

DANCE

One fellow is a pastry chef; the other is a German scholar. Together with a white cockatoo named Barney, these three have given Portland culture another feather for its cap. From a basement nest in their Southwest Portland home, Paul King and Walter Jaffe have hatched White Bird Productions.

This nonprofit organization has presented performances of nationally acclaimed dance companies in Portland since 1997. In fact, more than 8,000 people witnessed the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and its signature piece *Revelations* last February.

Yet, they insist they're just two guys and a bird.

Together for 19 years, this couple lived the quintessential New York life. In the mid-1990s, however, they decided they wanted to do something else—something together. The problem was that they weren't quite sure what they wanted to do. (Gourmet takeout was one idea.) They weren't even sure where they wanted to do it.

Until they visited Portland.

"We knew we were choosing the right place because there was a [newspaper] article about the mayor, whose chief of staff was a gay man, and they took the bus to work together!" banters King, 49.

When the pair arrived in 1996, the city's once-renowned dance scene already had lost its rhythm. Portland State University had eliminated its dance department and performance series. Along with it, Jaffe suggests, went a whole community of teachers and students. Portland artists continued to perform in somewhat of a "fragmented community," he says, but

Two guys and a bird

Shining the spotlight on Portland's dance impresarios

BY TIMOTHY KRAUSE

the city's network lacked a national connection.

Enter Jaffe and King, direct from New York with East Coast contacts and a passion for dance. Within a year, living legend Paul Taylor had convinced these two aficionados that opportunity was knocking on their door. Bring us to Portland! he suggested.

And so they did, on a Tuesday night in October 1997. Without an

office, without business cards and without experience as events promoters. Since then, these two guys and a bird often have been credited with putting Portland's dance community back on its toes.

White Bird's performance series opened its second season with 760 subscribers. In

the following year, that number more than doubled.



Paul King (left) and Walter Jaffe with their company namesake

A big, otherworldly finish

"At the end of the evening, the audience will leave with this very uplifting feeling that happens from good physical theater, drama and music. They will leave also with a secondary feeling that I have allowed them to enter into this world of spirits."

That's how Michael Curry describes the world premiere of his new creation titled *Spirits*. The unusual production will blend dance, theater, music and multimedia performance art to "transform the Keller Auditorium into a magical environment of breathtaking, otherworldly beauty."

Based in St. Helens, Curry is perhaps best known for his puppetry work for Disney's *The Lion King* on Broadway. His company produces large, live-performance-oriented designs, such as those seen at the 1996 Olympics opening ceremonies, the 2000 Super Bowl and New York City's Times Square millennium event.

Under a commission from White Bird Productions, Curry's *Spirits* will travel to Vienna in July. After a tour of the United States, the show could end up settling in Las Vegas for an extended run, its presenters say.

SPIRITS plays 7:30 p.m. June 7 to 9 at Keller Auditorium. Visit www.michaelcurrydesign.com for further information. Tickets can be purchased online or from any Fastixx outlet.



One of Curry's *Spirits*

Its current season, however, is the first to fulfill the organization's full mission. In addition to affordable ticket prices and educational outreach, White Bird has co-commissioned new works by Bill T. Jones, *The Holy Body*, Stephen Petronio and Michael Curry.

Still, success doesn't come cheap, and sold-out houses don't always pay all the bills. The reality, they say, is that it's very expensive to present dance, even with the low overhead of a home office and forgoing their own salaries. So, these two have begun to seek funding through foundation grants and private donations in order to continue their work.

"What we're doing [right now] really is a gift," says King, referring to the couple's personal contributions—financial and otherwise—to the upstart organization. "We need [our audiences] to understand that we're a not-for-profit organization and that we need contributions in order for us to continue. We made a commitment to help get this on its feet, but we cannot do it forever."

In an effort to find that solid footing, many arts organizations look for a sense of balance in their programming. White Bird, for example, presents at the Schnitz a season of more popular shows with a greater box office draw.

This in turn helps subsidize more adventurous programming at PSU's smaller Lincoln Hall. These guys intimate that the key to balance between the two lies in variety, quality and accessibility.

"We've always trusted in the artist," says Jaffe, observing that the organization's second home at PSU has been "a place where we could take a few more risks and a chance for us to round out our season."

For as much as White Bird might have been a gamble, its two leaders agree that Portland has been the perfect place to roost. "Portland audiences are incredibly savvy, sophisticated and enthusiastic," Jaffe indicates quietly but with enthusiasm. "Audiences are often savvy and sophisticated but jaded. Portland audiences, however, love the variety."

King agrees with his partner, adding, "You know that if you come to White Bird, you're going to be stimulated and it's going to be very high quality."

On the marquee this season remain Doug Varone and Dancers, April 12 to 14; Merce Cunningham Dance Company, May 2; and the world premiere of Michael Curry's *Spirits*, June 7 to 9. **J**

For all the steps to the WHITE BIRD dance, including performance schedule, ticket information and a preview of the 2001-02 season, visit www.whitebird.org or call 503-245-1600.

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