



Flights and Landings

**Giannella Garrett** | April 7, 2011

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"Sometimes I try to articulate an idea, story or experience; other times, things just land," says Thang Dao, founder and artistic director of the Thang Dao Dance Company (TDDC). That age-old black swan versus white swan dilemma torments creators of every genre. When should you choose groping around in the dark if there's a well-lit room beckoning? I sense Thang has thought about this a lot.

Thang received his formal education in dance at Juilliard, The Boston Conservatory and New York University. A former dancer with Stephen Petronio Company, he left the troupe after five years to concentrate on choreography--which was basically choosing a walk in the dark. His risky choice proved fortuitous. A Princess Grace Choreography Fellowship in 2008 for his works *S.O.S.* and *Glass Violin Concerto* led to new ballet commissions from The Boston Conservatory and Ballet Austin II.

Combining relentless creative and organizational abilities, he established the Contemporary Dance Festival in New York City, now in its third year. "I wanted to create a space and a process to develop and present my work," he says, "and to showcase a spectrum of contemporary works from veterans and emerging artists." Additionally, artistic residencies at BalletX in Philadelphia and Perry-Mansfield Performing Arts School in Steamboat Springs, Colorado have offered him opportunities to invent new ballets, such as last year's *The White Flag*.

This year Thang's projects are taking off, thrusting him forward and challenging him in ways he once only dreamed about. In February, he created *Foil* for The Boston Conservatory's tribute performance honoring Yasuko Tokunaga, retiring Director of the TBC's Dance Division. According to Thang, *Foil* is a work that "just landed" for him. His original idea was to choreograph a Requiem by Wojciech Kilar during his six-week residency in Boston, but it turned out that that score was unavailable. Instead, he set the piece to Chopin's Nocturne No.2 in E-flat major, Nocturne No.1 in C-sharp minor and the last movement of Concerto No. 2 in F minor, and a percussion score by Richard Malcolm.

"Six weeks is enough time to be spontaneous," says Thang of *Foil*. "But my pattern is I have to be prepared. I listen to music to conjure up what I'm doing and sketch it out. But I'm also flexible and can manipulate how I work to serve the dancers. I don't want to go into something with a formula."

April is a busy month for Thang. Ailey II has been touring his *Echoes* for two years and is currently rehearsing it for a performance in their home theater. Next Thang will be spending two weeks in Interlochen, Michigan creating a dance to Benjamin Britten's *Gloriana* to be performed by the school's choral group and orchestra. Later he'll fly to Houston for Ballet Austin II's April 23rd performance of his *Quiet Imprint*, which was commissioned by the Princess Grace Foundation. This homage to Thang's Vietnamese culture is his most personal project yet. It's also a first-of-its-kind melding of contemporary dance and Vietnamese music. Trinh Cong Son, considered the Bob Dylan of Vietnam, composed *Quiet Imprint's* ballads between 1965-1975, during the height of the Vietnam War. Thang has choreographed 10 stories to Son's timeless lyrics that speak about humanity, loss and the destruction experienced through war. Singing the songs live will be Khan Ly, Son's muse,

considered the most brilliant interpreter of his music.

As if that weren't enough, Susan Kikuchi--daughter of Yuriko, who danced with Martha Graham for 50 years, and a gifted dancer in her own right--has asked Thang to help her with a production of *The King & I* for Kansas City's Starlight Theater in June. It's Thang's first opportunity to work on a musical. "I'm really excited," he says. "I have something to look forward to--the continuation of opportunities to inform my work."

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