

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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CoA kicks off year with dance news

By Kara Andrade
STAFF WRITER

When he was 17, Alamedan Danny Nguyen escaped from Vietnam on a small boat overflowing with 48 people bound for the shores of California. He had tried 32 times before and it wasn't until 1983 that he caught that boat in one of his many dogged attempts to create a life for himself other than selling fish sauce or serving in the Vietnamese military.

The boat drifted along the ocean for six days until it was intercepted by a German oil tanker near the Galang Island and Nguyen eventually made it to Alameda, via Hawaii and San Francisco, where he would take his first dance class at College of Alameda.

"I never danced in Vietnam," said 41-year-old Nguyen, who in 1999 was recognized by Paul Taylor of the Paul Taylor Dance Company as one of the seven best creative choreographers in the Bay Area and was selected to participate in the 27th International Choreographers' Showcase in Paris in 2004.

"When I first came to America," Nguyen said, "I was at the Hawaii airport and I saw all these dance commercials and movies like 'Fame' with dancing. I wondered if I could do that so I started taking classes and my first class was a ballet class. I was the only Asian. And that made me think about being a role model to attract Asians into dance. In order to be a role model I had to concentrate on a career in dance to inspire others that they can do it too."

More than 20 years later, after a bachelor's degree in fine arts from the California Institute of the Arts and masters degree of fine arts in dance from Mills College and starting his own dance company in 1999, Nguyen is pirouetting his way back. Next week will be his first semester teaching full-time at the College of Alameda in what he sees as a significant step toward the college getting serious about offering an associate's degree in dance. Nguyen recalls his days at the college.

"In 1984 the college had an awesome dance program and it died out," Nguyen said. "I think this program is needed."

For Shirleen Schermerhorn, public information officer for College of Alameda, Nguyen brings something vital to the dance program.

"He is unique in that he brings a Vietnamese sensibility to his dancing," Schermerhorn said. "It's a rare thing to find someone like him because he also runs his own troupe and can provide professional dance opportunities while teaching at the same time."

During the upcoming semester Nguyen will teach ballet and modern dance courses on the College of Alameda campus as well as college-credit courses in ballroom dance and yoga at several off-campus sites. He joins College of Alameda dance instructor Joe De Guzman, who teaches evening courses in salsa, swing and tango at the college.

For Nguyen, who was a part-time instructor at Laney College and was recently commissioned by the Oakland Ballet Academy to teach teenagers, the most important component of his work is making dance accessible to as many people as possible.

"I really love what I'm doing and I want to see people feeling healthy and happy, that makes me happy," Nguyen said. "I tell them don't worry about paying me, money doesn't mean anything to me."

Nguyen says he enjoys teaching at community colleges because of the diversity among the students and his commitment to "giving back" to people that don't have the money to learn dance.

"Money doesn't make me happy. I volunteer at four senior centers and teach yoga. I love to teach and I want to make everybody dance."

Nguyen doesn't just talk the talk, last year he and the Vietnamese Performing Arts Group went back to his native home in Ho Chi Minh City, Saigon to teach children in an orphanage how to dance. On his Web site blog is an entry from the trip:

"These kids were great... it was as if this day was set aside as a celebration. And, indeed, it was. (We)spent a few hours with them in a free format dance, music, and singing workshop. They didn't need much coaching or encouragement. They were ready to go. They could sing. They could play the music. All we had to do was teach and lead the dance. How easy was that?"

Nan Busse, who has been dancing for Nguyen for the past three years and is an educational therapist, says if it wasn't for Nguyen

she would not be planning on finishing her degree.

"He (Nguyen) is an incredible dancer and teacher," said Busse. "He is inspiring because he is so community oriented. He's seeking to empower people in the same way he was empowered. He's an equal opportunity guy, anybody, anything, if you can move he can make you dance."

Nguyen envisions the dance program at College of Alameda as a success under his leadership.

He plans on continuing to teach, putting on free performances, recruiting at different schools and volunteering in order to fill his classes with new students and also show people how culture can be integrated into modern dance. One of his plans includes finishing a PBS documentary, directed by Ashley James, about Nguyen's life which Nguyen expects to premiere in the upcoming year.

Nguyen's "to do" list is exhaustive and one wonders in looking at Nguyen's deceptively youthful face if he knows something the rest of us don't know.

"I have a lot of energy, I'm non-stop," Nguyen smiles. "Dancing keeps me young."

Courses begin the week of Aug. 17 and cost \$26 per unit plus a \$2 campus fee. www.alameda.peralta.edu. 510-748-2373
www.dannydancers.com

- Theatre enthusiasts Howard and Loretta Fong celebrated their 50th anniversary by attending the opening night performance of Alameda Civic Light Opera's "42nd Street," now running at Kofman Auditorium through Aug 21. Daughter Bernice Fong Smith arranged for gifts, a pre-performance introduction from the stage and a backstage visit with the stars after the show.
- President George W. Bush addressed 37,000 Scouts and adults at the National Boy Scout Jamboree at Fort A.P. Hill. The Alameda troop included 35 Alameda Scouts and 4 leaders. They toured New York and Washington, D.C. prior to heading to the 10-day Jamboree.
- Air Force Senior Airman Teresa M. Fox is deployed overseas under Operation Iraqi Freedom. She is contracting journeyman regularly assigned to the 22nd Contracting Squadron, McConnell Air Force Base, Wichita, Kansas. Fox is a 1999 graduate of St. Joseph Notre Dame High School.

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