

Partners in life and partners in art, dancer-choreographers Daniel Kirk and Eric Skinner just celebrated their ninth anniversary—and on May 11 they'll celebrate opening night of their newest venture, *The Collection*.

Their first self-produced program of new dances, *The Collection* also refers to the performers themselves: Kirk, Skinner and guest artists Davida Haas and Elizabeth Lewis-Burden. In fact, Kirk says it may evolve into an ongoing series of performances.

Both accomplished performers with impressive credentials, the two men met during their early years together at the Oregon Ballet Theatre. After nine years with OBT, they left to pursue other projects, including opportunities to do choreography.

"We got what we wanted out of our OBT experience," Kirk said in a recent interview, adding that "the ballet has become so young."

Indeed, Kirk recalls that when he left OBT in 1996, "13 other dancers also left—the old guard—and we were all replaced with 17- and 18-year-olds." He has a good rapport with OBT Artistic Director James Canfield, however, and feels honored that he was the first dancer Canfield ever asked to return as a guest artist, which he has done several times.

Apropos of his 35th birthday on May 5, Kirk coincidentally appears in this May 5 edition of *Just Out* more or less in his birthday suit (in photos accompanying "Size Matters," which begins on Page 25). Thirty-five is an age that used to be considered old for a dancer. "Seven years ago that would have bothered me," he confides.

But as the accompanying photos attest, Skinner, who is 37, and Kirk are both aging beautifully. And despite spending his 30th birthday in traction for a spinal injury, Kirk is still going strong.

"I don't see any reason to stop anytime soon," he says, then adds: "Until people say, 'Daniel, it's time to stop.' I just hope I make good choices artistically. As you lose certain things, you gain others."

"We're joined at the hip... it's how we formed our relationship. When we're doing separate projects, it seems odd."

