

Dancing to his own tune

World-renowned dancer David Parsons, fresh from choreographing the New Year's celebration in Times Square, brings his dance company to Eugene



DANCE

By Sara Jarrett
Oregon Daily Emerald

Known for ensnaring audiences in his emotional web of delightfully quirky movement for the last 13 years, David Parsons shows no signs of slowing down.

In fact, the modern dance company that bears his name seems to be on a mission to achieve a level of success that is almost unheard of in the field.

Even if you haven't heard of Parsons, chances are you've seen his work. Most recently, he was commissioned by the Times Square Business Improvement District to choreograph New York City's 24-hour millennium celebration.

The opportunity was a choreographer's dream come true, and Parsons was up for the challenge of entertaining an estimated one billion people. He asked more than 60 dancers from around the world to join in the project and incorporated hundreds of dancers, puppets and actors to perform cultural representations of each country as they celebrated the arrival of the year 2000.

Hailed as Parsons' "most decadent bash yet," this venture may have been just what he needed to create a household name for himself. Time will tell.

Of his own work, Parsons told the New York Times last year that "it's not about getting people to love me. It's about following what I want to do."

Luckily for him, people seem to love what he wants to do, and those in Eugene get to show their appreciation Saturday night, when the Parsons Dance Company graces the stage of the Silva Concert Hall at the Hult Center for the Performing Arts. A pre-performance talk is scheduled for 7 p.m., with the main event at 8 p.m.

Also, two master classes are planned: one for the members of the community and another for students of both the University and Lane Community College's dance programs.

This level of community involvement is what sets apart the Parsons Dance Company from other dance groups. The company's mission to bring modern dance to as many people as possible has received criticism from dance highbrows, however, who believe appealing to the masses cheapens the art form.

Another group of dance enthusiasts, however, see making modern dance accessible to a wide range of people as a move in the right direction, especially if Parsons maintains that he always follows his visions and not those of his audience.

Just five days after performing

in Eugene, the company is scheduled to premiere its new work, "Images," in Irvine, Calif. Parsons collaborated with renowned photographer Howard Schatz to create "magnified black-and-white images projected behind the dancers. The audience can observe extreme closeups of a shoulder, a facial expression, a sweeping gesture or a sensuous encounter," a writer in Dance magazine observes.

This is not the first time Parsons has been influenced by the notion of capturing images through photography. "Caught," choreographed in 1982, utilized a strobe light, with the dancer seemingly suspended in the air during the entire piece. He was apparently defying gravity by walking, skipping and leaping through space without ever pushing off from the ground.

Though choreographed for himself, the 40-year-old Parsons has retired from performing his signature work.

"You find yourself using the bodies around you to do what you used to do yourself," says Parsons, quoted in Dance magazine. While 40 is an age when most other professionals might anticipate a successful peak in the years to come, a dancer's performance career begins a downward spiral.

In the height of his career, Parsons was likened to a quarterback instead of a dancer, yet he is now a business man and choreographer. His boyish good looks may be far from looking their age, but years of dancing have taken their toll.

The magnitude of success the company has achieved is another facet that makes it stand apart from competitors. In an age when dance groups struggle for funding — and are short-lived because of that — Parsons tours and performs 40 weeks out of the year.

The company operates in the black with an annual budget of \$1.3 million, with 80 percent of its revenue coming from performances and the rest made up from grants and contributions. Its repertory includes more than 50 original works, and it has toured five continents, giving more than 700 performances. Parsons also strives to feature all his dancers in almost every piece and routinely choreographs solos for them.

There is usually something for everyone in a Parsons performance. The company explores wide thematic ranges and movement motifs. Audiences are often left struggling between laughing,

crying, sitting in awesome contemplation and shaking out the uncomfortableness.

"I want audiences to understand what I'm saying and at the same time offer them something for the imagination and personal interpretation," Parson said. "I think it's very important as an artists to touch people."

His virtuosic dancers, combined with innovative artistic direction, make watching the Parsons Dance Company a truly unique experience. Novices and dance professionals alike will find something to appreciate in Saturday's performance.

The Parsons Dance Company performs at 8 p.m. in Silva Hall. Tickets are \$15 and \$20. Call 682-5000 to order tickets and for more information.



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