the Lines

A new dance company redraws the boundaries of movement and audience in the Twin Cities. By Camille LeFevre

Last summer, the "Space T.U. Embrace" project performed for the first time at the Southern Theater in Minneapolis. Space to embrace? Space tee-you embrace? Why so cryptic? There was definitely buzz around Toni Pierce-Sands ("T") and Uri Sands ("U"). They had launched their experimental project the year before, at the University of Minnesota, and the rumor was that the couple had created something unusual and captivating.

That was immediately clear at the Southern, as the muscular Sands powered across the stage with weightless precision and godlike intention. He was a revelation, effortlessly sculpting space with an original blend of African and Indian, ballet and modern dance, symbolic and ritualistic moves.

His perfect complement, Pierce-Sands was long, lean, and lithe as she gathered the space around her; then she turned loose-limbed goddess as she and Sands became the core of "Lady," with the project's entire cast—fifteen dancers of varying skin tones, ages, and sizes—engulfing them in a celebration of grace and generosity. Little question remained as to what space the dancers were embracing. This was a performance of uncommon openness, and the audience reciprocated with emotional enthusiasm.

In the year since that performance, "T" and "U" have transformed their experiment into a proper dance company, complete with nonprofit status and new name, TU Dance, which debuts with a program of premieres this month (June 16-18 and 23-25 at the Southern Theater, 612-340-1725). Just as one of the Twin Cities' most beloved companies, jazzdance by Danny Buraczeski, was performing its final concerts and closing a remarkable fifteen-year chapter in local dance history, TU Dance was making a commitment to some kind of longevity. Coincidence? Perhaps. More likely the turn of events is a testament to the fertile ebb and flow of creativity in the local dance community.

Still, it's not every day that dance companies get founded here, and so the question remains: Why start a company? Why here, and why now? Sands and Pierce-Sands have enjoyed fruitful, high-profile careers as performers, in the U.S. and abroad. Sands' choreography is in the repertories of numerous dance troupes. "We wanted to grow as artists and individuals, and to bring that growth into our community," says Pierce-Sands of their decision. "The dance world has given us so much," Sands adds; creating a company is a way for the pair to give back.
But behind that contribution is a mission. “The Twin Cities is at a point where art isn’t reflecting the cultural richness that exists here,” Sands says. “So we decided to create a company that demonstrates that diversity, as well as the expertise of this area’s dancers. We think audiences, even people new to dance, will gravitate toward that.”

The pair trace the origins of TU Dance back to Johnye Mae Pierce, who, according to her granddaughter, Pierce-Sands, was the first African-American woman to work in downtown St. Paul. (She operated an elevator.) Grandma Pierce’s support was unwavering as Toni grew up at Minnesota Dance Theatre, joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre in New York, moved to Paris to dance with Company Rick Odum, came back to St. Paul to have a son, returned to Ailey, and, eventually, began dating the company’s charismatic star, Uri Sands.

“I met Uri twelve years ago in Philadelphia. He was dancing with Philadanco, and I was visiting a friend who was the rehearsal director,” recalls Pierce-Sands. “He was topless and wearing black spandex jazz pants,” she adds, laughing. “I honestly thought he was a little cocky at first.”

Two years later, they met again at Ailey. “It took time for us to get to know each other, because we were both involved with other people at the time,” Pierce-Sands says. “Uri very much kept to himself and wrote a lot in his journals. He’s a thinker and that’s what attracted me to him.”

The true test of their devotion came when Pierce-Sands returned to St. Paul to raise her son and be close to the rest of her family; she also had offers to join the faculties of the Minnesota Dance Theater school and the University of Minnesota dance program. Sands followed for two reasons: “Toni and Walleye fishing,” he says. (An avid angler while growing up in Miami, Sands fishes Minnesota’s rivers and lakes, often with his stepson. Last year, his wife bought him a fishing boat for his birthday.)

