



CULTURE CLUB

FLYING HIGH

Franco Nieto's life sounds a bit like the premise for a novel or movie. Start with a high school football jock (whose dad is the coach). Add a required dance class in his school. Then, at sixteen years old, the jock decides to become a professional dancer. Parents disappointed? No. In fact Dad signed off, "I don't care what you do. But you have to give it 110 percent. If you don't give it your all, it's not worth doing."

A novice dancer at sixteen has, by most practical standards, discovered his passion too late. Fortunately, Nieto was blessed with an athletic family (his parents met playing professional racquetball). He began gymnastics at age five. The discipline he learned in sports and at home paid off. There was one particularly good male dancer in the classes he enrolled in whom Nieto used as his guide, "I wasn't doing well enough unless it was as good as him."

Nine years later: Nieto has danced professionally around the country, returning only this past year to Northwest Dance Project. It's home in many ways. Vancouver, WA is his hometown. And he considers the company a family of sorts, "Since I was young and playing sports, I've always enjoyed a team atmosphere. I think about that here, it's a team, a family."

The tight knit NWDP family consists of eight full time dancers, artistic director Sarah Slipper, executive director Scott Lewis, plus a few others who man the office. Ms. Slipper chooses each dancer based on the quality of their individual movement and the energy they bring to the ensemble. Athleticism is part of Nieto's appeal. "He's so manly," notes Slipper, "he's like a panther onstage and, for such a muscular dancer, he is so supple."

Exposure to the wider world has expanded Nieto's general attitude toward others. He's less conservative than the household he grew up in and now considers himself an ally of the LGBT community. "I live in the basement of my earliest mentor, Tracy Durbin. She's like my liberal mom," says Nieto, "between her and Mom I have a balance that I really like." ■