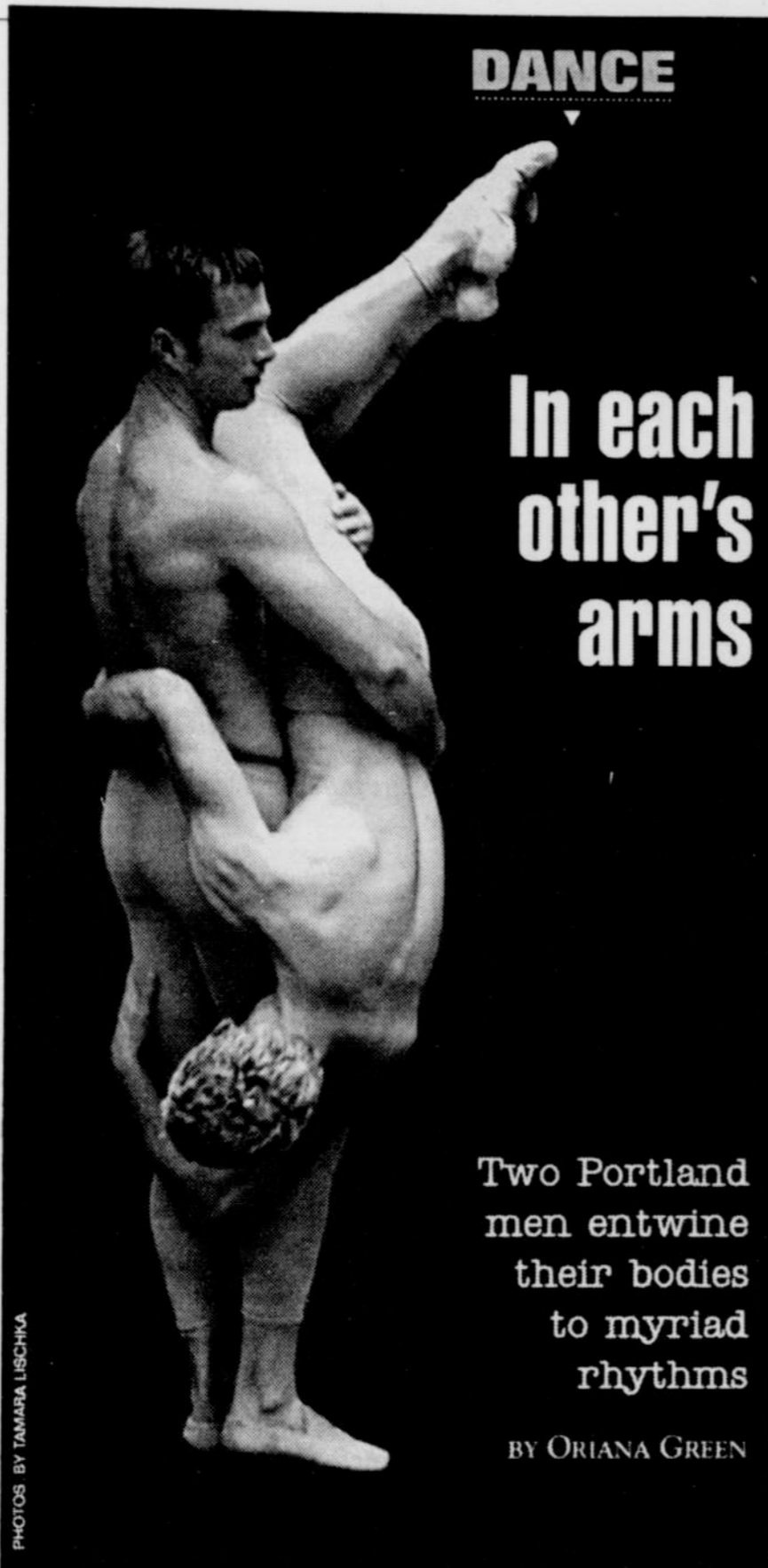
It's fascinating how one random event can alter a person's life forever. At 16, Daniel Kirk was all set to pursue a career in architecture when he attended a production of a local dance company in Laguna Beach, Calif., his hometown. "That one performance changed it all," he recalls. "I just knew that night I wanted to dance."

After a brief apprenticeship and only three years of training, Kirk was accepted into the prestigious school of the Joffrey Ballet in New York. During his four years with the Joffrey, he was sent out as a guest artist, which turned out to be a great education for his eventual life as an itinerant dancer.

Eric Skinner also took a direct route to his career, beginning in Muncie, Ind., gaining a B.A. in dance, followed by training at the Joffrey school and the Pacific Northwest Ballet in Seattle. Soon after, Skinner moved south to become a founding member of OBT.

Both men agree that working together professionally and becoming friends for a year and a half before they started dating is the secret to the health of their partnership. "There were no surprises," Kirk remembers. "I knew Eric didn't make his bed in the morning."

But it sounds like Martha Stewart could



DANCE

In each other's arms

Two Portland men entwine their bodies to myriad rhythms

BY ORIANA GREEN

drop in anytime. As the admitted neat queen of their house, Kirk says, "I can't relax if there's stuff to be done."

Adding to the joy in their home—and their only regret when they go on tour—is Jemimah, their 5-year-old Labrador.

Since leaving OBT the men have rarely worked apart, and both swear they are not competitive with each other. Occasional artistic differences are settled with clear communication skills. When it's suggested that they sound too good to be true, they agree.

"We've just always done things this way," Kirk contends. "We're joined at the hip...it's how we formed our relationship. When we're doing separate projects, it seems odd."

In addition to spending summers with the Los Angeles Chamber Ballet, the men helped birth the aero/betty dance troupe. They're also founding members of the Portland company Bodyvox and have toured with the group in Italy, Canada and all over the United States.

"It's really a full experience to work with such a mature company," Kirk says with great enthusiasm.

More recently, the duo has been dancing with the Portland Opera in productions of *Aida*, *Carmina Burana* and *The Cunning Little Vixen*.

