

DANCE

# Big ideas, small stage

Latest edition of *Ten Tiny Dances* brings together artists from Seattle and Portland

BY REBECCA RAGAIN

With his project *Ten Tiny Dances*, Portland choreographer Mike Barber instigates dance on the edge, sometimes quite literally. In his piece, "Wicked," for instance, the stage is actually tipped on end.

The uniqueness of *Ten Tiny Dances*, now in its ninth edition, is largely inspired by its set of rules: The stage spans only 4 feet by 4 feet; dancers can only leave the stage for 15 seconds at a time; and each dance must be less than 15 minutes long.

Unlike many guidelines that hamper creativity, the parameters of *Ten Tiny Dances* actually foment it.

"That sense of confinement is such a creative spark, a challenge for choreographers," says Barber, who is gay.

Each work in *Ten Tiny Dances* is choreographed by a different artist, and each choreographer finds his or her own way to stretch the small space. In "Wicked," Barber and collaborator Cydney Wilkes met that challenge by turning the stage on end. Linda Austin filled the stage with multiple dancers. Daniel Addy, Barber's partner, utilized his aerial expertise to add a vertical element to his dance.

"People have been themselves in a beautiful way, really worked through the concepts," says Barber.

In fact, Barber sees the artists' commitment to creating interesting, quality work as one of the main strengths of the project. To encourage a diverse show, he intentionally chooses choreographers with different skills and backgrounds, from Oregon Ballet Theatre artistic director Christopher Stowell to performance artist Amber Martin.

"I look for people that are experimenters, innovative," says Barber.

*Ten Tiny Dances* has been more successful than Barber ever expected when he staged the first event in 2002 as a fund-raiser at Crush. During the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's Time Based Art Festival last year, Barber estimates *Ten Tiny Dances* drew a crowd upward of 300. And in February, nearly 200 people filled Bluehour restaurant for the eighth edition.

"From the first one, I realized that this is a great idea and kept doing it, and each one kept



Mike Barber



Mike Barber and Cydney Wilkes go full tilt in *Ten Tiny Dances*.



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proving itself," says Barber.

Part of the appeal for audiences is the opportunity to view a wide range of performance all in an evening's outing. And because the pieces are short, nothing is too taxing to watch, adds Barber.

The fact that *Ten Tiny Dances* is usually held in a bar or restaurant—one chosen for its own energy and atmosphere—doesn't hurt attendance. For many, it's a more comfortable way to

enjoy dance: eat, drink and be merry while watching area dancemakers strut their stuff.

"That's one of the things that I love about the event," says Barber. "It is a party. It's cabaret-ish, because you've got food and drink, but there's also really incredible dance going on."

Barber has a lot of other dance projects on

his plate, as well. He is a member of Minh Tran & Company and is working on an evening-long performance with his own company, Wilkes.Barber/Proximity.

Still, he is constantly looking for new ways to expand the experience of *Ten Tiny Dances*.

For instance, the ninth edition is a bi-city exchange between Portland and Seattle, featuring five groups from each city. The performance will open June 19 in Seattle, with the assistance of Seattle choreographer Crispin Spaeth, then come to Portland the following week.

Through this exchange, Barber hopes to increase the visibility of *Ten Tiny Dances* and to create more connections between the two dance communities. After this, he's considering San Francisco, New York City and Boulder, Colo.

"That's the plan. I want to do other cities. I want to conquer the world," he says.

However, Portlanders are in no danger of *Ten Tiny Dances* withdrawal. Barber has secured a spot for *Ten Tiny Dances* in the Portland Building for May 2006, as part of the Regional Arts & Culture Council's Installation Art Series. He says it's the first time the space will be used for performance art.

"The next experiment with *Ten Tiny* for me is to do it for more public art," says Barber. "As successful as it is, I want to continue that, but I'm also looking for ways to keep it fresh, as well." 

TEN TINY DANCES will be performed 8 p.m. June 26 at Bernie's Southern Bistro, 2904 N.E. Alberta St. Tickets are \$15 at the door, cash only. No reservations are accepted, so early arrival is recommended.

REBECCA RAGAIN is a Portland free-lance writer who thinks that short is cool.

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