

DANCE

Long day's journey into night

Dance reflects artist's intense personal odyssey

BY FLOYD SLAVER

A lean, lonely figure writhes onstage—contorted, tortured and haunted. Two more join him, their muscular bodies expressing intense discomfort. Thus opens “The War Within,” the autobiographical signature dance piece by Portland dancer and choreographer Minh Tran.

One of four works by Tran that compose *Crossing Borders*, it will be performed Oct. 23 to 25 as the season opener for the White Bird/Portland State University Dance series.

“The War Within” is Tran’s highly personal exploration of his dangerous escape from Vietnam. “Technically, there’s nothing to it,” he says, “but choreographically it’s like going to a counseling session.”

In 1979, four years after the Communists won the Vietnam War and took over the entire country, a pubescent Tran was conscripted into the army to help overthrow the neighboring Cambodian government of Pol Pot. Before he could leave for training, however, his parents handed him a large wad of cash (“I’ve never had so much money in my life”) and told him to follow and obey his three older brothers. Then they kissed him goodbye and told him he might never see them again.

Tran bounced along dirt roads by truck, bike and bus in order to avoid detection. “You had to have a permit to go from one city to another,” he explains, “because everyone was trying to escape. We were afraid of any government officials finding us.” They made their way to a pier where they climbed aboard a rickety fishing boat to leave Vietnam.

It was the height of the “boat people” crisis, when hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese fled across the South China Sea using small wooden and unseaworthy boats. Tran and his brothers

endured a perilous voyage through scorching heat and monsoon rains. “There were 65 people on our 35-foot fishing boat,” he recalls. “We were literally shoulder to shoulder. There was no rooming room. Only 60 percent would make it alive.”

Tran’s parents were wise in telling him to stick with his brothers. “On the boat I got seasick instantly,” he says. “There was a time when I wanted to let go.”

In “The War Within,” the 5-foot-4 Tran is supported and carried by another dancer who represents his older brother. “I just wanted to go overboard. It would be much more peaceful than on the boat. [But] he wouldn’t let go.”

After four days on rough seas with no food or water, the three arrived at a U.N. refugee camp in Thailand, where they spent the next year. Tran and his brothers were sponsored by a local man to immigrate to the United States. When he heard that he was being sent to Portland, the young Tran started crying, “I don’t want to go to Portland. I want to go to the U.S.”

In Portland, Tran discovered the world of modern dance. “I couldn’t talk about [my experience] until I met dance. That’s how I was finally able to share the story. It was too close, too personal.”

It also wasn’t until he met his partner, Gary Nelson, 15 years ago that he was finally able to verbally tell the story, which fortunately ends happily with the rest of his family reuniting with him in the United States.

Tran’s work blends Eastern and Western traditions. He trained as an opera performer at the National School of Fine and Performing Arts in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) when he was a child. Vietnamese opera is very derivative of Chinese with many of the same elements, including elaborate costumes, minimal sets and a rigid structure of roles.

Opera performers must be able to sing, dance and act and are typecast into predefined roles for which they spend years training. Tran was tapped to portray female warriors and concubines.

“In the opera world,” he says, “it was a compliment that I had to take, whether I wanted it or not. I kept sneaking over to pick up a sword,

and [my master] would scold me to get over here and pick up the fans and the scarves.”

The highlight of *Crossing Borders* is the world premiere of “Nocturnal Path,” another highly personal work with slow tai chi-like movements and arresting images set to hypnotic music by Philip Glass and Dead Can Dance. Tran has been choreographing the piece for more than two years.

