

# MONKEY DANCE

## FACT SHEET

### TITLE

Monkey Dance

### FORMAT

65 minutes (theater version), 56:40 minutes (TV version)  
NTSC Digibeta or Betacam SP, English and Khmer with English subtitles

### ONE-LINE DESCRIPTION

Their parents escaped Cambodia's killing fields — now traditional dance helps three teens survive the minefields of urban America.

### SYNOPSIS

Three Cambodian-American teenagers come of age in a world shadowed by their parents' nightmares of the Khmer Rouge. Traditional Cambodian dance links them to their parents' culture, but fast cars, hip consumerism, and new romance pull harder. Gradually coming to appreciate their parents' sacrifices, the three teens find a balance between their parents' dreams and their own.

### CREDITS

Julie Mallozzi - Director/Camera/Editor  
Shondra Burke - Editing Consultant

Rebecca Sherman - Writing Consultant  
Jorrit Dijkstra - Composer

### FUNDERS & PRESENTERS

"Monkey Dance" is produced in association with the Independent Television Service, the Center for Asian American Media, and WGBH Boston with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Additional support was provided by the Sundance Institute Documentary Fund, Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities (a state program of the National Endowment for the Humanities), and LEF Moving Image Fund.

### PUBLIC TELEVISION PREMIERE STARTING MAY 2006

"Monkey Dance" is made available through American Television (APT), which for 44 years has been a prime source of programming for the nation's public television stations. APT is known for identifying innovative programs and developing creative distribution techniques for producers. For inquiries about APT, press should contact Donna Hardwick at 617-338-4455 ext. 129 or via email to [Donna\\_Hardwick@APTonline.org](mailto:Donna_Hardwick@APTonline.org), or visit [APTonline.org](http://APTonline.org).

### PRESS CONTACT

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## ABOUT THE MAKERS

### Director/Camera/Editor

Julie Mallozzi is a documentary filmmaker based in Boston, Massachusetts, who combines observational camerawork and in-depth interviews to tell strong, character-driven stories. Her films explore the interactions between cultures thrown together by history, and between politics and personal experience.

Mallozzi grew up with a Chinese-American mother and an Italian-American father in rural Ohio. Her debut film, "Once Removed," tells the story of meeting her mother's family in China and learning about their involvement in China's complicated political history. It premiered at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, won awards at several festivals, and aired on public television. "Monkey Dance" is Mallozzi's second feature film. She also freelances as a producer, cameraperson, and editor on documentaries and videos for community organizations. Mallozzi studied filmmaking at Harvard University, where she currently teaches.

### Editing Consultant

Shondra Burke's credits include main editor for Errol Morris's award-winning feature documentary, "Fast, Cheap, & Out of Control" and four episodes in his "First Person" documentary series (BRAVO). She recently completed a feature documentary directed by commercial visionary Pete Favat; "Adrift," (PBS) a personal documentary directed by Tom Curran; and "The Flute Player" (PBS) a film by Jocelyn Glatzer about a musician's return to his native Cambodia. She has edited and produced numerous spots for clients such as the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Ford, and Sony.

### Writing Consultant

Rebecca Sherman is a freelance writer and editor who studied History and Literature at Harvard University. She co-wrote Mallozzi's first film, "Once Removed," and has written for several non-profit organizations and educational institutions. Sherman's most recent publications include contributions to the reference books, "Human Rights: The Essential Reference" (Oryx Books) and "Atlas of the Baby Boom Generation: A Cultural History of Postwar America" (Macmillan).

### Composer

Dutch saxophonist and composer Jorrit Dijkstra was an active member of Amsterdam's vivid jazz and improvisation scene before moving to Boston in early 2002. Dijkstra is a recipient of the prestigious Podium Prize from the Dutch Jazz Foundation (1995), the Fulbright grant (1998), and numerous composition commissions. He has scored several documentary and educational films as well as soundtracks for theater productions in Vancouver and Boston.

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## THE FILM

Three Kids. One Dream.

*"My sister getting put in jail was really hard – people were looking down upon our family. People are just waiting for me to fail. I can't do enough to prove them wrong." – Linda*

*"It's hard to grow up in Lowell, 'cause there's a lot of gangs around... Just growing up not having much money or whatever, you have to deal with a lot." – Samnang*

*"When I started to fall apart I realized that I've got to start doing the things that I want to do to get me somewhere." – Sochenda*

The young members of the prestigious Angkor Dance Troupe are entrusted with carrying on a Cambodian dance tradition that was almost annihilated in the violence of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge regime. Yet the lure of hip consumerism and good times often pulls these Cambodian-American teens away from their parents' traditions, toward more all-American dreams – and dangers.

