

# dancing across borders

PROFESSOR MINH TRAN BRINGS NEW RHYTHM TO DANCE DEPARTMENT *By Claire Sykes*

**t**HE BEAT OF A CONGA DRUM throws the velvety tones of a contrabass throughout the dance studio. Nine dancers dart, leap and glide in unison to the live music, eyes fixed on their own reflections in the large mirrors. Minh Tran faces his students, watching for a certain line of the hip, a curve of the hand. He walks over to adjust someone's pose, and even then he seems to be dancing. Sweat glints off his concise, muscular form as he demonstrates another move. The class imitates the phrase, and Tran shouts out an exuberant "Yes!"

"Minh is incredible," says political science major Avery Ucker '09. "He's kicking our butts, but bringing a lot of joy to it, so I don't hold it against him."

While his students are pushing their limits, Tran is shifting the rhythm of Reed's dance department, in his role as visiting assistant professor. For more than two decades, as performer, choreographer, and teacher, Tran has been crossing—and blurring—borders, merging traditional Southeast Asian dance techniques with contemporary Western expressions, and captivating audiences in Portland and beyond. Along the way, the national-award winner has caught the attention of critics and peers who applaud him as one of the most impressive modern dancers in the contemporary scene.

He has taught at Reed since September 2008, thanks to a \$1.5 million grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and nearly \$4.5 million in gifts from alumni and friends to expand and support faculty in theatre, music and dance departments.



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Dance has been an integral part of Reed since 1958, when the world-renowned Trisha Brown taught the college's first courses in modern dance. The arrival of Judy Masee, who served as director from 1968 to 1998, heralded a new era for the discipline at Reed. "She's the one who really built the department that we have now," says dance professor and current director Patricia Wong, who was hired in 1975 and is retiring this summer. She and Carla Mann '81, visiting professor since 1995, are thrilled that Tran has joined the department.

"Minh is deeply gracious, intelligent, compassionate—and human," says Mann, who was recently appointed associate professor. "And those are people who make magical teachers,

because not only do students respond to them, but they respond to students . . . He has a broader vision of what they might need, and figuring out how to provide that to them. He has that capacity to really see students within the bigger picture of their lives."

Maybe that's because Tran has taken a close look at his own life. The last of eight children, he was born in 1966 to peasant parents who fled North Vietnam for the outskirts of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City). By age 4, "rich and spoiled" from his father's lottery win, he was living in a four-story house with a ballroom and spiral staircase, in Saigon's bustling downtown. The Confucian bedtime stories his father told him came to life for Tran in the live classical Vietnamese opera performances the two of them enjoyed; and by age 7, he was training in that tradition at the National School of Fine and Performing Arts.

Tran and his family survived the fall of Saigon and the advent of communism. A few years later, the regime began drafting teenage boys to fight in Cambodia; Tran's name came up, but his parents refused to let him go. One night, his mother handed him a wad of cash and sent him away with his three brothers. At first, he didn't understand. "It would've been devastating for me if I'd realized then the possible consequences of that night, that that could very well have been the last time I would see my parents and other siblings," says Tran, his easy smile replaced with a furrowed brow.

Without answers or street smarts, he sought help from strangers, and



*tran demonstrates  
a choreographic shape  
from doris humphrey's  
1929 piece, water study.*

slept on beaches and in bus depots for six months, until his brothers negotiated a desperate escape from Vietnam on a flimsy, 35-foot fishing boat.

Sleep was impossible as they squatted knees to chest, vomiting alongside 65 other refugees, with no food or water. At one point, the boat was invaded by pirates, who raped a woman before Tran's eyes. He would have thrown himself into the heaving waves of the South China Sea if not for the strong arms of his brothers. As he tells the story, his eyes seem to darken and pull inward at the sheer memory of his despair. "The water, so close, was so tempting. I just wanted to end the misery."

After four harrowing days at sea, they landed at a Thai refugee camp on a beach the size of a football field, packed with 17,000 people.

Eight months later, a Vietnamese man in Portland sponsored Tran and his brothers; they arrived in September 1980 (the rest of the family joined them a few years later). Tran immediately entered Milwaukie High School—a jarring experience, since he spoke no English—and earned money by mopping bathrooms at night. He steeped himself in American culture, and sat riveted to the dancers on *Solid Gold*. "They were as close to dance as I could get," says Tran.

