



**Leonardo Torres and
Miyako Nitadori in
costume for Images
from the Embers**

STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHS SHOT ON LOCATION AT JOY OF MOTION DANCE CENTER (JOYOFMOTION.ORG) IN WASHINGTON, DC. STYLING AND COSTUME DESIGNS BY JUDY HANSEN.
HAIR BY AUDREY BETHARDS, MAKEUP BY RICHARD BERNAL FOR THE ARTIST AGENCY. ALL NON-STUDIO PHOTOGRAPHY BY KRISTIN LEWIS

Dancers

Without Borders

DS follows a Washington, DC–based company on a 10-day tour to Peru. By Kristin Lewis

LAST SUMMER, EIGHT DANCERS from Dana Tai Soon Burgess & Co. packed the sets, props and costumes of their newest work, *Images from the Embers*, into suitcases and flew to Peru for a 10-day adventure that included performances in two cities. *DS* went along to find out what happens behind the scenes of an international tour.

Dusty and windswept, we're standing transfixed under a bright turquoise sky at 8,200 feet above sea level, taking in 360-degree views of Arequipa, a city in the south of Peru that is nestled among a trio of volcanoes. It's presidential election day—every citizen must vote or face heavy fines—so the city is closed and the dancers have the day off. Our translator, Hannah, has led us up hundreds of stairs to a *miradore*, or lookout, from which you can gaze down at the “white city” (so named because it's built primarily with white rock from the neighboring volcanoes), its surrounding terraced farming, and the great mountains beyond—including Machu Pichu.

The company is here for a one-night performance, on invitation from Peru's Ministry of Culture and the U.S. State Department, and it's the first time many locals will have the opportunity to see American modern dance. The rest of the tour will be spent in Peru's capital, Lima, where the company is to perform three times at *Danza Nueva*, a six-week annual international festival for contemporary dance. That engagement is funded in part by founding artistic director Dana Tai Soon Burgess'

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**What brings us together
is the dance.”**

—Dana Tai Soon Burgess

**Sarah Halzack in
costume for *Death*, for
*Images from the Embers***



Lima



Tech rehearsal in Lima



Studio Photography by Steve Vaccariello

Dana Tai Soon Burgess

Born in Carmel, CA, Dana Tai Soon Burgess is the son of a Scottish-Irish-American father and a Korean-American mother, both visual artists. He was raised in an artistic community in Santa Fe, NM, where Isamu Noguchi—most famous in the dance world for his set designs for Martha Graham—was a frequent dinner guest. Early martial arts studies led Burgess to dance, and he later attended a performing arts high school. “I knew from a young age that my [true] language wasn’t verbal,” says Burgess. “I still struggle with verbally representing myself, but I feel very comfortable representing how I feel or what’s on my mind through dance.”

Burgess went on to earn an MFA from George Washington University, where he now teaches, and founded his company in 1992. He performed until early 2006, when he retired from the stage to concentrate fully on directing and choreographing. He has taught at the Hamburg Ballet, the National Ballet of Peru, Sejong University in South Korea, the Latvian State School of Dance, the Xiamen Dance Company and Beijing Contemporary Dance Company in China.

Fulbright scholarship, through which he came to Peru several weeks prior to the tour to teach class and set a work on local modern dance company Ballet San

Marcos. By bringing his company to perform, Burgess will be able to give BSM dancers a firsthand look at his aesthetic. (The competitive Fulbright Scholarship Program is administered by the U.S. State Department, and awards funding to scholars, students and professionals to teach and research abroad, with the aim of increasing understanding between the U.S. and other cultures. For more, fulbrightonline.org.)

IN GOOD COMPANY

At the heart of DTSB & Co. is a celebration of culture and diversity of personal experiences. The dancers come from all over the world—from Colombia to Taiwan to Japan. “This is a group of different experiences,” Burgess said over dinner at La Abuela in Lima. “What brings us together is the dance.”

On the third evening of the tour, while comfortably installed in the empty dining room of our hotel in Arequipa with steaming cups of *mate de coca* (tea), Burgess related the story of his work and his company, which he founded in 1992 in order to present work from a pan-Asian American perspective. Blending Eastern and Western aesthetics, his movement vocabulary draws on martial arts, modern dance and culturally specific forms from around the world. “People describe my dances as meditations, because they are contemplative and play with time—time is cyclical,” Burgess said. “Experiences are remembered in a nonlinear way—an image or a sight or sensation triggers memory and that triggers us to find a complete understanding of that experience at a later time. That’s what I play with in my work.”