The documentary "Monkey Dance" follows three members of the Angkor Dance Troupe through several years of their lives, chronicling the everyday choices, dramas, and mistakes that carry them to the threshold of adulthood. Each of their stories offers a distinctive and spirited answer to the question: What does it take to make it as a child of refugees – and as a regular kid – growing up in urban America?

Their parents fled the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia in the 1970's, making their way on foot through the jungles of northern Cambodia to refugee camps on the Thai border. In the early 1980's, they emigrated to America and settled in Lowell, Massachusetts, a historic New England mill city now home to the country's second-largest Cambodian community. For these parents, America held the hope of safety, jobs, and better lives for their children. But Lowell is a tough city with its share of gangs and violence, and immigrant kids growing up there have to deal with a lot more than their parents' aspirations.

Linda, Samnang, and Sochenda know first-hand about the risks of gangs and drugs, having seen friends and older siblings make mistakes that cost their futures and even their lives. While they want to avoid the troubles faced by their peers, these kids are just as dedicated as other American teens to looking good, having fun... and breaking the rules. Shot over a period of four years, "Monkey Dance" depicts the three teens beginning to find themselves somewhere between their own hopes and disappointments, and their parents' anxieties and ideals.

**LINDA SOU** is a freewheeling 17-year-old who struggles to overcome the shame cast on her family when her older sister was imprisoned for murdering an abusive boyfriend. Linda has been dancing since age three, when her father founded the Angkor Dance Troupe to preserve Cambodian culture in America. But as time progresses, her commitment to the troupe wavers,

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and she is lured away by the excitement of fast cars and hot dates. Linda's wild ways intensify until she and a friend are injured in a serious accident. A trip to Cambodia with her family to meet her village relatives – and perform with one of Cambodia's most acclaimed dancers – brings Linda a new awareness of her parents' losses and sacrifices.

**SAMNANG HOR**, an athletic 16-year-old born in a refugee camp in Thailand, is driven to achieve to make up for his two older brothers, who dropped out of high school because of their involvement with gangs and drugs. Sam's mentors encourage him to see education as a way out of the ghetto, so he begins the bumpy path towards getting the grades and test scores that will get him into college. On the exciting day he receives his college acceptance letters, he also realizes that getting into school is only part of the challenge – finding money to pay for it may be even harder.

**SOCHENDA UCH**, a lanky, fashion-conscious 16-year-old, works a series of part-time jobs to pay for the necessities and accessories of teen life – while his mother worries that he doesn't study hard enough. Hungry to reinvent himself, Sochenda drops out of Angkor Dance Troupe and begins to perform as a backup dancer in a Cambodian-American boy band. He gradually realizes that his real dream is to study art. However, too many distractions soon take their toll: Sochenda's grades start to slide, leading him to be rejected from all the colleges he applies to. Only after another year and a half of hard work to get into art school does Sochenda begin to understand what success or failure means, both for himself and his family.

Throughout the events and dramas that mark these kids' lives, the theme of dance continually returns, both as a path toward self-mastery and as a means of self-expression. They belong to the **ANGKOR DANCE TROUPE**, a rigorous performance group preserving a world-renowned Cambodian dance tradition almost lost when 90% of its practitioners were killed by the Khmer Rouge. Sam performs the troupe's signature piece: the Monkey Dance, a traditional tale about a folk hero figure that has been electrified and transformed by Sam's addition of hip-hop choreography.

Dance – both traditional and modern – is ultimately what makes a difference for these kids. Cambodian dance provides Linda, Sam, and Sochenda with a unique connection to their parents' culture at a time when many immigrant kids reject traditional culture as irrelevant to their lives here in America. By making the dance their own, the subjects of "Monkey Dance" forge a link with the past while also finding their way in America, where creativity, self-expression, and individual achievement are critical keys to success.

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## FILMMAKER'S VIEWPOINT

This is a different film than the one I originally set out to make. In 1999, I saw an article about a traditional Cambodian dance troupe that had gotten a grant to work with Lowell Police Department and Big Brother/Big Sister to try to keep kids out of gangs using traditional culture. That intrigued me, so I called up the Angkor Dance Troupe and started getting to know them. At that time, I thought: I'm going to make a film about what it means to be a young person in this community, with everything that's going on – drugs, gangs, teen pregnancy and STDs, and all the violence that's really common in an urban setting like Lowell.

I work to capture an authentic voice in my films. I really wanted to portray what it feels like to be a teenager – not just a first-generation immigrant teenager, but any teenager. My idea was not to interview any adults – no teachers, no parents, no dance masters – just the kids. That's why I also gave the three teens each a small video camera, so they could record their own lives. I integrated what they shot into the film, and I think it brings a different kind of intimacy to the story. My intention was to make a film about growing up in America and how tough it can be to make the right choices – and how this dance troupe was lending a hand.