Skinner jokes about an unusual cast member of *Aida*. "We got to spend some quality time with Tiki," he recalls, referring to the elephant that tried to steal the show.

The cast for their upcoming show, *The Collection*, is entirely two-legged—and special, because all four people have danced together for many years, starting at OBT. The six pieces in the program are all choreographed by Kirk and Skinner, some individually and others as collaborations.

Though their methods are very different,

each man has great admiration for the other's work. Kirk says Skinner as a dancer has great energy and "the most beautiful legs and feet—he's a fast mover, which is fun to see." And as a choreographer, Kirk believes Skinner has "a sense of sculpture."

Skinner admires Kirk's strength and commanding presence onstage. An added thrill is that Kirk is strong enough to lift Skinner high in the air during their duets, something most men don't get to experience in classical ballet. "It's awesome...I love being up in the air," Skinner exults.

As a choreographer, Skinner enjoys watching Kirk's creative process, which is so different from his own kinesthetic approach. "He'll hear a piece of music and see the whole dance in his head. It takes me a little longer," he says with genuine admiration.

The six pieces in *The Collection* reflect many moods, starting with "One," a trapeze duet the two men first performed with aero/betty and have since toured extensively. The piece is a tender, sensual dance set to an operatic song by Cantaloube.

"One" will be followed by Kirk and Skinner in "Pas de Deux Hommes," an excerpt from *Apollo and Hyacinth* set to an original composition by Portlander David York, which they premiered in 1998 at a benefit for Cascade AIDS Project.

"For this performance we're just doing the love scene," Kirk explains, also happy to add that there's a kiss.

Their first self produced program of new dances, The Collection also refers to the performers themselves: Kirk, Skinner and guest artists Davida Haas and Elizabeth Lewis Burden. In fact, Kirk says it may evolve into an ongoing series of performances.

Also included is a solo piece for Davida Haas that Kirk choreographed with a jazz influence. "I tend to go for more moody and melodic music, yet I try not to go there every time," he explains. "I don't want all my stuff to look the same."

Skinner then dances solo to "Feeling Good" sung by Nina Simone in a piece he choreo-

graphed himself. He also designed a duet for Kirk and Elizabeth Lewis-Burden set to the second movement of Gorecki's *Symphony No. 3*.

The finale is a piece the men choreographed together for all four dancers set to Bach's *A Musical Offering*. The dance is divided into six short sections, and Kirk and Skinner had fun matching their moves to Bach's whimsical inventions. For one part, Bach turned his score upside down and added the reversed notation as a counterpoint to his original melody. In the dance, one woman moves across the floor while another performs the reverse movements above her on a trapeze.

Kirk and Skinner are also excited about the venue for *The Collection*, the new Bodyvox Studio that they helped create on the third floor of the Bridgeport Brewery building. The eight members of Bodyvox all worked to install the complex, layered sprung floor that dancers require. It's an intimate space with seats for the 100 audience members all around the dance floor.

