



Interview EMMA RUSSEL  
Photography EMMA RUSSEL

THE  
UNDEFINABLE

VAN HUYNH  
COMPANY



Dancers  
IEVA NAVICKAITE  
PAUL DAVIES  
MARELY ROMERO  
TOMMASO PETROLO  
LAURA KENYON  
NEIL HO SUM YUEN

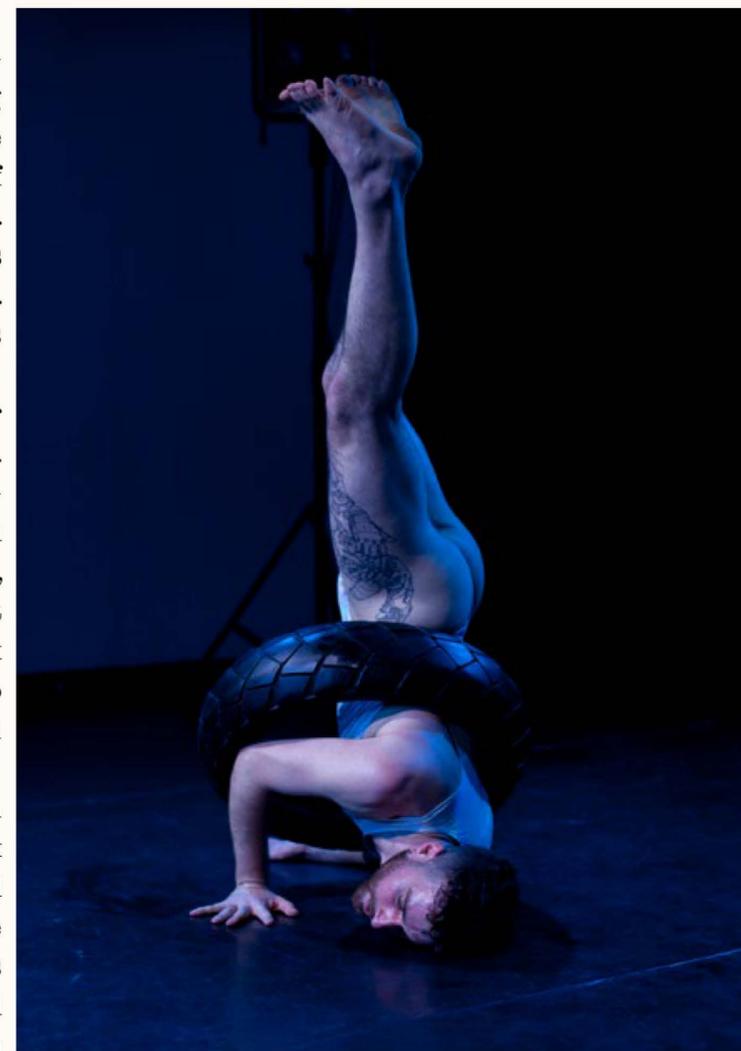
Dam Van Huynh's dances sit somewhere between *reality and the dreamlike*: drawing on his memories as a child refugee fleeing the Vietnam War and a queer boy coming of age in America. There's not often a direct narrative or a linear dramaturgical approach but instead a collage of images, concepts and sonic constructions that overlap and exist all at once. "Lots of my work has this component where it's a little bit fuzzy," Dam says. "It's not quite defined because I'm not quite defined."

The youngest of nine siblings, Dam fled south Vietnam with his family when he was around seven years old, and grew up in what he describes as "the poor ghetto area" of east Los Angeles, surrounded by gang and gun violence. He later moved to the UK in his 20s to join Richard Alston's company, worked at the Phoenix Dance Theatre in Leeds, and set up his own company in 2008. "We were all just trying to survive. I don't think we really knew what was happening to us for a long time. You knew you were not at the top of the economic scale, but you realise, well, this is life. I think most of us were just trying to find our survival tactics to get through these periods."

For Dam growing up, it often meant minimising himself to fit in. "When you're displaced, going through a refugee experience, there's a sense of shame that permeates through your existence, and even if you can't use that word boldly for a long time, it exists. And so you kind of deny it, you shun it, and I'm sure lots of people can relate because you're always an outsider. Whether it's true or not, the sense is strong. And this notion of otherness is the real thing."

"When you're young, you can't place that finger exactly on the pulse to say, this is what's happening. But you consciously and subconsciously make decisions where you try not to be cloud-sized. So you really try to assimilate. And then in order to do so, I guess perhaps it's a survival mechanism, one almost has to sever something harshly to deny and not look at something that really is a huge part of you. And so I think then this shameful creature grows as you feed it more and more."