That is, until the school's dance-team coach invited him to watch the girls practice. After graduation, he enrolled at Portland State University and joined the university's now-defunct professional dance company.

With a B.S. in business administration

and a certificate in dance from PSU, Tran briefly considered a career in law, but his life partner, Gary Nelson, owner of a Portland residential property management company, urged him to follow his dreams. So he went to the University of Washington and earned an MFA in dance in 1999.

East and West merge in Tran's 30-plus works, some drawing from his experience as a political refugee. "But it's more than just visual," says friend and colleague Tere Mathern, artistic director and choreographer of Tere Mathern Dance and co-director of Conduit Dance, both in Portland; and Tran's dance teacher when he was at PSU. "It's a presence in the dancing, bringing in the Eastern philosophy, with the Western contemporary side supporting that in a way



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that's relevant to the world, now." Tran's fondness for intricate movements, such as the delicate fanning of fingers, "demands a detail and a quietness, and a softer kind of presence . . . [It] makes people go deeper into performance, and their own state of mind, when they're moving."

Tran wrote *The Road Home* in 1996, two years after he and his father made their first trip back to Vietnam. "Some memories were so vivid I recreated the scenes, but in a poetic sense." Ask him about being on that boat and "in an instant I can feel it." Dancers roll away and are pulled back, repeatedly, what became Minh Tran & Company's first performed work.

Once White Bird, a Portland-based, national dance presenter, took Tran on, his company was flying, spurred by a National Dance Project grant and the world premiere of *Nocturnal Path* (2003), a tribute to his Buddhist father (who still lives in Portland with his family).

"My dad always wanted to become a monk, so this piece is about my perception of Buddhist philosophy," says Tran, who is not a Buddhist. With microtonal and minimalist music, dancers flow in orange-burgundy robes amidst an eight-foot mirrored spiral, the scent of temple incense wafting. "I want the audience to immerse themselves in all the senses, even the sixth sense."

It mattered to him that the silk and

rayon costumes rippled and drifted, "because the vocabulary of that piece is that nothing ever stops. It's a spiritual journey. As soon as the dance movement arrives at a shape, it's moving to the next one."

Tran views dance "as a piece of motion that captures the essence of whatever message I'm trying to send," he continues. In *Forgotten Memories* (2007), that message can wrench words from decades of silence.

On a visit to Cambodia in 2002, Tran visited the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide, in the former Khmer Rouge secret prison where thousands of people were tortured and executed. Being there, says Tran, "was as if someone hit you in the stomach." In this work, dread and longing cry out in the dancers' tightly rounded and shivering shapes contrasting with the fluid and the lyrical.

Tran's work moves audiences as much as his teaching motivates students. "Dance is a very powerful way for me to express emotion and exercise the body," says psychology major Tian Yu Yen '09. "Minh challenges our bodies to do things that are not necessarily comfortable. His choreography is very physical, and requires a lot of precision, balance and control. What's really valuable in his teaching is the high expectations. When you have that, students are more likely to perform at a higher level."

Students also take their dance

experience out into the rest of their lives, while at Reed and beyond. "It's about not letting yourself become all about your analytic capabilities or brain endurance, but trying to incorporate the whole self in the educational experience," says Ucker.

Most of all, Tran hopes his students learn to be honest with themselves—an honesty he insists on for his own life and work.

His latest piece (to premiere January 2010), about his sexual identity, is perhaps his most intimate. He came out to his family in the late 1980s. As a Vietnamese man from a conservative and traditional culture, "it was hard to deliver such news to them," he says. "First of all, I tell them I'm gay, second, I've fallen in love with a man, a white man yet, and third, I'm moving out," he chuckles. "I did not just drop a bomb; I dropped a nuclear bomb."

The scene of steeling himself to break the news and then dodging the fallout will show up in this piece, in which he makes a cameo appearance.

Clearly, Tran is someone who lives his own advice: "If it's with dance, truly speak from your heart, from your blood, from every single cell in your body," he urges. "But with whatever you do, just be true to yourself."

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