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## Crossover

**Dancer-choreographer Danny Nguyen mixes Vietnamese traditions with Western-style modern dance.**

**BY JASON SERINUS**

It may come as a shock to learn that Alameda resident Danny Nguyen is the first Vietnamese-born artist to receive two degrees in dance in America. What is also unique is that he has successfully bucked the notion, virtually unthinkable in Vietnamese culture, of a man becoming a professional dancer.

When the Nguyen Dance Company ([DannyDancers.com](http://DannyDancers.com)) presents *Close to the Trai Tim (Close to the Heart)* at Berkeley's Julia Morgan Center for the Arts on Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2, attendees will discover a multicultural group of dancers, musicians, and visual artists. The performance mixes modern dance movement with Vietnamese costumes, music, and commentary on social issues such as war and poverty in Vietnam.

The Saigon-born Nguyen began studying dance at Laney College in 1983, one year after escaping Vietnam by boat after 33 failed attempts, and acknowledges that most of his life revolves around dance and volunteer work. He will return to Vietnam in December for the first time since his escape to teach a workshop for the Ho Chi Minh Ballet Company and to work with hundreds of disabled orphans. "Most of my company's movement is Western because I have barely studied Vietnamese dance," he explains. "Our dancers are either Caucasian or African American because Vietnamese parents don't let children dance for a career. Most of the Vietnamese community doesn't understand how our dancers can translate movement based on Vietnamese music into their bodies."

Nguyen chose the title *Close to the Trai Tim* because the majority of the pieces are about relationships. Though most focus on heterosexual coupling, one in particular, a tango to recorded accompaniment by cellist Yo-Yo Ma, features Nguyen dancing with a Caucasian man to represent his relationship with his partner of eight years. Nguyen describes "To Have and to Hold" as "a bit like a circus dance with a lot of acrobatics." There's also a swing dance performed by Tiffany Barbarash and Calvin Lane, both members of Nguyen's eight-member company.

As is the case with many choreographers, Nguyen was still assembling the program a month before the concert. Depending upon timing, he explained, he may do a piece, "Struggle to Flee," about Vietnamese women's efforts to escape Vietnam. Vu Hong Think, a well-known composer and musician from San Jose, composed the original music for the piece. Other expected works include "The Aftermath," a dance to music composed by Lane Hiers and Darryl Joyce to commemorate the aftermath of 9/11. Two Vietnamese-inspired pieces, a fan dance called "Trace" and a scarf dance, "Dawn," will mate Vietnamese music with modern movement influenced by Nguyen's New York studies with José Limón, Paul Taylor, Merce Cunningham, and Trisha Brown. Most of the dances will feature a live mix of Vietnamese and Caucasian musicians, including Vu Hong Think and Calvin Lane. The costumes, which Nguyen terms "amazing and very

Chris Duffey



**Having and holding: the Danny Nguyen Dance Company.**

beautiful," were all made in Vietnam.

So outstanding is the Nguyen Dance Company's dancing that a mere five years after Nguyen joined the Laney College dance faculty and started his company, they journeyed to Paris for the 27th International Choreographers' Showcase. Complimented for their freshness, brilliance, and high level of technique, they were invited to Barcelona for the thirtieth International Choreographers' Showcase next June.

Information and tickets: [JuliaMorgan.org](http://JuliaMorgan.org) or 925-798-1300.