

Dancers without Borders: The Nguyễn Dance Company

by Shannon Barry

photos courtesy of the Nguyễn Dance Company



Members of the Nguyễn
Dance Company

Danny Nguyễn believes he can teach anyone to dance. He discovered his passion for dance in 1982 when he first came to the U.S. After arriving at the airport in Honolulu, Nguyễn, who was 19 at the time, saw a commercial for a cruise ship and was intrigued by the dance performance in the ad. He decided then and there that he wanted to become a dancer. He hasn't stopped dancing ever since.

It was tough telling his parents, who wanted him to become a doctor, that dancing was his dream. Nguyễn finally admitted his true profession to his parents after working as a dancer for 10 years. "I'm a doctor of dance," he told them.

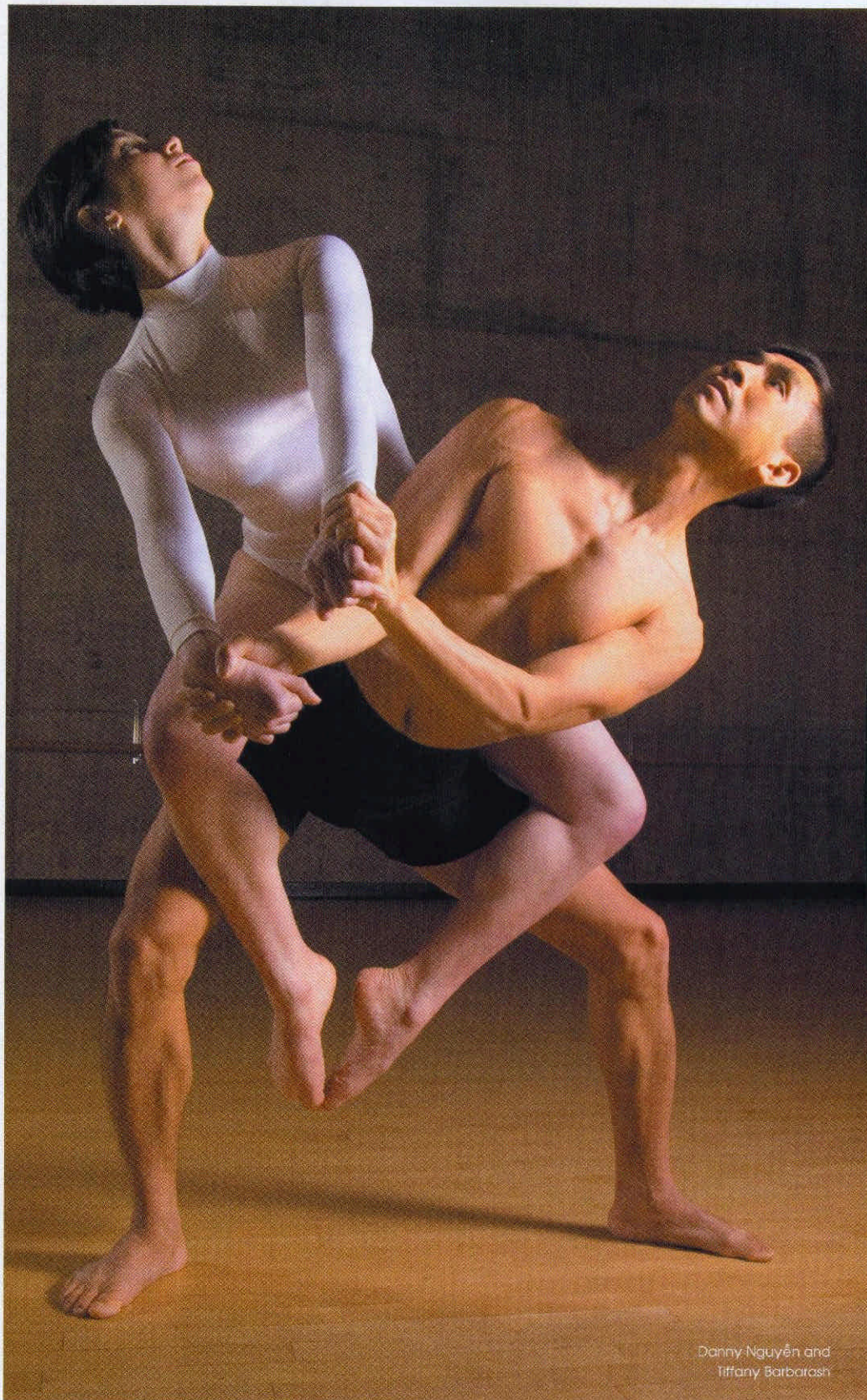
"We live in a free country," Nguyễn continued. "Parents should let their kids do what they want to do. I know that