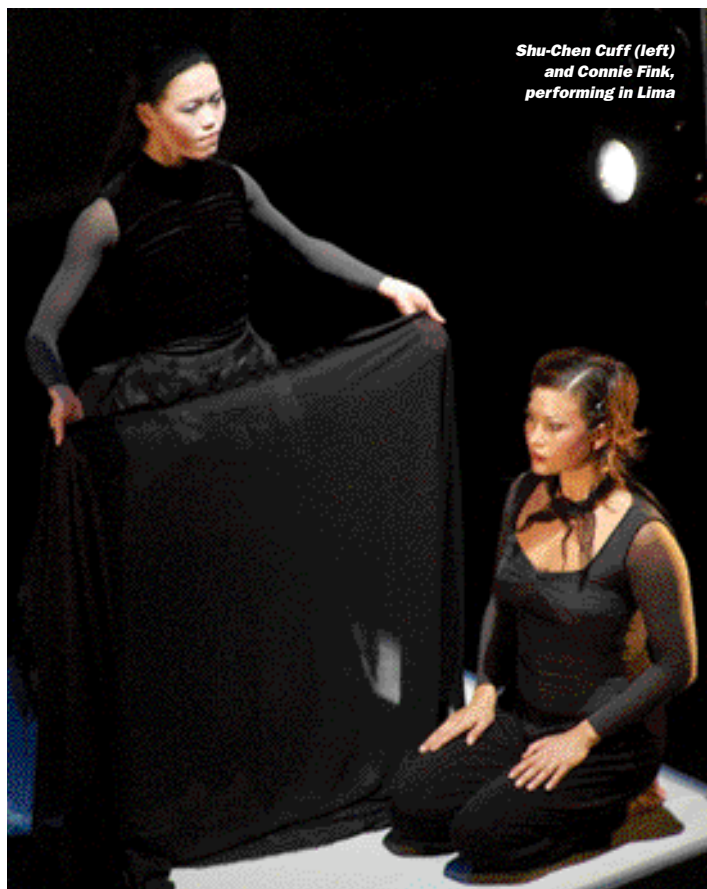
Leonardo Torres and Tati Valle-Riestra

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This tour is by no means the first for DTSB & Co. This company travels the world—prior trips include Riga, Latvia; Quito, Manta and Guayaquil in Ecuador; and Trujillo, Peru. Part of its touring philosophy is to bring work to communities like Lima and Arequipa that can offer interesting cultural exchanges, but which may not have many opportunities to see or experience American modern dance. In Latvia, for instance, DTSB & Co. was the first American modern dance group to perform at the Riga Opera House, the official theater of the Latvian National Ballet, where Baryshnikov trained. Later this year, the company’s work will be used in a documentary on its upcoming cultural exchange to India for The Kennedy Center’s ArtsEdge Program.

DTSB & Co.’s work with international and national government and non-government arts groups and consulates has included an engagement at the National Geographic Society for World Refugee Day and performances at the Austrian and Japanese embassies in DC. This approach has also opened up funding opportunities from non-dance-specific cultural organizations such as the U.S. State Department, which fosters cultural exchange worldwide and sponsored DTSB & Co.’s trips to Peru in 2005 and 2006. (In 2005, Burgess spent six weeks collaborating on a new work for the National Ballet of Peru with the National Young Orchestra and Peruvian visual artist Eduardo Tokeshi.)

New works may be commissioned for a certain event, such as Burgess’ *Tracings* (the story of his mother and her family’s emigration from Korea) for the Korean American Centennial in 2003, or invitations may be offered after Burgess makes first contact. Much of Burgess’ time is spent applying for grants to keep his company onstage, though fundraisers, sponsors and private donation programs also help to support work. Burgess has been commissioned by the National Ballet of Peru, The Kennedy Center and the Smithsonian Institution. The company has also performed at the Asia Society and the Kaye Playhouse in NYC; at The Kennedy Center, the Smithsonian and the Lincoln Theatre in DC; and throughout the U.S.



**Shu-Chen Cuff (left)
and Connie Fink,
performing in Lima**

Cultural Exchange

The opportunity to take in a new culture is an exciting part of touring—and the intensity of the shared experience can bond a company together. Here are a few highlights of our trip:

- Hiking through Incan ruins
- Eating a “highlander’s meal” of *pachamanca* (meat cooked with herbs in deep, underground pits) and corn kernels the size of cotton balls that were popped on the inside
- Shopping for alpaca, jewelry and pottery from local artisans
- Touring Lima’s historic cathedrals, a gold museum and catacombs
- Spending an evening socializing with local dancers, artists, aficionados and presenters at an elegant dinner in the home of Fernando Torres, cultural director of Lima’s Instituto Cultural Peruano Norteamericano, which presents the *Danza Nueva* festival
- Taking Burgess’ open class (which Burgess gave in Spanish) at the University of Lima, where the company performed last year



**Mugging
in front of a
company poster
in Arequipa**



pachamanca

Kelly Moss Southall

EMBERS

For this tour, the company presented *Images from the Embers*, an abstract story, about a woman who loses her lover in wartime, which is partly inspired by the World War II writings of Marguerite Duras, particularly her film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. Duras' themes of mourning and grief—and of falling in love in the wrong time and place—seemed particularly relevant to Burgess. “I’m not by nature a political choreographer, but every day I open up *The Washington Post* and read about the escalation of something far away that seems so abstract, yet is so real,” he explained. “As an artist, the conflict that’s going on globally, because we’re part of the whole world, affects my creativity.”