I started out filming a lot with the dance troupe – rehearsals, performance tours, team-building workshops. Then, I started to focus on three older kids in the troupe – Linda, Sochenda and Sam – and got interested in the rest of their lives as well. I got drawn into the stories of their part-time jobs, their succession of boyfriends and girlfriends, gymnastics and dances and high school life, the cars that they bought, fixed up – and crashed – and everything else.

I filmed for nearly four years, and as time passed, my relationship with the kids changed. I became a parent myself, and I gradually became more interested in interviewing the kids' parents. I'd known them over the years, but since I don't speak Khmer, I had never talked with them in depth, in their own language. I got a translator and we sat down and started talking about the long hours they worked in the nearby electronics factories; about their struggles as parents of American teenagers; and finally, about their experiences under the Khmer Rouge. That was, of course, a central moment in their lives – and the reason they had come to America. We talked about their lives as refugees, what they had hoped to find in America, and what they dreamed of for their children.

I was just blown away. These kids' parents had survived genocide – suffered through torture and murder and starvation. They had lost most of their families and had run through the jungles, avoided landmines, and sat festering in refugee camps for years. Then finally the U.S. accepted them and they came to this place where they had nothing. They spoke no English when they came – most could barely read or write. They knew nobody, and understood very little about American society. Most of them had lived as rice farmers before they arrived.

America wasn't where they wanted to be, but all the parents told me – every one of them – that they came because they hoped to give a better life to their children. I realized that *this* was what was at stake for Linda, Sam, and Sochenda. What made them different from teens growing up in middle-class America, or even from children of other immigrants, was what their parents had been through to give them this life.

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Their parents had ended up in Lowell, Massachusetts, a city with a lot of crime and gangs and other problems. They got low-paying factory jobs, and worked mind-numbing double shifts to provide opportunities for their children. So now their kids do have a lot of opportunities and choices – America is all about choice – but in a city like Lowell, many of those choices are dangerous ones. The older siblings of Linda, Sam, and Sochenda all went down paths that their parents aren't really proud of. Linda's sister murdered an abusive boyfriend and is serving an 18-year prison sentence. Sam's two older brothers were kicked out of high school for their involvement with gangs and drugs. Sochenda's unemployed brother was spending more time fixing up his car than looking for a job.

When I finally began editing all this material, I found myself asking: What are Linda, Sam, and Sochenda going to do with these opportunities for which their parents had sacrificed so much? Are they going to squander them the way their older siblings had, or are they going to be different? In the end, that's the heart of the story in "Monkey Dance": not just their lives as teens, right now, but what will become of their future and their parents' hopes for them?

The film comes back around to the Angkor Dance Troupe, because I think it plays a key role in helping these kids make the right choices. It links them to their parents' culture, even at time when many kids their age reject a lot of Cambodian tradition as irrelevant to their lives in America. The troupe connects them to the past, but it also gives them a way to become more successful Americans, through gaining confidence and recognition as performers.

This project got closer and closer to my heart as I got further along in the process. I shot most of the film myself as a one-person crew – riding along in speedy cars, waiting around in supermarket parking lots after hours, eating delicious homemade Cambodian food with the families. I think we related partly because of my own Asian background – though I'm such a mix myself that I'm not sure what they saw of that.

My father is Italian-American and my mother is Chinese-American. I grew up in the middle of nowhere in rural Ohio, where my family ran a roadside tourist attraction – actually a Native American historical site. I guess that made me curious about displacement, about people who find themselves for some historical or political reason in another place. My mother's family ended up in America because of the Communist-Nationalist civil war in China (the subject of my first film, "Once Removed"). I grew up feeling linked in some way to Chinese-American, Italian-American, and Native American culture. I lived for a time in Latin America, and now I'm married to a Dutchman and our daughter is growing up bilingual. So my life experiences have also drawn me to stories of cultural fusion and mixing.

In Linda, Sam, and Sochenda, I saw an amazing mix of traditional Cambodian culture, White mainstream culture, and Black hip-hop culture. Their spirited synchronization of these elements is part of what enabled these three to overcome difficult childhoods to become strong, successful adults. I would like to co-ordinate the national broadcast of "Monkey Dance" with activities among local teen support groups, violence prevention programs, cultural organizations, and youth-oriented arts and media programs. I hope that this story will inspire other young people as they make difficult choices in their lives.

