



The Long Road to Success

Minh Tran collaborates with fellow Vietnamese choreographer for cross-cultural artist residency
by Rebecca Ragain

Portland dancer and choreographer Minh Tran jokes that he owes his U.S. residency to the Vietnamese sandwich.

Actually, he says it only partially in jest.

Tran's mother did sell bread in Ho Chi Minh City. And she did send that money with Tran and his three brothers when they fled Vietnam in 1979 to avoid being drafted.

Tran was 13 at the time. But as the youngest of eight children in a close-knit family, Tran, looking back, figures he had the emotional maturity of an 8-year-old.

He admits to being spoiled when he was growing up. Although Tran's parents were originally farmers from North Vietnam, they escaped to the South when Ho Chi Minh came to power.

While living in a shack on the outskirts of Saigon, Tran's father won the lottery, literally becoming a millionaire.

The family moved into the upscale part of Saigon, which Tran compares to New York City's Fifth Avenue, and built a six-story building for their residence. His parents read Confucius to Tran and took him to see Vietnamese opera, a derivative of Chinese opera.

That was when Tran knew he wanted to be a performer.

Sitting in the audience at the opera, Tran remembers thinking, "Whatever it takes, I want to be in the limelight like that."

Though it was rare to have an artist in a Vietnamese family, Tran's family sent him to the

prestigious National School of Fine and Performing Arts, where he studied opera. He admired his sister, who was part of a dance group.

Escaping Vietnam

That all changed when Communist forces overtook the city in 1975. The new government confiscated Tran's family's house, allowing them to lease the top three floors as their residence while turning the bottom three floors into a factory producing handmade duvets. Tran's family worked there for no pay.

As the power struggle for the city took place, Tran doesn't remember being afraid. From a child's perspective, the purple streaks trailing the missiles through the sky seemed like fireworks. In fact, Tran and his siblings would climb onto the roof to watch the show. (His parents, of course, ordered them to come back down.)

"It was quite magical as a kid," he recalls.

At one point, Tran remembers joining a group in looting an American embassy. For his part, Tran looked mainly for the green tins of peanut butter he had previously seen handed out by U.S. soldiers.

After all, the Vietnamese didn't have peanut butter, says Tran, and he loved the sticky stuff.



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