Aged, but bound to what she suffered as a young woman, the central character (played by Tati Valle-

“We’re innately abstract beings. We’re moved by symbols, so I enjoy building symbols and archetypes onstage.”

—Dana Tai Soon Burgess

Riestra) experiences both the tenderness of her love and the loss of it over and over again. “First love is so scarring, and once lost, you can never be of innocence again,” said Burgess of the role. The other characters in *Embers* are the woman’s younger incarnation (Miyako Nitadori), two war dancers (Katia Chupashko, Kathleen Weitz), the lover and soldier (Leonardo Torres), Death’s henchman (Connie Fink) and the grotesquely beautiful Death herself (originally Shu-Chen Cuff; now Sarah Halzack).

Black-and-white video images of dead soldiers, bombers, and women typing letters are projected onto the back of the stage. The solemn, foreboding original score by Aaron Leitko lends a visceral feel to the piece.

Painted on drops that hang on the sides of the stage are excerpts from actual letters written home by WWII soldiers. On our second day in Lima, set designer Sara Brown, while sketching how she would hang the drops in the theater, explained the story behind them. First, she dug through correspondence that had been donated and archived in libraries. “The phrases that really stuck with me were ‘I have lost all pride in my physical appearance,’ and ‘the smell of personal filth and the stench of the dead,’” Brown said.

MAKING THE CONNECTION

Opening night in Lima was sold out. Though *Embers* deals with American subject matter, after the house

Below clockwise from back left: Katia Chupashko, Shu-Chen Cuff, Connie Fink and Kathleen Weitz, in costume for *Tracings*



Above L to R: Kathleen Weitz, Shu-Chen Cuff and Tati Valle-Riestra in rehearsal in Arequipa



Going Abroad

What does it take to pull off an international tour of this magnitude? Organization, adaptability and a spirit of adventure. In a small company like DTSB & Co., each dancer wears many hats besides that of artist and performer. Connie Fink is also the associate artistic director. Sarah Halzack, a recent George Washington University grad and the newest addition to the group, assumed the role of apprentice who helped with company coordination (she was on tour to understudy Shu-Chen, who would be taking a hiatus after the tour), such as safeguarding valuables during rehearsals and performances, running errands and even giving television interviews (in Spanish!). The dancers *all* act as stage assistants. Sets and props are distributed among everyone's luggage—mailing them ahead is risky and expensive—and at each venue, company members help put them together and break them down.

Lighting artist Maja White and set designer Sara Brown both travel with the group, because lighting and sets must be tweaked in only one or two tech rehearsals—in theaters that often don't deliver the specs promised. (The group's semi-serious motto is "no dreams, no disappointments.")

Sometimes choreography and staging must be changed at the last minute, too. While the theater in Arequipa was large, the dancers had the unforeseen challenge of dancing on a steeply raked stage. In Lima, the venue was more intimate, seating about 150, with the first row of chairs on the stage itself. Many audience members weren't able to take in the entire stage without turning their heads. At the climactic end of *Embers*, the dancers cover the stage with a huge parachute-like piece of fabric followed by a moment of musical silence and nearly unbearable stillness. Death, meanwhile, had been sitting downstage right, eerily illuminated in a spotlight and gesturing with slow, insect-like arm movements as if to indicate that she is the one in control of the scene. But, in Lima, her intense presence, felt so keenly in a bigger theater, was lost. To remind the audience, Burgess had her execute a swift and violent upward arm movement in the silent stillness that, peripherally, caught the audience's eye. The slight adjustment had a powerful effect.

lights were raised and most of the patrons had already left the theater, one woman told Burgess that the themes of war and loss touched her deeply. The piece evoked memories of her own experience under the reign of the terrorist guerrilla organization Shining Path, which was characterized by brutality and violence in the 1980s and '90s.

Earlier that day in his office, the cultural director of the Instituto Cultural Peruano Norteamericano and founder of the *Danza Nueva* festival, Fernando Torres, earnestly expressed his belief in the power of dance for cultural exchange. "You don't need to learn another language to be able to understand dance and to feel what is taking place onstage," he said. "Dance integrates, unifies, helps societies to understand each other in a very efficient way."

The only annual international contemporary dance festival in Peru, *Danza Nueva* is entirely funded by private donations, but Torres is committed to preserving it. "This festival is a bottle of water to our thirst for dance, for movement, for contemporary expression," he continued, "for the dance that makes you feel, makes you break your boundaries, makes you think."

After the performance in Arequipa, my seatmate, a teenaged boy who had driven three hours to see *Embers*, turned to me and said: *No quisiera que terminara* (I didn't want it to end). **DS**



This year, DTSB & Co. celebrates its 15th anniversary with performances in DC and abroad. Plans are in the works to perform in India. (At presstime, company members Leonardo Torres and Miyako Nitadori and lighting designer Maja White were heading to Chennai, India, to teach and perform, and to scope out possible venues for a late 2007 engagement.) For a calendar of events: movingforwarddance.com.