

Building Bridges

In addition to being a teacher and artistic director of his own company, Tran has traveled regularly to the Mekong area of Southeast Asia during the past several years to conduct research on the state of performing arts in countries such as Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia.

His travels have been financed by the Mekong Project, which aims to breathe new life into the performing arts communities of impoverished Southeast Asian countries.

The needs of the artists vary by country. For instance, in Thailand, Tran helped organize a two-week conference so that native performing artists could gather, bond and build a stronger community.

In 2003 the Mekong Project sent Tran to Vietnam, accompanied by 10 U.S. dance presenters from cities such as Chicago, New York and Seattle. The delegation included Walter Jaffe from Portland's own dance presentation company, White Bird.

In Hanoi, the presenters met with Le Vu Long, a Vietnamese choreographer who wished for his company, Together Higher, to tour in the United States.

This spring, Le's dream is coming true: Beginning in late February, Le Vu Long/Together Higher will perform in Portland, Seattle and New York.

Here in Portland, the Vietnamese company will participate in White Bird's first artist residency. Their itinerary includes lecture/demonstrations at Oregon School for the Deaf (the company's dancers are hearing-impaired), Washington School for the Deaf and Portland Community College's Vietnamese school at Rock Creek.

Paul King, who founded White Bird along with Jaffe, says it would probably have been impossible to arrange the residency without Tran's help: "Minh has been gracious to act as a liaison and conduit."

Tran will accompany Le Vu Long/Together Higher to all the outreach events to facilitate the discussion portion of the visits.

King explains: "He can help give context from the point of view of the American audience. He knows the Vietnamese side and the American side. He's full of information about the way things work, so depending on which audience we're with, he can relate to and has roots within each of them."

Tran will also perform the role of facilitator during the discussion session that takes place after Le Vu Long/Together Higher's public performance March 2 and 3 at Imago Theatre. The position of liaison is a familiar one for Tran, who has sat on panels for a number of arts organizations through the years.

"With this many hats, I'm lucky I can get to sleep!" Tran jokes.

As it turns out, it's not just hats that Tran dons and doffs at will. He also has been known to put on a frock and a stage persona in honor of a good cause.

He doesn't dust off the dresses often—he stole the show during three fund-raising performances in the past two decades—but when he does, it's memorable.

His alter ego goes by the name Lady Ho, which sounds funny enough already. Throw in a little historical context, though, and it gets funnier.

Tran explains, laughing: "Ho Chi Minh never married, but if he would have married, how would they address her? Lady Ho!"

Jaffe, who attended one of the fund-raisers, described Tran's drag act as "pretty outrageous."

"He really is beautiful in drag," adds Diego. "He's a better woman than I am."

Tran remembers his time as Lady Ho fondly: "It was almost like a dream come true. I was backstage and I unzipped my dress, and here comes money oozing out."



Le Vu Long/Together Higher will participate in White Bird's first artist residency before making its West Coast debut.

Tackling History Head-On

Mathern, who has known Tran for so many years, has seen his wilder side: "He's got this crazy side that he uses a little as his public persona, but when you really talk to him, he's really solid. He's a really solid person with a lot of integrity."

That integrity is evident in his work.

Many of us stick our heads in the sand to escape the problems we see in the world, but Tran uses his art to grapple with weighty issues such as immigration, war and how people find tranquillity and meaning among it all.

His latest work, *Forgotten Memories*, which premieres in its complete form in April, is a perfect example. The piece was inspired by Tran's 2004 visit to the infamous interrogation center at Tuol Sleng in Cambodia, where the Khmer Rouge tortured and executed thousands. The choreographer created *Forgotten Memories* to deal with the emotions raised in him by the visit and to face the reminder of his own narrow escape from "re-education" camp.

By the very act of naming and examining the horrors of the past, Tran ensures that they are not truly forgotten.

He elaborates: "Instead of using my own, which I've done already, I found another war. Because it seems like we never learn from our history. It doesn't matter which war it is.... When you have war, there will be casualties, and the cost of the casualty is too much to bear. We just can't afford it anymore." 10

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Minh Tran in Action

• **Cooking with the Choreographers:** A Dinner and Cooking Demonstration Benefiting White Bird: An avid amateur chef, Minh Tran compares cooking a fine meal to creating a new dance: Both call for lengthy preparation, the right mix of ingredients and perfect timing.

Guests will be served a six-course meal of Vietnamese dishes and fine wine while they watch a cooking demonstration featuring Tran; Hanoi choreographer Le Vu Long; Le's wife, Lan; and chef Lam Van of Silk.

Tran is close friends with all three chefs, as well as with co-host Paul King, and he predicts the event will take on a bit of a party atmosphere.

6:30 p.m. Feb. 25 at Silk, 1012 N.W. Glisan St. \$125. For reservations call White Bird at 503-245-1600.

• **Le Vu Long/Together Higher perform *Stories of Us*:** Tran will join Vietnamese choreographer Le Vu Long in a post-performance discussion of the work.

8 p.m. March 2 and 3 at Imago Theatre, 17 S.E. Eighth Ave. \$15. Information available at www.whitebird.org.

• **Dance Uncovered:** Minh Tran & Company is the featured artist next month at Dance Uncovered, Conduit's ongoing open rehearsal series in which choreographers share their work with the public in an informal format.

1 p.m. March 17 at Conduit Dance, 918 S.W. Yamhill St. #401. Free. Visit www.conduit-pdx.org for details.

• **Minh Tran & Company performs *Forgotten Memories*:** The dancers present the completed rendition of Tran's newest work, *Forgotten Memories*, a haunting piece based on his visit to a Khmer Rouge interrogation center in Cambodia.

The audience can expect an active, participatory experience, similar to what one might experience in an interactive museum installation.

April 6 and 7 at Wonder Ballroom, 128 N.E. Russell St. Details will be available at www.wonderballroom.com.



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