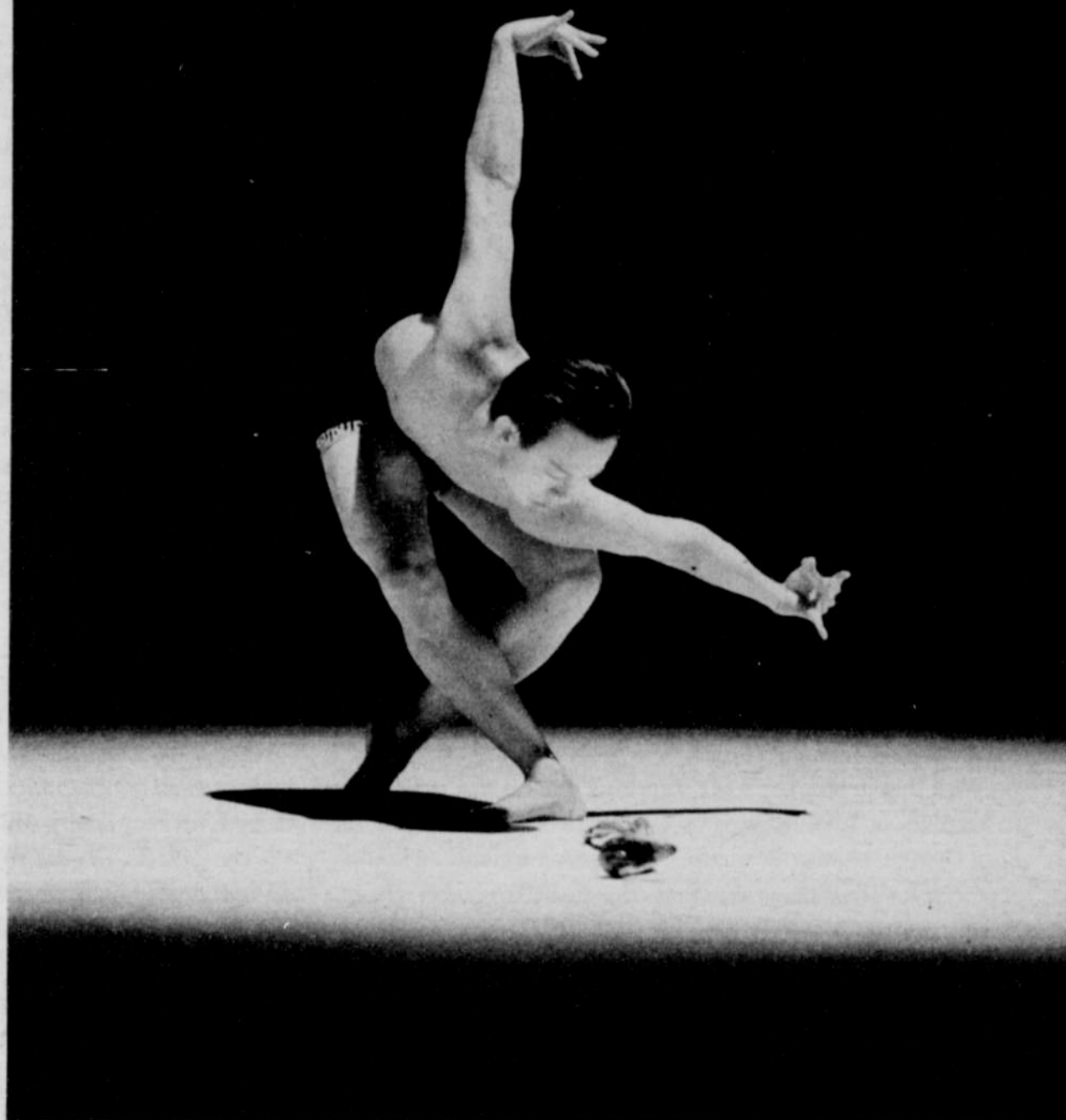


*"My work is not about entertaining.
It's about the experience I want to share
with the audience....
It's more of an interpersonal communication."*
—Minh Tran



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By 1979, the government was proposing to lower the draft age to 13, so Tran's parents decided to send their sons out of the country.