After briefly dancing with James Sewell Ballet, Sands became a Minnesota Dance Theater company member and resident choreographer. In 2002, he signed on as a dancer and choreographer with North Carolina Dance Theatre in Charlotte, where he’s been stationed about half of the year. “It’s a lucrative situation for me and my family,” he explains. But after a couple of years of watching the couple run hither and yon, Grandma Pierce sat them down. “She told us, Why don’t you guys try to work for yourselves and make your own stuff look good, instead of making everybody else’s stuff look good?” says Pierce-Sands. “That really inspired us.”

The duo started off with research, assessing foundation support, opportunities for performances, and the variety of dance artists and companies already in the Twin Cities. “We were looking for something we could piggyback on, some way to enhance what the community had started,” says Pierce-Sands. While they’re hesitant to say they discovered an unfilled niche, the couple did find one characteristic troubling. “The Twin Cities has one of the most diverse communities I’ve ever seen,” Sands says, “but its audiences are segregated.”

Audiences, he argues, are loyal to specific niches—ethnic, ballet, modern, improvisation, dance theater, or even ballroom—but they rarely cross into other disciplines. TU Dance aims to attract those various niches, in part by featuring dancers schooled in a variety of disciplines, who “reflect the cultural diversity here in the Twin Cities,” he says.

Among the company’s eighteen members are guest artists from Complexions in New York City and Alonso King’s Lines Ballet in San Francisco—both of which have African-American artistic directors and repertories with work inspired by the African-American experience—and from North Carolina Dance Theatre. For local representation, TU’s founders cherry-picked from Twin Cities companies, including Venezuelan charmer Abdo Sayegh, a longtime company member of Minnesota Dance Theater. Stephanie Fellner, the petite powerhouse from Ballet of the Dolls; and Penelope Frehe and Peggy Seipp-Ray, who are dynamic regulars with James Sewell Ballet. The exquisite Mary Ann Bradley was a Jazzdance member, and also performs with the postmodern troupe ARENA Dances.

In other words, TU Dance may aim to draw together and integrate audiences, but it will not sacrifice artistic excellence. “They [Toni and Uri] are driven to be an exemplar of high-quality dance performance,” says Jeff Bartlett, curator of programming at the Southern Theater. “Actually, they’re somewhat intolerant of a mindset that allows for anything less. For them, that’s not okay.”

A third component of TU Dance’s strategy is accessibility. Pointing to the long-term success of their alma mater, Sands says that Alvin Ailey’s shows consistently sell out because the company’s works “speak to the human experience.” Similarly, the pieces he has choreographed for TU Dance “reference particular cultures, social situations, or life events. Accessibility comes through work that taps into the emotional, spiritual, and psychological aspects of our being.”

Audiences may find other ways into TU Dance’s work, adds Pierce-Sands. “One of the lessons we learned at Ailey was that you could bring your father, who doesn’t know anything about dance, but he enjoys the music. That’s making dance accessible. We don’t have any expectations on how someone should look at dance. We just try to give audiences as many opportunities as possible to grasp something meaningful.”

Sands and Pierce-Sands didn’t just look locally for dancers; teachers, choreographers, company managers, and presenters throughout the Twin Cities offered advice, especially on the mounds of paperwork necessary for incorporation and tax-exempt status. “As we launch this endeavor, one thing in particular we’ve found is that nothing in life is done on your own,” Sands says. “The dance community is helping us form this company.”

The Southern’s Bartlett has been instrumental. “They have good heads on their shoulders,” he says of the couple, “and part of why they do is because of their experience outside this town, specifically in the Ailey company. A life in that company educates you about the reality of the dance world, it provides a lot of tools, and gives you a glimpse of what success looks like.”

Danny Buraczewski also played a critical role. “He’s an incredible artist and mentor, whether through advice or example,” says Pierce-Sands. “Does his company folding make us apprehensive? No. Actually, we feel even more compelled to continue.” Her partner sounds equally determined. “The only way we know to start a dance company is like the only way we learned how to swim,” he says. “Just jump in the water.”