dance partners

A Twin Cities couple are still working out the steps of their creative partnership.

BY MATT PEIKEN
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Uri Sands and Toni Pierce-Sands each have business cards claiming the title of artistic director for their new dance company. Now comes the hard part.

“When you say ‘artistic director,’” you automatically think one person, and we’re still trying to figure out what that means to have two, and two who are in a relationship together,” Pierce says. “On top of that, you have the whole thing with male authority and him being the choreographer, and me being a little resistant to the norm of the ‘wife.’ I’m hypersensitive to it and maybe a little more aggressive about having my voice heard.”

It’s a dramatic shift for the married couple, who met in New York as dancers with Alvin Alley’s vaunted company. At 43, Pierce is 12 years older than her husband, who was an apprentice when she first saw her perform with Alley’s company. He knew her by her reputation as “Pierce Pierce.”

When they met, in 1986, Pierce, who grew up in St. Paul and whose parents still live here, was looking to return to the Twin Cities with her young son. At the same time, Sands, who had spent five years in Alley’s troupe, hungered for a creative kick start. Their move to Minneapolis, seven years ago, was groundswell for Pierce and “transforming” for Sands, who soon began dancing and choreographing for Lise Houlton’s Minnesota Dance Theatre.

“I had no idea a place that would seem so land-locked could be so diverse,” he says. “As a choreographer, it catapulted me. I started seeing the contributions I wanted to make in the dance world.”

In their work today as TU Dance (their first initials), Sands handles the choreography; Pierce oversees everything else. Any friction isn’t in the long-term vision but in working together moment to moment.

“The biggest conflict, which probably won’t be solved until one of us retires, is Uri telling me how to do something and approach it,” Pierce says. “And I’m like, ‘Oh, huh, let me be the dancer.’ But when we’re on the same page as dancer—dancer, it’s amazing.”

“It’s like a horse and a jockey, and sometimes the question is who is who, and that changes from moment to moment,” Sands says. “We’re new at this, and we’re both passionate and struggling with that, but we both know the mission.”

Dancing alongside Sands and Pierce is a cross-section of the créme de la Twin Cities crème — members of James Sewell Ballet, Ragamala Music and Dance Theatre and Ballet of the Dolls, along with dancers from Alonzo King’s Lines Ballet and other troupes of national renown.

The couple handpicked local dancers and some from top companies elsewhere for a show that debuted two years ago at the University of Minnesota’s Barbara Barker Dance Center and remounted the work, “Space TU Embrace,” last year at the Southern Theater. Many of the same dancers are performing in their new, all-female program, filled with Sands-created dances.

Sands designed his dances, which merge ballet and modern traditions, to leave room for the individual dancers to pour their distinct backgrounds and styles into the pot.

The two envision a repertory company featuring work from commissioned choreographers, as well as from Sands, and a school, which Pierce would oversee, founded on the fundamentals of ballet, modern and African dance.

“Our mission isn’t to create an island for Uri and I to work,” Pierce says. “It’s to create an environment for dance and training.”

“And it feels like we almost have nothing to do with this,” Sands adds. “It’s like we have no choice — it’s just what we’re meant to do.”

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