



- Erin Baiano | Special to the Daily

West greets East

Sokvannara Sar imbues 'Solo for Sy' with his Cambodian childhood and American education

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[WREN WERTIN](#)

WREN@VAILDAILY.COM

VAIL CO COLORADO

An American woman. A Cambodian teenager. A sense of movement. An artistic obligation. These are the elements that set the stage for Sokvannara Sar's leap of faith across oceans, across cultures, across disciplines. Known as Sy (pronounced See) by most of the world, the dancer on Saturday performs a work by Jill Johnson that draws on his memories of Cambodia while ensconced in an American reality. Created in conjunction with the Fire Island Dance Festival, "A Solo for Sy" (a title the dancer doesn't approve of, instead preferring "Duality") was premiered at the New York festival last month before making its Vail debut today.

Sar is the recent subject of a documentary, "Dancing Across Borders," which chronicles his journey as a young folk dancer in Angkor Wat in Siem Reap, Cambodia, to a ballet student — and star — in New York City. The idea of a 16-year-old boarding a plane for a new life in a strange land is at once romantic and intriguing. But Sar has a different perspective.

"It's just another story," he said. "It's not more interesting than anybody else's story. It's just that mine's been recorded."

Sar frequently danced traditional folk dances in his village with a group of his peers. It was a way to have fun with his friends, as well as earn some money for school supplies. Dance patron Anne Bass saw him at one such performance in a temple in 2000. He and his dancing abilities made a strong impression on her, but she returned to New York City without meeting him. But her mind wouldn't let go of the enormous potential she recognized within him.

"Sy's dancing was alive with joy and with perfect proportions while he was entertaining the crowd at Angkor Wat," Bass told Fox News in 2010.

"She felt, in a way, obligated to give me an opportunity," Sar said. "She thought it would be a waste if I didn't study ballet, because the world would never see me. I had never heard of ballet, but America seemed like a dream. I never thought I would be here."

Bass spoke with Sar's parents, getting their permission for him to leave his home and go to America. He raced off into his dream, but was a little dismayed at what he found. Because he'd never studied ballet, he had a lot of catching up to do. Most dancers start by age 8 at the very latest. He was 16, and so he had a lot of catching up to do. For months he worked with ballet mistress Olga Kostritzky, and then he was accepted into the School of American Ballet.

"I didn't like it," Sar said about his early time in the U.S. "My body didn't like it. I didn't speak the language. I didn't like the food. I kept going to the ballet, and I fell asleep at every performance."

He struggled through his English-speaking high school, and eventually learned the language. He began to like ballet more, and he cultivated friends and peers. (He still hasn't made peace with American cuisine.) After studying at the School of American Ballet for five years, he joined Pacific Northwest Ballet in Seattle. From there he became a freelance artist. He recently joined Carolina Ballet in North Carolina as a soloist.

Choices

Last year, Sar decided to retire from the world of dance.

"I had a breaking point," he said. "It wasn't that my body was hurting, and it wasn't emotional. But I felt like there

was so much more I could in my life. And I felt like I'd never had a chance to choose this for myself. Plus, I'm the only Cambodian ballet dancer, and that's a lot of pressure.”

So he decided to quit. But it just didn't take.

“I spent so many years studying ballet already, and now I'm at the beginning of my career,” he explained. “I felt like I betrayed myself. I spent so much time, and then I dropped it. I betrayed myself and I betrayed the people who supported me. So I returned.”

But he returned with a feisty dedication to not simply study ballet, but all movement. A devotee of the martial arts, he also intends to study every type of dance available to him.

“In general, dance teaches you to know your body better,” he explained. “You don't know what your body can do until it's moving.”

And by coming back to dance, he was able to work with Johnson. The work she created for him was inspired by his own memories of home. At their first session she put on “ Passacaglia,” the violin music by Heinrich Biber used in the piece. She asked him to remember his village, and – amazingly – he did.

“I started to remember stories about being home, and it was touching,” he said. “A tear came out at the memories.”

And those memories were incorporated into the dance. Some of the movement is based in Cambodian dances, like the Monkey Dance. The second title, “Duality,” stems from the dual nature of Sar's life. When he's in Cambodia, he misses the U.S. But when he's in the U.S., he longs for Cambodia. It's almost like a flashback.

“I hear the music, it calls to me, and then I remember,” Sar said. “I'm between two things. I walk one direction, but that means walking away from the other side. It's hard to decide.”

Cambodia versus America. Dance versus any number of things. Sar has choices. And luckily for Vail audiences, one of the things he's chosen to do for the past four years is dance at the Vail International Dance Festival.

For more information about Sokvannara “Sy” Sar, visit www.dancingacrossborders.net.