DANCE

Want a Job with Grueling Labor, Brutal Hours, and Lousy Pay?

Don’t let us interrupt anything: Husband-and-wife dance team Uri Sands and Toni Pierce-Sands

COMPANY MAN

BY LINDA SHAPIRO

“Why start another dance company?” asks Toni Pierce-Sands. “Well, my son Trey is graduating from high school and Uri and I needed another child.” Harrowing birth and child-raising analogies aside, both Uri Sands and Pierce-Sands, who are married, know all too well that starting up a modern dance company in the current cultural climate is a bit like investing in a typewriter repair service. The audience is relatively small and specialized, even in the Twin Cities, arguably the most active modern dance scene outside of New York City. The best way to make money forming a dance troupe is not to form a dance troupe.

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Undeterred, the new TU Dance is forging ahead for the next two weekends at the Southern Theater with a program of Uri Sands’s choreography. In keeping with the fledging company’s philosophy of physical, stylistic, and racial diversity, the current troupe of 14 dancers resembles an elegantly athletic United Nations assembly (or maybe a New York block party). During a recent rehearsal at the Barbara Barker Center for Dance, the company could be seen running through one of Sands’s newest works, “Wayfarers.” Like many of Sands’s dances, this one approaches a broad theme—nomadic cultures—from oblique angles. Dancers slide across the floor on all fours like beasts of burden, or trek on like weary refugees. With musical backing from such disparate acts as soprano Dawn Upshaw and the Andalusian Dogs to Zakir Hussein’s tabla, the performers forge a way through an amalgam of dance styles from the Middle East, Africa, and the West.

“They could be any group of restless, weary, wanderers, even (maybe especially) dancers on tour,” laughs the 32-year-old Sands, who prowls through the studio, corrects here, joking there. Recently, Sands has found himself—and his reputation—spreading out beyond the Cities. Dance Magazine named him one of “25 Choreographers to Watch” and he recently collected the coveted Princess Grace Award for young artists. Sands will take off for New York in July to create a work for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater.

He and Pierce-Sands, who danced with the Minnesota Dance Theatre in the 1980s, are both veterans of the Alley company. Perhaps as a result of that lineage, the pair believes In dance as a social mission, not just a night out for middle-class audiences. They are determined to start a school in St. Paul that will become a community center for inner-city children. “I mean, we want excellent technique teachers who can also give the kids a hand with their homework,” says Pierce-Sands.

While they see themselves as part of a vital and ongoing tradition of dance that has flourished in the Twin Cities since the 1960s, the couple also believes that they have something unique to contribute.

“There aren’t that many opportunities for artists and students, especially those of color, to get broad, comprehensive training here right now,” says Sands.

“This dance community needs to be competitive nationally and internationally,” adds Pierce-Sands. “That means dancers training rigorously in a range of techniques to make them strong, then learning how to really move that shit.”