

# monkey dance

a film by julie mallozzi

BY TERRY HOUSE

At first glance, Linda and her friends seem to be typical urban-American teenagers. They juggle their classes at Lowell High with part-time jobs and dance practice. They flirt, listen to music, and yearn to drive. They struggle to assert their independence and individuality amidst their loyalty to family and neighborhood. However, as filmmaker Julie Mallozzi reveals in her powerful new documentary, *Monkey Dance*, the lives of these three teenagers are anything but typical. Linda Sou, Samnang Hor, and Sochenda Uch are the children of parents who fled Pol Pot's genocidal regime and sought refuge amidst Lowell's burgeoning Cambodian community. As the children of refugees, they must straddle and strive to reconcile two competing cultures – neither wholly their own.

"Having grown up Asian-American in a predominantly white, rural community, I know how it feels to be different from the culture around you," observes Mallozzi, the daughter of a Chinese mother and an Italian-American father. Indeed, in her award-winning debut film, *Once Removed*, Mallozzi – who now lives in Cambridge – tells her own family's story of involvement in China's "complicated political history."

Yet, it was through dance, rather than any shared sense of cultural connection, that Mallozzi initially met her new film's principal subjects. All three are members of the Lowell-based Angkor Dance Troupe, one of the most prestigious traditional Cambodian dance companies in the nation. The troupe's signature work is the "Monkey Dance," a traditional folktale that melds elements of the centuries-old dance form with hip-hop and break dancing. "I first found out about the Angkor Dance Troupe through an article I saw on the web about how they had gotten a grant, in partnership with Big Brother/ Big Sister of Greater Lowell and the Lowell Police Department, to involve teens in traditional Cambodian dance in an effort to keep them off the streets and out of gangs," she remembers. "I had heard about Lowell's big Cambodian community and about the challenges it faced with youth gangs, drugs, and teen pregnancy. So I called the troupe and asked if I could come observe for a while. That was back in 1999."

"For the first year or two I thought I was making a film about a Cambodian dance troupe that uses traditional culture to help teenagers become successful Americans," recalls Mallozzi. "At that time Linda, Samnang, and Sochenda were just three characters in this story of the troupe." Eventually, however, she found the three teens particularly compelling and grew increasingly interested in the rest of their lives outside of the troupe. "So, over

the course of the years of making this - it will be five years by the time I'm done - the focus of the film has become the struggle of these kids to make good on their parents' dreams for them when they fled Cambodia and came to America," Mallozzi explains.

The hour-long *Monkey Dance* covers approximately two to three years in its subjects' lives, beginning when Linda was seventeen and Samnang and Sochenda – both young men – were sixteen. It ends when they are around twenty and nineteen, respectively. "I didn't want to do the traditional 'year in the life of a teen,' ending with high school graduation," notes Mallozzi. "What interested me was their coming of age, much of which happens after they are out of high school."



*Monkey Dance* follows in the cinema verite – or "direct cinema" – tradition. "The goal," says Mallozzi, "is to capture events as they happen and find the story in real life." To achieve this, the filmmaker conducted nearly fifty one-to-two hour interviews and provided each of the three teens with video cameras to record their own "video diary" footage. Additionally, Mallozzi (and her camera) accompanied Linda's family as they returned to their homeland for the first time since fleeing over two decades before. "One thing that attracts me to stories as a filmmaker is the way that history intervenes in the lives of ordinary people," Mallozzi observes. "The Cambodia trip was an amazing experience."

Public screenings of *Monkey Dance* are planned for Lowell, Boston, and Lynn in the late fall. Hopes are high that at least one of its young stars will be on hand at several of these screenings. *Monkey Dance* is slated to run on national PBS stations sometime next year. Mallozzi's plans also include screening her documentary at film festivals and art house and university cinemas around the country. Adds Mallozzi: "I hope that the film will help young people think about some of the choices they make concerning consumer culture, dead-end jobs, cars, and education. And maybe it will inspire some kids to see the strength that their own cultural background has to offer, whatever that cultural background may be."

Public screenings of *Monkey Dance* will be held at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston from September 9–12. The Angkor Dance Troupe will perform following the September 12 showing at 3pm. The film will also show in Lowell on Friday October 15 at 7:30 and 9:30pm, Evos Arts, 98 Middle Street (\$5 admission). North Shore Community College will host a screening in the gymnasium of its Lynn campus Saturday, November 6 at 3:30pm. For further information, go to [www.monkey-dance.com](http://www.monkey-dance.com) and click "screening info."

## VINTAGE – VOGUE GIFT GALLERY & BEAD SHOPPE

37 MAIN STREET AYER,  
MA 01432  
978.772.7750

Take pleasure in the finest quality Swarovski crystal and imported glass beads. One of a kind hand made beads, semi-precious stone & vintage beads are also available.

We offer an array of sterling silver and gold filled beads & findings. For your convenience, we stock an assortment of tools and stringing material for all your beading endeavors.

### *Artisan Made:*

Discover handmade baskets, pottery, greeting cards, and exquisite jewelry all by local artisans.

### *More than Beads:*

A distinctive boutique of fine treats such as handmade soaps & sundries, Root soy candles, vintage style giftware and eclectic home décor. Also featured, are fun & unique children's giftware with a vintage flair.

### *September Workshops*

- |          |  |
|----------|--|
| Sept. 11 | Simply Stringing                         |
| Sept. 15 | Peyote Stitch Ring                       |
| Sept. 18 | Vintage Style Right Angle Weave Bracelet |
| Sept. 22 | Triple Clustre Wire Bracelet             |
| Sept. 23 | Simply Stringing Bracelet                |
| Sept. 29 | Funky Fringe Bracelet                    |
| Oct. 2   | Fantasy Weave Bracelet                   |

Please call for times & prices