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—Minh Tran



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In the end, however, 19-year-old Tran decided to stay rooted in the Pacific Northwest.

He remembers thinking to himself: "So you're going to come home: What do you want to do? You can't just be a dancer."

### *From Dancer to Dance Creator*

So Tran took the leap from dancer to choreographer, and started making dance works of his own.

Tran explains: "It forced the path that way when I came home. Had I stayed in New York, I would have had to be a dancer for probably the rest of my life. Making work in New York is just unspeakable. You don't have money to do that. That's why Portland attracts a lot of people who are choreographers, because it's feasible to make work here."

Tran's choreography was, and still is, a fusion of Asian influence and contemporary Western dance.

For instance, one of Tran's earlier works was called *Descending*. In a 1993 review, Johnson described the piece as a combination of ballet, modern dance and classical Vietnamese forms that was "alternately weightless and emotionally grounded."

Much of Tran's work packs an emotional punch, because he usually draws deeply from the well of his personal history to create his art.

"My work is not about entertaining," he says. "It's about the experience I want to share with the audience.... It's more of an interpersonal communication."

With that in mind, it is not surprising that his first return visit to Vietnam in 1994 inspired an evening-length work titled *The Road Home*. Choreographing the piece was an intensely emotional process for Tran. There were times that he had to cancel rehearsal, because "it was way too close to deal with it."

Somewhere between the initial concept and the public premiere of a work, however, Tran becomes more comfortable with the issues he touches upon in his dances: "Dance, for me, is a form of therapy." He adds: "By the time it's out in the public eye, it's become a necessity for me. My skin is pretty thick by then. I have already dealt with it in 360 degrees."

His sexuality is one issue that Tran has not yet explored through his work. Though he has been with Nelson for 19 years—in fact, their relationship was Tran's first with a man—he has yet to deal with his family's reaction to his coming out.

Tran's family, who have all immigrated to this country, disowned him for approximately six years when they found out he was gay. He doesn't completely understand their response, though he does recognize that culture plays a part, particularly within an immigrant community.

"That's another chapter I have yet to do: my coming-out chapter," Tran says. "I haven't attacked that yet. It's ripe for it, though."

### *Evolution of a Company*

In 1996 Tran moved to Seattle to pursue a master's degree in dance from University of Washington. During his time there, he twice received a fellowship from UCLA to join the Asia Pacific Performance Exchange, through which he met and worked with other artists from throughout Asia.

He founded Minh Tran & Company in 1997.

While in Seattle, Tran discovered a passion for teaching. Between 1996 and 1999, he taught several dance classes at UW.

When he returned to Portland in 1999, he continued to teach regularly at Lewis & Clark College, Reed College, Conduit Dance and other local educational venues.

In fact, one of the company's dancers, Jennifer Hong-Berdine, found Tran through his classes. In 2001 she was attending Reed and studying modern dance. She took a class from Tran and found that she liked his style.

From that point on, whenever Hong-Berdine found out that Tran was teaching a class in the community, she made a point of attending: "I'd follow him around a little bit. It was always a treat to find him."

Hong-Berdine joined Minh Tran & Company in 2002. She still loves working with Tran today and says she considers him a mentor.

When it comes to teaching, Tran prefers tenured classes, or residencies, because he enjoys watching the students as they develop: "I want to see where they begin. I want to see their journey. I want to be with them in their journey. It's much more satisfying for me."

Last year, in particular, was the year of residencies; Tran estimates he spent nearly 20 weeks on the road. He taught at University of Nevada in both Reno and Las Vegas. He choreographed a work for dancers at Western Oregon University and traveled to Anchorage, Alaska, for a one-week residency.

Tran finds teaching to be satisfying work in and of itself, but it also provides additional income, which he welcomes because his company operates "hand to mouth." In fact, to make ends meet, Tran does the accounting for his partner's business.

About teaching, Tran says: "Any money I earn goes back into the company. I take it as an honor to witness the growth of the students, and in return, I get to work with my family, which is my company."

The dancers, too, see the company as a chance to grow as performers and do not expect their work with Tran to line their pockets. They like the challenge of his work and his good-natured manner of pushing their limits as dancers.

Jae Diego, who has been with Minh Tran & Company for 10 years, points out: "In rehearsal, he's very organized. He has a clear plan of what he wants to get accomplished. So although you're not paid a ton, your time is well-spent."

All the dancers work double duty for the company. Diego, for instance, helps with public relations, and Hong-Berdine has found herself staffing the light board on occasion.

"We have our different parts that support Minh because we want the art to happen," says Hong-Berdine.

Everyone's hard work seems to be paying off. Just in the past few years, the company has been receiving recognition on the national scale, in addition to the respect they enjoy locally.

In particular, the 2003 piece *Nocturnal Path*, originally commissioned by White Bird, received financing from the Doris Duke Fund for Dance of the National Dance Project. That backing allowed the company to tour the work to Reno, Nev.; Helena, Mont.; and Chico, Calif.

"The National Dance Project grant helped push [Tran] forward and get seen outside of the Northwest community," says Diego. "It was a good launching pad."

Mathern, who choreographed one of the core pieces for *Nocturnal Path*, performed on tour with the company. Wherever they went, she felt like they were received with real excitement and interest.

Hong-Berdine agrees, "The audiences have been so warm."

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