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Vietnamese parents don't approve of their kids becoming dancers, even if they're talented, but as long as they're happy and healthy, I think it should be okay."

In 1999 Nguyễn started his own dance company, Danny Nguyễn Dancers and Musicians, which has since been changed to the Nguyễn Dance Company (NDC). Shortly after starting his company, Nguyễn was recognized as one of the best choreographers in the Bay Area by Paul Taylor's annual choreographic symposium in San Francisco.

San Francisco has the second-largest dance community in the country after New York, and Nguyễn has taken full advantage of the opportunities and resources available in this artistic community. Through his dance company, he has brought together dancers from diverse cultures and given them a platform for artistic expression.



Danny Nguyễn and Tiffany Barbarash

"Dance comes from the inside," said Nguyễn. "A lot of students think they have to be professional dancers or they have to train to be a dancer. When I make them go up (on stage), that inspires them."

Nguyễn received his BFA in Dance, Performance, and Choreography from the California Institute of the Arts and his MFA at Mills College. Before starting his own dance company, he trained with Alvin Ailey, Martha Graham, Jose Limon, Paul Taylor, Merce Cunningham and Trisha Brown.

Aside from giving twice-weekly performances in the Bay Area, the Nguyễn Dance Company also conducts dance workshops and training classes for people of all ages. The group recently traveled to Seattle, Wash., to participate in the Vietnamese Traditional Music Lectures & Workshops organized by the Hương Việt Performing Arts Group.

"Our work in Seattle was very fulfilling," said Tiffany Barbarash, assistant director of the Nguyễn Dance Company.

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"The students participating in the workshops ranged in age from six to 40. But no matter what their age, they were eager to learn."

The company performed to a full house of about 700 people in Seattle. "We go out there to share our work with other people and when there is that big a response it is very welcoming and very encouraging," said Barbarash. "It shows that we're getting our message across and reaching a wider audience."

Barbarash has been working with the company for a little over two years. Before moving to the Bay Area, she thoroughly re-

searched the different dance companies there. When she met Nguyễn she was intrigued by what she saw.

"I was really inspired by his love and passion for what he does and for helping other people," said Barbarash. "It's very selfless and his movement really reflects who he is and where he comes from."

What makes the Nguyễn Dance Company so unique is the diversity of its dancers and the integration of different artistic styles in the performances. Nguyễn fuses traditional Vietnamese dance movements with modern dance forms, which distinguishes the structure and choreography of each performance. Some shows incorporate American and Vietnamese poetry into the dance movements while others rely on impromptu performances by the dancers and musicians.

Nguyễn's unique choreography and style inspires different levels of understanding and interpretation. Poet and writer Tobey Kaplan, who is also a board member, said: "Being involved with the

dance company has enabled me to look at language in a way that incorporates the body as well as formal and modern tradition in movement. Poetry comes from the language of rhythm and words, whereas dance comes from rhythm and movement. We find a connection through stories or poetry and dance."

In 2004 the Nguyễn Dance Company officially became a non-profit organization, solidifying Nguyễn's vision of the company as a community-based performing arts organization that represents the cultural diversity of the Bay Area.

"I feel that we're bringing art to all different types of communities who might possibly never have the opportunity to experience dance and performance," said Peggy De Coursey, an apprentice at the company.

