

Stepping out

Choreographer infuses Portland Gay Men's Chorus with fancy footwork

BY ANDY SIMON

If these nine men were standing still, you probably wouldn't take them for dancers. But they are hard at work learning a complex dance routine. Their teacher and coach is in constant motion as he explains and demonstrates the movements. He applauds energetically, jumping up and down, when they get it right. He is always upbeat, always encouraging.

"I don't want you to just throw your head back here," he addresses the group while using one man's body as a prop. "The motion starts in the foot—first your heel goes up, then your knee, then your hip, your torso, your chest, and then you throw your head up and back. It has to move through you like a wave."

The men work on the motion, a bit mechanically at first. Very quickly it becomes a smooth and sensuous undulation that fits perfectly the lyrics of the song they will be dancing to.

The dancers are members of Cascade, a song-and-dance subgroup of the Portland Gay Men's Chorus. The teacher is Paul Scardina, choreographer for the chorus for the past 10 years. They are preparing for the *Spring Fever!* concerts March 24 and 25.

The rehearsal takes place in Scardina's stunning loft apartment—dark, highly polished stonelike floors reflecting the gleaming black baby grand piano, architectural-sized planters with ceiling-high trees mounted on rollers and warm wood paneling along one side.

"I designed this space to accommodate rehearsals like this," he says as a few of the guys help him roll the large table, which is shaped vaguely like a cubist piano, back into place. The rehearsal space then reverts to the kitchen area.

When it came to designing the space, he clearly knew what he was doing. That's hardly surprising, as he is the owner of Scardina Design Studio, which he describes as "a full-service space planning and interior design practice."

A framed poster in the apartment announces a 1978 performance in San Francisco of the Paul Scardina Dance Company. Obviously, he was a professional dancer—is design a second career, then? No, he says, third is more like it. And his eyes sparkle as he says so, because the remark leads him to a story. And Scardina loves to tell stories.

A native of Youngstown, he was working on a master's in painting at Kent State University in Ohio. He sought a model to pose for his thesis project, and a young dancer answered his ad.

At the first sitting, she asked for some time to warm up before posing. He agreed, of course, and while watching her warm-up routine got the idea to try to capture some of her movements with rapid sketches.

Rendering human bodies in motion on can-

vas became the theme of Scardina's thesis project. The model invited him to her dance class so he could learn more about dance movements.

Eventually, human bodies in motion became the canvas for the project. Titled "Dance

for a Gallery Space," the work featured several dancers in nude body stockings, dancing to a recorded soundtrack while shapes were projected on them.

It was a success. He was awarded his degree and took a job at a fine arts center in Ohio.

In the meantime he continued studying dance, which he grew to love more and more. By this time he was in his 20s and realized, owing to the physical demands, he was facing a now-or-never kind of decision about whether to attempt a career in dance.

Scardina decided to give it a decade and headed out to San Francisco to seek his fortune in choreography. Once again, success stalked him. He joined an established dance company, and after several years of working for them as a choreographer and teacher, he was able to found his own company in the late 1970s.

The Paul Scardina Dance Company was critically acclaimed and its dance school was self-supporting, but by the mid-1980s—the Reagan years—arts funding had dried up significantly. His dance decade was coming to an end just as funding problems were beginning to overshadow the joy of creating and performing.

Scardina saw the need to make a change. He went back to school and earned a degree in interior design with a background in architecture.

"Design and dance are not so far apart," he observes. Both are about space and about how people move through it. It is not surprising, then, that when he describes one of his custom home projects he falls back on musical terms: rhythm, harmony, theme and variation.

Custom homes are among his favorite proj-

ects, Scardina says. He also enjoys working on retail stores and public spaces. He especially likes personalizing spaces to suit the needs of individuals.

That's not how his design career began, he notes. When he went to work as a designer in San Francisco, Scardina worked on office space, sometimes designing as much as 21 floors of office space as a single project.

"Then romance changed everything," he says. Again, his eyes sparkle, this time with a touch of sadness. We're off on another story.

Scardina had been a designer in San Francisco for eight years when he met a man from Portland. Rick Rease was also a former professional dancer. They met at a square dance convention in Arizona. Rease was ill with AIDS—Scardina knew that from the start—but that didn't stop them from falling in love.

At first they kept up a two-city relationship. But that was hard, especially on Rease, so he moved to San Francisco and the two did very well as a couple. But Rease's illness was progressing, and it became clear to both of them that he needed the support of his friends and the familiarity of his home in Portland. So, Scardina agreed to move.

Rease owned a couple of stores, which Scardina undertook to redesign. He found he enjoyed working on small-scale, people-oriented projects, and they became the focus of his design work.

Rease also insisted that Scardina go out and get involved in some social activities. Rease was getting weaker, and he wanted his partner

to have a network of friends to fall back on when he was gone. He urged Scardina to check out the Portland Gay Men's Chorus.

"He practically pushed me out the door to go to that first rehearsal," Scardina recalls. "And I've been going to rehearsals ever since."

It is obvious that participating in the chorus is one way Scardina keeps Rease's memory alive. There is more joy than pain in his reminiscence.

"The chorus was receptive to my ideas about choreography right from the start," he says enthusiastically. "And their commitment has grown."