Dance helped. It both allowed and required Dam to look at himself every day and examine the complex feelings he was experiencing. He gained a coveted place at the Los Angeles County High School, a free school for young artists that selected 15-18 students a year across visual arts, music, performing arts and theatre. He was trained in classical ballet and soon moved to the western US to join the Nevada Ballet. From then on, the body became his central subject of investigation, and dance was a way to solve problems. "In a way that was quite therapeutic," he says. "Eventually I was able to name the animal that it was, that it was shame itself. And it's quite liberating to be able to say I was ashamed of myself, ashamed of my culture, ashamed of my past."



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At the same time, Dam was “having confusing thoughts about my sexual identity”, which were difficult to understand without queer role models in his life. “Being a young male queer artist in the Asian community, there really were just four professions one could go into: like doctor, lawyer, engineer, accountant. The arts were not an option. The conscious awareness of the queer community almost didn't really exist as well, certainly not for an immigrant family,” Dam says. *“It didn't exist. So for a long time, I didn't exist.”*

Trauma manifested itself in different ways for the rest of his family. The sister above him has a really huge obsession with fruits. Her house is packed full of fruit in every corner, Dam says. Recently, she explained that the reason was that when they were kids, she felt they didn't have enough to eat and she used to always crave fruits, but they couldn't afford them often. “So now as an adult, she's obsessed.” For his mother, who rarely speaks about her life in Vietnam, the wounds from the war run deep. The conflict lasted from 1955 to 1975 and pitted the communist government of North Vietnam and their allies the Viet Cong in the south against the government of South Vietnam, which was backed by the United States. And after fleeing her home, she had no desire to ever return.

As a single mum struggling to survive in a new country, “she never had the opportunity to look back, she just kept going forward. Now, sadly, she's older. I think it's coming very heavily. She suffers a lot from night terrors.” The nightmares are always about her running. “It's one of these things where you can only hold them off so long.”



Drawing on his own experience of conflict, dislocation, shame and anxiety, Dam's dances tackle heavy and difficult themes but *“I usually look at them as celebratory works,”* he says. They are rooted in a social consciousness and a desire to advocate for equality, he says, *“I would describe it sometimes as challenging, but necessary.”* There's a sense of figuring things out through movement: “making work has always been a series of *trying to solve some questions that I had that have always emerged,*” he says. “If the puzzle is insolvable or that I'm not brilliant enough to solve them, I just keep hacking away at it.”

Dam never wanted to be a choreographer. “I just wanted to do one thing in my life, really, and that was just to dance and experience the world through the art form.” But his work as a choreographer has taken him around the world. Dam spent five years in Hong Kong running the contemporary dance department at a conservatoire academy. Although he didn't find it creatively stimulating: “The truth at the end of the day is that my brain only takes about no more than 40% of its capacity to solve these problems. But it takes me 100% to solve these creative problems. And for some reason, even though I would be dirt poor doing this one, it's exciting.”





So he left and focused his energy on the Van Huynh Company in London, which is now based out Centre 151 – a community centre in Hackney that supports immigrants from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Many of the dancers at the company he's worked with for more than a decade. The oldest dancer in the company just turned 60, while there's a mixture of body types. "I think that kind of breadth of representation is a bit more reflective of an organic community," he says. "It kind of gives the working process a *very rich fertile space.*"

"The work is politicised simply just by my sheer presence: to be a queer Asian male dance artist working and making. The minute my voice is thrust into the energy, the minute my voice is thrust into the arena of the industry, it's political," he says.



It's important for Dam to create a space where individuals of all backgrounds can feel seen. If it hadn't been for watching *Dirty Dancing* as a young boy and seeing Patrick Swayze make dance super cool, who knows whether he would have given dance a go professionally. "It was almost like permission I think," he says. "To be able to be present and visible as an East Asian artist means that there's another generation that could look and perhaps dream that you could step outside of the four options you've got set for you."

"I'm obviously just carrying the flag for South East Asian dancers," he says, "but for me equality is across the scale." In a recent piece with his long-time collaborator, the experimental artist Elaine Mitchner, called *Moving Eastman*, which premiered at the Barbican this season, he examined the work of Julius Eastman, who was also an African-American composer who would have been noted as the founding father of minimalist music.

"For a man who was so important and prominent, he was practically erased from history. And so just because I'm commenting on black rights or equality, for me, it's the same. I think sometimes when people divide it too much, we have defeated ourselves by the division but have missed the point," Dam says. In fact, a lot of the artist's recent commentary centres around inclusivity. "That table is large enough for us to be there and present to have these very important conversations on art and where it's going."

VAN HUYNH COMPANY

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