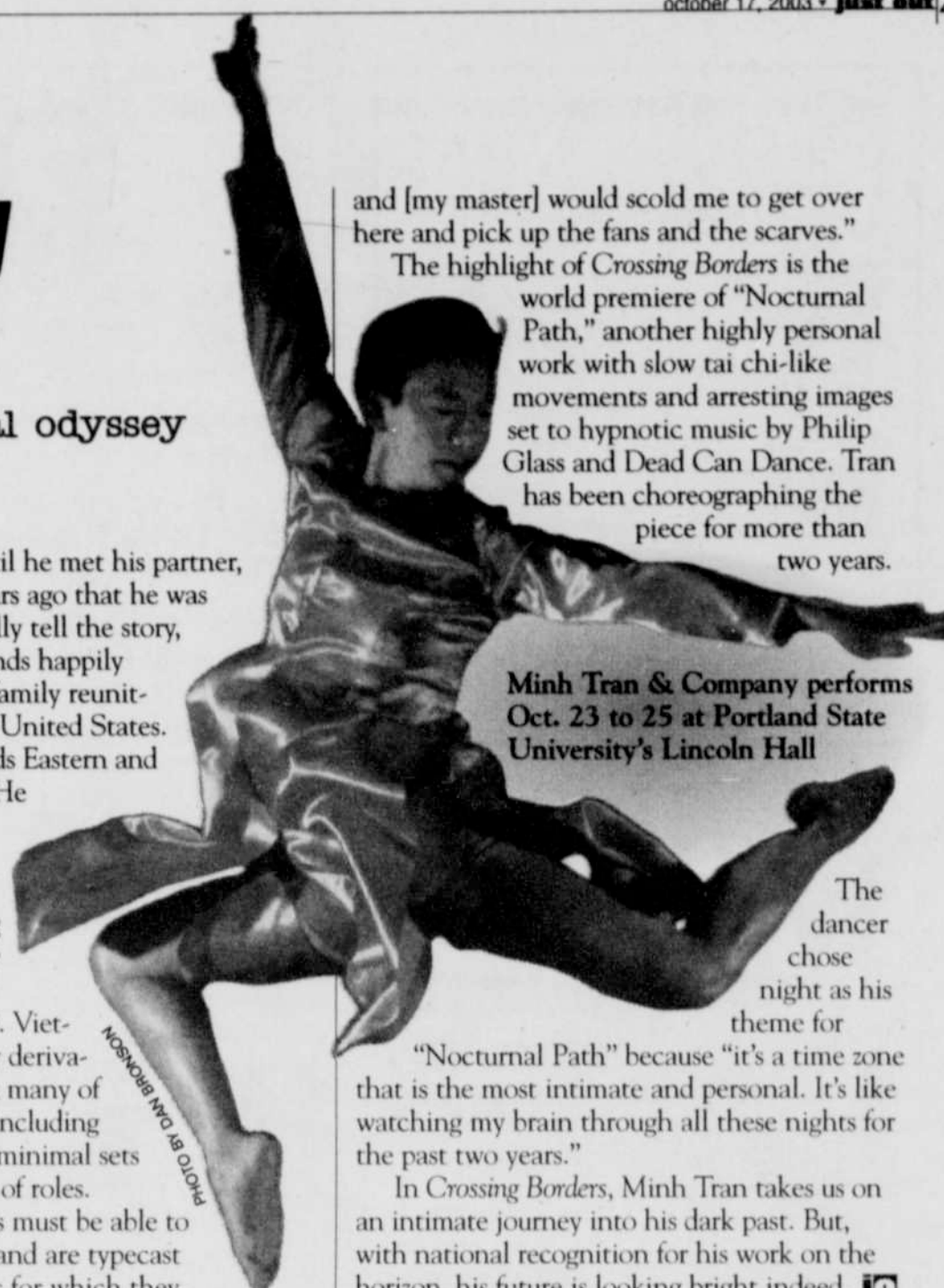
Minh Tran & Company performs Oct. 23 to 25 at Portland State University’s Lincoln Hall

The dancer chose night as his theme for

“Nocturnal Path” because “it’s a time zone that is the most intimate and personal. It’s like watching my brain through all these nights for the past two years.”

In *Crossing Borders*, Minh Tran takes us on an intimate journey into his dark past. But, with national recognition for his work on the horizon, his future is looking bright indeed. **J**

MINH TRAN & COMPANY performs 8 p.m. Oct. 23 to 25 at Portland State University’s Lincoln Hall, 1620 S.W. Park Ave. Tickets are \$12-\$24 from Ticketmaster.



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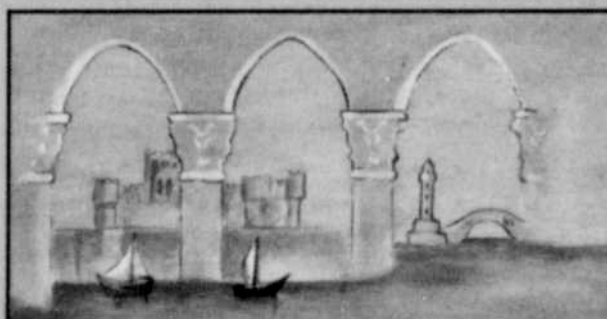
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