

SPACE-T.U.-EMBRACE

Thursday, June 26 through Saturday, June 28
Barbara Barker Center for Dance
500 21st Ave. S., Minneapolis
651.293.1549.

FROM AILEY FORWARD

BY CAROLINE PALMER

Uri Sands is a calm presence amidst a dozen or so swirling, sweaty bodies in the airy second-floor studio of the Barbara Barker Center for Dance on the U of M campus in Minneapolis. He urges the dancers to move closer to each other. "The mass just keeps building energy," he instructs. "Let's see if we can get tighter." They respond, synchronizing their interpretations of Sands's intricate-as-lace choreography, moving with elegantly nuanced athleticism to the joyful harmonies of the South African vocal group

Ladysmith Black Mambazo. Sands, watching closely, nods his approval.

"Ailey once said that the audience wants to be entertained. I truly and firmly believe that," observes Sands, who performed as a principal dancer with Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater for five years. It is one of the hallmarks of a career that began in his hometown of Miami and now finds him splitting time between the Twin Cities and the North Carolina Dance Theatre in Charlotte. The experience with Ailey has helped Sands develop layers of choreographic detail within his fusion of modern, ballet, jazz, and break dance. The combination of impeccably clean lines and physical surprises makes for category-defying dance, as is readily evident in SPACE-T.U.-EMBRACE, showing this weekend at the Barker Center.

Sands was drawn to the Twin Cities by his partnership with Toni Pierce-Sands, who grew up in the Minnesota Dance Theatre studio and also danced with Ailey, among other companies. She is now co-artistic director and a featured performer

in the concert. Pierce-Sands acts as a kinetic dramaturge for her husband. "I'm on the outside making a character for her to draw upon from the inside out," says Sands.

The upcoming performance has three sections: "Body" (including a solo for Stephane Andre and a duet with Aparna Ramaswamy), "Mind: Brothers & Keepers," and "Spirit: Lady." The last was inspired by the couple's experiences in Johannesburg, South Africa. "There was so much going on," recalls Sands. "What prevailed was the spirit of the people coming out of apartheid. And the harmonies of the music transcend all barriers."

This observation captures the goals of both Sands and Pierce-Sands as they continue to build their careers together while fostering the work of others. "This is a training ground for us," concludes Pierce-Sands. "We've been in a lot of other people's work, we've had our opinions, and there are things that are in our blood. Now we have to stay open and learn from that, because our responsibility to our own dancers now is huge." ■