At first he worked on adding gestures and movements to the whole chorus. The challenge, he says, is to integrate the singing and the movement. But the choreography can add a lot. He mentions a current piece, the straight love song "Let's Fall in Love": "Adding a few campy gestures gives the song a distinctly gay innuendo, and everybody has a good time with it."

A few years ago, the chorus was performing a medley of some '60s rock 'n' roll tunes. It required some dance, Scardina recalls emphatically. So, they created Locomotions, the first exclusively dance-oriented subgroup of the chorus. Locomotions is revived as needed. Scardina expects the group to be part of a commissioned piece focusing on gay seniors slated for next year.

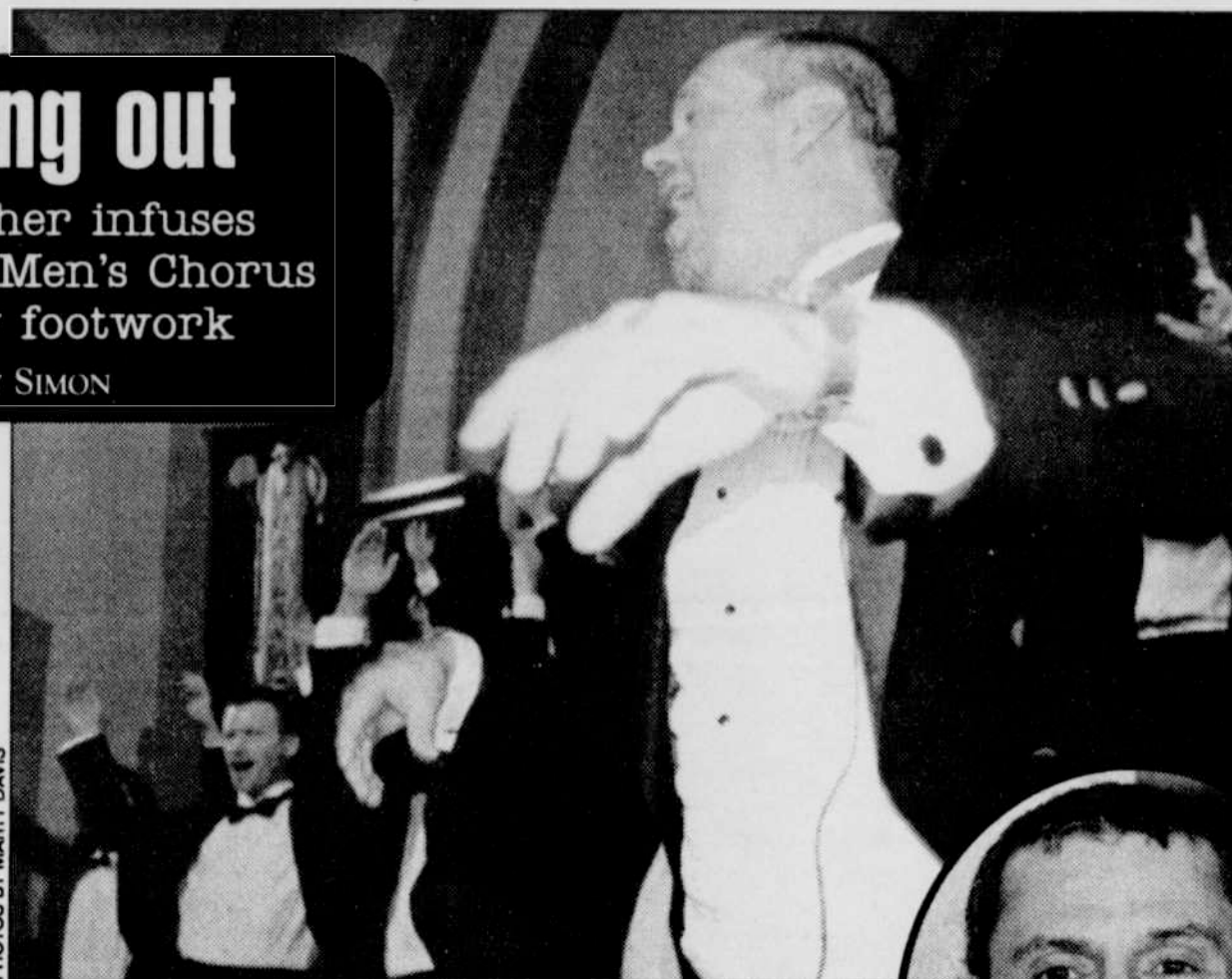
The Cascade subgroup has been around for more than 14 years. They were originally a singing group, but they, too, have been caught up in the new commitment to choreography.

Is it frustrating to a professional dancer to work with men who, far from being professionals, have no dance training at all? Not to Scardina.

"Dance isn't always about technique," he says. He finds it satisfying to work with pedestrian movements and feels challenged to push the range of ordinary movements, which he thinks can be wonderfully expressive. **JM**

The *SPRING FEVER!* concerts begin 8 p.m. March 24 and 2 p.m. March 25 at Reed College's Kaul Auditorium, 3203 S.E. Woodstock Blvd. Tickets are \$12-\$20, available through Fastixx, from any Portland Gay Men's Chorus member or at the door.

ANDY SIMON is a Portland teacher and freelance writer.



Bob Mensel is out in front of the PGMC again, and Paul Scardina (inset) has them dancing



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