but the spirit is correct.

Rice: I think lots of people out there would like to make a movie. However, most people without experience fail. You're a first-time filmmaker - a novice, to say the least. Now that the film is finished, what was your greatest misconception about making a documentary?

Bass: I was surprised by how challenging but also

consuming and satisfying the process of editing was. My biggest surprise though was how lengthy the post-production process is. I personally underestimated how important sound mixing was, and I was not happy with the first effort. I did two more mixes - one in 5.1 [surround] and one in stereo. Then there was the process of converting from digital to 35mm film. For example, blues and whites are completely different in digital and in film, and so we did another color correction. One of the people at Technicolor said to me when I announced that I thought we were finished at last, "Films are never finished; they are abandoned."

Rice: As a magazine editor, you obviously understand the basic elements of storytelling. However, you've made a beautiful film with a nicely controlled narrative, but a narrative that could have spun wildly out of control. What piece of this story got left out of the film?

Bass: There were many stories that could have been told. When one of our editors and I were discussing how much material we had, he said, "We don't have a film; we have a mini-series."

Rice: I know Sy recently went through a stage where he questioned his will to continue dancing. Where is Sy now, professionally and emotionally?

Bass: In the late fall, Sy thought he wanted to quit dancing, and he resigned from Pacific Northwest Ballet. A long five weeks later he called and said that he thought he had been dancing for everyone but himself, his family, his country, his teachers, and of course me; and he said that he wanted to "do what he wanted to do." However, having quit dancing, he realized how much he missed it and that he had been doing what he wanted to do all along. It was a painful period for him, but I think he has learned a lot from the experience and has a strong renewed commitment to dancing. You might ask him; I don't want to speak for him. Tell a friend:

