

THE SUN, LOWELL, MASSACHUSETTS



stepping into

'Monkey Dance'

follows three Lowell teens as they come to grips with their old and new worlds through the Angkor Dance Troupe

By AUSTIN O'CONNOR
Sun Staff

At first, Julie Mallozzi thought she was making a movie about the Angkor Dance Troupe, the Lowell institution that teaches the city's young children of Cambodian immigrants to appreciate their heritage through traditional dance instruction and performance.

"It wasn't until about nine months into the filming that I started identifying these kids," the 34-year-old Mallozzi explains over tea at a Harvard Square coffee shop near her Cambridge home. "And then I just got more and more interested in the rest of their lives. And I saw that though the dance troupe was really cool, it wasn't in itself the story. It wasn't changing the same way that the kids were changing. They were changing incredibly."

The kids Mallozzi is talking about are Lowell natives Linda Sou, Sochenida Uch and Samnang Hor. Together, they form the heart of Mallozzi's new documentary, *Monkey Dance*, which premieres in Lowell Friday night with two showings at the Evos Arts Institute on Middle Street. The movie follows their divergent paths over five years, from high school to their attempts to go off to college.

By simply opening up her lens, Mallozzi examines the difficulties faced by the young first-generation immigrants as they struggle to adapt to a new culture without abandoning the one their parents were forced to leave behind by the murderous rampages of the Khmer Rouge.

Mallozzi showed up in Lowell in late 1999 with a grant from Boston PBS station WGBH and a camera in hand. The station was looking to beef up its coverage of local Asian-American communities, and Lowell, with its huge population of Cambodian immigrants, seemed like the perfect place to find a story.

"I wanted to do something on the relatively new immigrants," says Mallozzi, "and I thought that Lowell would be fascinating, especially with the history of immigration there."

Once here, she found the Dance Troupe, which was founded in 1986 with the dual intents of preserving traditional Cambodian culture and keeping young kids out of the street gangs that had begun proliferating in their adopted home city. Mallozzi was intrigued.

But after filming the troupe's practices and performances for nearly a year, her storytelling attention turned more toward the kids in the troupe.

Linda Sou, who was 16 when Mallozzi started her cameras rolling, remembers when the filmmaker first asked whether she'd be interested in being one of the movie's featured subjects.

"It was a little weird at first," says Linda, on the phone from the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, where she's currently a senior. "I was like, I don't know if I really want my life story out there for everyone to see."

Please see **MONKEY DANCE/22**

THE DANCERS: From left, Sochenida Uch, Linda Sou and Samnang Hor, who are the focus of Mallozzi's new documentary, *Monkey Dance*.

'Monkey Dance' follows three teens in Dance Troupe

MONKEY DANCE/ From 19

Sammang, now a junior at UMass Amherst, had similar concerns.

"It was actually a hard decision," he says. "But eventually I gave in. It was about the dance troupe, so I figured I would do whatever I could to help."

"I can't really say that I didn't like it," admits Sochenda, speaking from Massachusetts Art College in Boston, where he recently began his sophomore year. "It kind of brought a lot of attention to you, to have cameras following you in places. But I got used to it."

For nearly five years, Mallozzi visited Lowell every few weeks to check in on the three, all of whom had joined the Dance Troupe as young kids. She followed them home, to school, even on trips to Cambodia. She spoke to their parents about their dreams for their children. She gave them each their own camera and told

them to film their daily lives.

The project wasn't simple. At one point, Mallozzi and her husband moved to Amherst, but she flew back to America every two months to tape two weeks of new footage.

"It was a lot of flying back and forth," admits Mallozzi.

It was worth it. *Monkey Dance* is a moving portrait of three young kids growing up, as well as a gritty, warts-and-all look at the city they grew up in.

"It's hard growing up in Lowell because there is a lot of gangs around," Sammang says at one point during the movie, as a camera whizzes past the city's rundown triple-deckers. "Just growing up, not having much money or whatever, you have to deal with a lot."

But the city helps its kids deal with a lot, too, says Mallozzi, who was so impressed by her reception in Lowell that she's considering using the city as the backdrop for another documentary.

"I just found the people very helpful," she says. "There's incredible history, and I've gotten so much positive feedback from people there. They have so many programs to help the kids, and the dance troupe is one of those programs."

"Some people criticize the film and say that these kids are not typical, that they're exceptional. All three have gone off to college, and they're not going to college in Lowell," continues Mallozzi. "But I think the reason they're exceptional is partly because

of the dance troupe, and what it's done for them in terms of self-confidence and identity."

Mallozzi expects *Monkey Dance*, which takes its name from the troupe's signature dance, to air on WGBH early next year. A national PBS rollout should happen after that. She's also submitting it to various film festivals, and says she plans to keep in touch with the trio of kids whose lives it chronicles.

"Our lives are kind of inextricably linked now," she says with a smile.

Angkor Dance Troupe remains an influence in students' lives

For the young people profiled in Julie Mallozzi's documentary *Monkey Dance*, participation in Lowell's Angkor Dance Troupe may well be the seminal experience of their lives.

Samnang Hor, a math major at UMass Amherst who hopes to someday return to his hometown and teach at Lowell High, still treks home to Lowell most weekends to help out the troupe's young kids.

Sochenda Uch, now at the Massachusetts College of Art in

boston, says he's always available to help out with performances, though he's not as involved as he was when he was younger.

"(The troupe) made me realize what my culture really is, I guess," Sochenda says. "It brings a lot of people together. Lowell's such a big city, and it's really diverse. I think the dance troupe is an important aspect of Lowell. What they do for kids is awesome."

And then there's Linda Sou, whose father Tim is one of the group's co-founders. Many people, says Linda — now a senior

at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in North Adams — assume that one day she will take over the reins of the troupe.

And while she won't rule out that option, that's in the future. For now, she has her sights set on the Urban Leadership Program at Simmons College, where she plans to earn a master's degree before she returns to Lowell to work with local kids.

"It's a major part of my life," she says of the troupe. "I don't know if the younger kids realize

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Samnang Hor, left, at his homework; Sochenda Uch skateboarding; and Linda Sou, top, in costume with the Angkor Dance Troupe.

FILM PREVIEW

WHAT: *Monkey Dance*, a documentary about three teens involved with Lowell's Angkor Dance Troupe.

WHERE: Evos Arts, 98 Middle St., Lowell, 978-441-9906
WHEN: 7:30 and 9 p.m.
ADMISSION: \$5.

Angkor's influence

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it, but the dance troupe has brought me a long way." With the movie's completion, the dance troupe won't be the only thing that binds the three childhood friends together.

"It's just something I wanted other people to see," says Sochenda. "You have to realize that sometimes in life when things are not going well, just push yourself. Here's these three kids who did it. I wanted it to inspire others."

—AUSTIN O'CONNOR



ABOUT

JULIE MALLOZZI

Age: 34

Background: Born in Ohio. Graduated from Harvard in 1992

Family: Married.

Daughter: Maya, 7½ months

Job: Documentary filmmaker; teaching assistant at the filmmaking program at Harvard.

Previous film: *Once Removed*, a "personal political memoir" about her

mother, who came to America with her family from China in 1946 and was

forced to stay in the U.S. after the Communist Revolution in her homeland.