Tran didn't know about the decision until he was awakened at 4 a.m. one morning. His mother was burning his baby pictures. He and his brothers were handed three envelopes full of the money that his mother had been saving, so they could bribe their way through to refugee camps in Thailand.

They left with no luggage. The all-important contact information for their sponsors was written in their underwear in permanent ink, in anticipation of the boys losing everything but that last layer.

The brothers were on the road for three months. They bounced from town to town, waiting to meet their guides, or informers, at bus stations and train terminals, sleeping in the streets with no more shelter than a rented mosquito net. They worked on their tans so they could pass as laborers, instead of standing out as city people.

Tran barely understood what was happening. "I wasn't a street-smart person," he reflects today.

Eventually, the brothers reached a refugee camp in Thailand, about six hours from Bangkok. There, in an encampment not much larger than a football field, with only a small tarp for shelter, they waited for word from their sponsors. Approximately 74,000 people were living in the camp.

Tran spent eight months in the camp before he got on a boat bound for the United States. The 55-foot-long fishing boat had nearly 65 refugees crammed below deck with the fish.

Tran still recalls how nauseated he was by the smell of diesel emanating from the boat's engines. He was seasick from the moment he set foot on the boat till he debarked several days later.

Those days were spent with no food, no water, no chance to leave the hold—except when the boat was taken by pirates.

The first pirates to stop the fishing boat were relatively nonviolent. They took the refugees on board their own vessel and fed them. Then they stripped and searched everyone, looking for gold or U.S. currency. The Levi's jacket that Tran's brother was wearing was one of the first items to be confiscated. Tran secretly swallowed his ring to keep it from being stolen.

The second group of pirates, who found less to take from the refugees, were "not very happy," Tran recounts.

The third time the boat was boarded, there was nothing at all left to steal. So the pirates started raping the passengers.

Until that point in his life, Tran had never seen a naked human body. Surrounded by other helpless refugees, with no end to the journey in sight, Tran considered slipping off the boat into the ocean,

giving himself up to the monsoon-season swells.

"The water is just there, just inches away, all I have to do is roll over and just call it a day," he remembers. "I think this four-day ordeal will echo through the rest of my life."

A New Future

Tran arrived in Portland on Sept. 18, 1980, with two pieces of paper and the clothes on his back. He didn't speak a word of English.

When telling the story of his life, Tran skims over his high school years, mentioning little except that he spent the time struggling to come to terms with his harrowing journey to the States.

During college, however, Tran found both of the loves of his life: He gravitated to dance studies at Portland State University, and he met his husband, Gary Nelson.

Tere Mathern, a respected local choreographer and co-director of Conduit Dance, was one of Tran's first modern dance teachers. The two are still friends and colleagues today.

When Tran first became her student, Mathern recalls that he already had the poise of a performer, perhaps because of his early training in Vietnamese opera, and he quickly picked up the techniques she taught. "It was apparent that there was something special about him," she says.

Tran was invited to join The Company We Keep, PSU's professional dance company. Within the company, he danced in works choreographed by Mathern.

The two also shared the stage as dancers, finding that they had a natural affinity for each other's style and rhythm. Through the years they would explore and build on that symbiosis, as their relationship evolved from student-teacher to colleague-colleague.

In 1989 Tran graduated from PSU with a bachelor's degree in business administration/information systems and quantitative analysis and with a certificate of dance. He spent the next several years working with a variety of dance artists, including Northwest dancers such as Mary Oslund, Gregg Bielemeier, Bonnie Merrill and Mathern.

The *Oregonian* archives reveal what dance writer Barry Johnson thought about Tran's dancing: He repeatedly referred to Tran as "graceful" and "precise."

Of Tran's 1991 performance in Sue Brantley's work, Johnson wrote: "Tran displayed the suppleness and confidence that have made him the favorite of local choreographers. Tran can make almost anything look good because he has such command of such a broad range of movement."

Tran also flirted with a career in New York City, studying with choreographer Stephen Petronio.

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