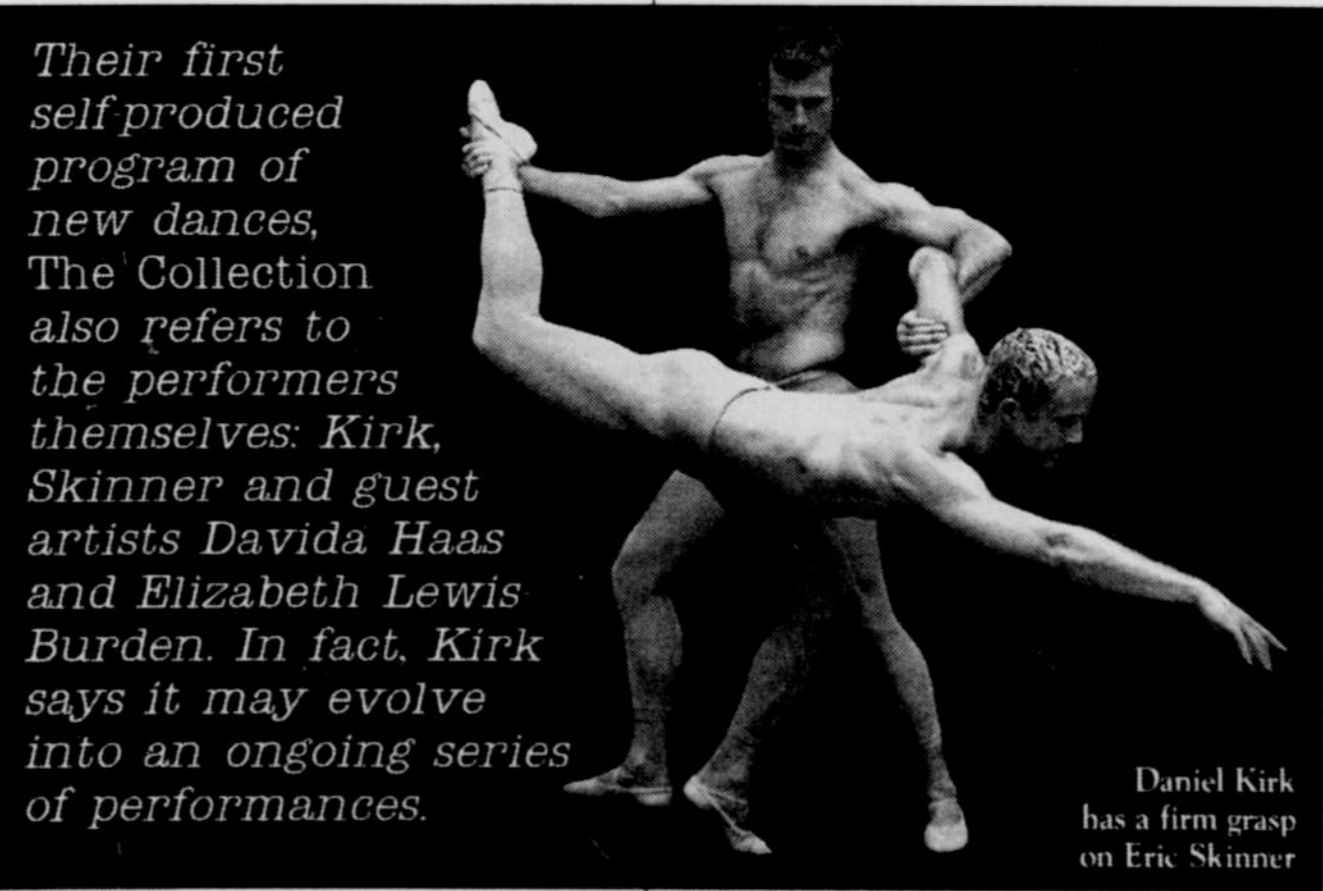
"This kind of presentation is great for us, because you feel more of the energy of the audience, and you can feed off that," Kirk enthuses.

Also devoted members of the queer community, Kirk and Skinner repeatedly volunteer their talents to good causes, especially Cascade AIDS Project.

"We love doing it," Kirk explains with a smirk. "Sometimes we give 'em the beefcake, and sometimes we give 'em good art."

And, yes, this upcoming show offers plenty of both.

■ THE COLLECTION runs May 11 to 14 at Bodyvox Studio, 1300 N.W. Northrup St. in Portland. Tickets are \$12 by reservation only from (503) 229-0627. Tickets are also on sale now for A THOUSAND LITTLE CITIES, the new Bodyvox



show at Portland State University, which plays June 8 through 18. Tickets are \$24 from Fastixx.

ORIANA GREEN used to dance all night, but now she prefers to watch. She is the Entertainment Editor for *Just Out* and can be reached at oriana@justout.com.