

Dancing Across Borders

A new film follows the evolution of a dancer and explores the meaning behind the art in Cambodia.

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"I used to fish," says dancer Sokvannara "Sy" Sar. "To dance a dance is to fish in the rice field" in Cambodia, Sar's home country. Both fishing and dancing came naturally to Sar.

In Ann Bass's documentary, "Dancing Across Borders," she traces Sar's career as a dancer first in the Khmer tradition and later in ballet, a career that Bass fostered for several years.

Sar's life as a dancer began early, the result of unshakable determination. Although his mother refused him permission to attend dance classes, she says, "he snuck out for the dance training" at Wat Bo School, before returning home to help his mother with household work late at night.

After many years at Wat Bo, Bass asked for permission to bring Sar to the United States to study ballet, and after much soul-searching, Sar and his parents agreed.

Despite initial doubts, Sar studied at the School of American Ballet in New York for five years, and later performed with Pacific Northwest Ballet in Seattle.

In "Dancing Across Borders," Bass films Sar during a return trip to Cambodia and to Wat Bo School. "I am a bit nostalgic," Sar says, as he watches his former dance teacher lead a class.

Sar guides us through his home country and his American adventures in both English and his native language, guiding us across these national borders, as well as the boundaries of past and present, with the help of Bass's occasional commentary.

Sar recalls leaving behind his task of fishing for his parents, as well as his first ballet lessons, showing us both his talent and the lush beauty of Cambodia.

"The culture of a country is the soul of that country," says Roland Eng, former Cambodian ambassador to the United States. And Sar has shared his culture and soul with the American ballet world.

"Dancers are people, and they come from within," says Peter Boal, Artistic Director of Pacific Northwest Ballet. "Sy's face represents who he is as a dancer. It electrifies. It makes people melt. It charms."

Bass's film brings that charm to wider audiences, and most important, gives Sar the opportunity to speak in his own voice as well as through his dancing.

To have a Cambodian such as Sar perform ballet, says Fred Frumberg of Amrita Performing Arts, translates Cambodian tradition into this western dance form and "transcends the international language of performance."

"Dancing Across Borders" runs April 9-15, 2010, at Varsity Theatre, at 4329 University Way Northeast, Seattle.