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## SCREENINGS

### Festivals

**New England Film & Video Festival:** Brookline, MA, October 8, 2004

**Santa Fe International Film Festival:** Santa Fe, NM, December 1-5, 2004

**San Francisco Int'l Asian American Film Festival:** San Francisco, CA, March 10-20, 2005

*\*\* NAATA Media Fund Award \*\**

**Wisconsin Film Festival:** Madison, WI, March 31, 2005

**Chicago Asian Showcase,** Chicago, IL, March 2, 2005

**VC Filmfest:** Los Angeles, CA, April 30, 2005

**Refugee Film Festival:** Phnom Penh, Cambodia, June 23, 2005

**Asian American International Film Festival:** Manhattan & Long Island, NY, July 16, 2005

**National Association of Film and Video Media Artists:** Venice, CA, October 2005

*\*\* Insight Award \*\**

**San Diego Asian American Film Festival:** San Diego, CA, September 29 – October 6, 2005

**Northern Lights Doc Film Festival:** Newburyport, MA, September 30 – October 2, 2005

**Asian Pacific American Film Festival:** Washington, DC, October 6-15, 2005

**Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival:** Toronto, Ontario, November 25, 2005

*\*\* Audience Favorite Feature Award \*\**

**DisOrient Asian American Film Festival of Oregon:** Eugene, OR, February 18-19, 2006

**Singapore International Film Festival:** Singapore, April 13-29, 2006

**Refugee Film Festival:** Tokyo, Japan, June 20-27, 2006

### Universities and Museums

**Museum of Fine Arts:** Boston, MA, September 9, 2004

**Evos Arts Institute:** Lowell, MA, October 15, 2004

**Boston University:** Graduate School of Fine Arts, Painting Department, November 3, 2004

**Middlesex Community College:** Lowell, MA, October 29, 2004 and November 10, 2004

**North Shore Community College:** Lynn, MA, November 6, 2004

**Harvard University:** Cambridge, MA, Harvard Film Archive, March 6, 2005

**Arizona State University:** Tempe, AZ, November 18, 2004

**University of Wisconsin:** Madison, WI, Southeast Asian Studies Center, March 31, 2005

**University of Massachusetts:** Lowell, MA, with Angkor Dance Troupe, April 14, 2005

**Museum of Natural History:** New York, NY, May 7, 2005

**Western Michigan University:** Kalamazoo, MI, June 1, 2005

**Tufts University:** Somerville, MA, October 1, 2005

**Cape Cod Community College:** Barnstable, MA, October 20, 2005

**Bristol Community College:** Fall River, MA, February 21, 2006

**Boston College Law School:** Boston, MA, March 16, 2006

**Center for Southeast Asian Studies:** Berkeley, CA, April 13, 2006

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## QUOTES

"A fascinating narrative of fusion, assimilation, and renewal — the hard inevitabilities of multiculturalism."

– Marcia B. Siegel, *Boston Phoenix*

"Mallozzi's film is a truly masterful work portraying the lives of youth and families who are trying to begin new lives in a strange land while making peace with the ghosts of their past."

– David Wilcox Ed.D. Harvard Medical School Clinical Director of Adolescent Consultation Services, Middlesex Juvenile Court Clinics

"Julie Mallozzi's fantastic documentary looks at the lives of three Cambodian teenagers who live in the city.... [Her] approach flows with compassion, and you gradually grow to care about all three teenagers."

– Warren Curry, *Entertainment Insiders*

"Julie Mallozzi has made two vivid, touching documentaries about the immigrant experience.... [Monkey Dance]'s treatment of the refugee experience is enlightening."

– Ken Gewertz, *Harvard University Gazette*

"The Cambodian monkey dance celebrates a pan-Asian folk hero, part trickster, adventurer and warrior, whose mind is as agile as his body. The subjects of this documentary are equally agile in negotiating between the lures of American youth culture and the expectations of their parents who survived the Khmer Rouge atrocities of the 1970s.... Filmmaker Julie Mallozzi creates a moving portrait of these teenagers as they navigate the landscape of urban adolescence."

– Mary Carbine, *Wisconsin Film Festival*

"Mallozzi demonstrates remarkable commitment to her subjects, making for an insightful end result."

– Cheryl Eddy, *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*

"Monkey Dance is a brilliant film that brings to life so many of the important issues facing today's second generation -- children born in the US of immigrant parents. The young people in this film face the challenges of growing up both American and Cambodian. They overcome many obstacles growing up in poor neighborhoods and with little resources and they discover through dance the rich heritage of their parents' homelands. This rich and engaging film is a terrific resource for courses on immigration, ethnicity, American studies, sociology and anthropology. My students loved it!"

– Mary C. Waters, Professor of Sociology, Harvard University