At 40, De Coursey is happy to be able to continue performing, and credits Nguyễn with enabling her to learn something new every day. She also appreciates the company's contributions and ties

to the Bay Area's multicultural community and feels that dance offers an important form of communication.

Barbarash agrees. "Dance overrides the language barriers we sometimes face in the community. Everyone can get something from movement and Danny's choreography, whereas spoken and written language can often be limiting. Not everyone can get the full message through words."

Indeed dance is an important form of communication and cultural exchange, as Nguyễn proved when he returned to Việt Nam to perform with members of his dance company in 2004. It was the first time he had been back in over 20 years. Nguyễn's journey to Việt Nam represented the realization of a lifelong dream, but he also had his doubts about returning to the country he had left behind.

"I was afraid of going back to Việt Nam because I escaped from the country. I worried that the government would have some excuse to keep me there,"

said Nguyễn. "I was there with a group of Americans so that calmed me down a bit. After I went through immigration, I felt like a big rock was lifted off my chest."

Instead of facing government restrictions, Nguyễn found himself fearing for his life as a pedestrian in the traffic-congested streets of Sài Gòn. The hard conditions in south Việt Nam also made a profound impression on him.

One of the most memorable experiences from Nguyễn's trip was visiting an orphanage. "The situation was so tough that the orphanage did not have their own bathroom," said Nguyễn, who immediately set about making plans to raise money for a bathroom facility for the orphanage.

This December the Nguyễn Dance Company will make another trip to Việt Nam. Although the company's activities were kept on a small scale during the last trip, this year they have been invited to work with the Thăng Long Water Puppet troupe in Hà Nội.

"Dance allows people to exchange ideas and helps to foster international understanding," said Barbarash. "It is a meaningful partnership wherever we go."

Ashley James certainly thinks so. James is the director of KTOP-TV Channel 10 in Oakland. He first met Nguyễn at the Heart and Soul Festival and has been following Nguyễn's career ever since.

"I was particularly struck by the emotion he was able to bring to dance," said James, who is working on a documentary film about Nguyễn's journey to Việt Nam. James plans to air the film nationally on PBS.

"It was his first visit back in 22 years," said James. "Part of the drama of the film is seeing his reaction to the changes. For Americans especially, this is a view of Việt Nam that has never really been seen before. Americans only see Việt Nam from the aspect of the war, but it is a very vibrant country. Americans need to understand that it isn't one-dimensional."

Whether at home or abroad, the

Nguyễn Dance Company continues to broaden its reach.

Next year the company will begin working with Đoàn Lạc Hồng, a traditional Vietnamese performance group based in Garden Grove, Calif. But Nguyễn continues to make community outreach in his home base a top priority.

This fall Nguyễn began teaching at the College of Alameda where he is responsible for revamping the school's dance program. Nguyễn wants to bring performances and activities to the school, and plans to have his company perform on campus at least once a month.

"Danny wants to make dance accessible to everyone," said Barbarash. "It's very rare to see that level of commitment."

Apprentice Nan Busse was a visual artist for many years before becoming a dancer. Busse said she didn't even realize that she could dance until she started taking classes with Nguyễn.

"It's a major commitment, but it's

worth it," said Busse. "I love how Danny blends his modern choreography into the traditional. Of course, with my body, as you get older, you have to respect what you can do and look good doing, but still aspire."

Apprentice Erick Taylor added: "You can see he's not an ageist or a sexist. There's no discrimination at all in the company. He just takes people, old and young, in every shape and size, and from different cultures. It's just a great community."

The Bay Area may be home to the Nguyễn Dance Company, but with inspiring figures like Danny Nguyễn leading the way, it may soon become a household name. **N**

Shannon Barry is currently pursuing a degree in magazine journalism and a minor in film at San Jose State University. When not absorbing eclectic foods, music and movies, Shannon works as a freelance writer for *metro.pop* magazine and is an editor at the *Spartan Daily* where she revels in exploring her creative talent.