

# Andrew Palermo & Taye Diggs

The artistic directors of dre.dance share their creative processes and hopes for their budding contemporary company.

Topher Cox

Nearly 20 years ago, two young boys formed an instant bond after meeting in dance class in their native Rochester, New York. It was a connection that would lay the groundwork for the future establishment of their own 12-member company.

Today, Andrew Palermo and Taye Diggs' New York-based dre.dance is entering its fourth season and creating quite a name within the performing arts community. The press has praised their work as "powerful," "unexpected," "athletic," "passionate" and "abstract," and the company recently signed its first tour (set to begin in 2009) with booking powerhouse IMG Artists, which also represents such companies as Paul Taylor Dance Company and Pilobolus.

After graduating from Rochester's School of the Arts, the childhood friends remained close while continuing their musical theater education in different parts of the country: Diggs attended Syracuse University and Palermo went to the University of Cincinnati. Both

trained under such renowned teachers as Garth Fagan, Timothy Draper, Milton Myers and original Alvin Ailey member James Tuitte.

Diggs decided to embark upon an acting career post-college, which led to starring roles as an original cast member of the Tony Award-winning musical and feature film *Rent*, motion picture *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* and, currently, ABC's "Private Practice." Meanwhile, Palermo chose to establish himself as a stage and commercial choreographer, teacher and Broadway performer, starring as one of the primary ensemble members of the box-office hits *Wicked* and *Annie Get Your Gun*.

Although content with his acting career, Diggs felt the tug of dance whenever he would chat with Palermo about his teaching gigs. The two rejoined to instruct master classes at several well-known studios, and in 2004, approached Dancers Responding to AIDS about showcasing their first benefit performance. The duo christened their fledgling company dre.dance, a combination of

their names.

Palermo and Diggs recently completed a residency at Wichita State University in Kansas, where they set the first 20 minutes of their Joyce SoHo residency work-in-progress *beyond.words* on the performing arts students. The piece, which delves into embracing life with autism, will premiere April 2009 at the Tribeca Performing Arts Center as a full-length work. The company is also rehearsing a sociopolitical piece titled *the people*, which will feature a live orchestra and cutting-edge visual effects, to be presented at TPAC this month.

**Dance Teacher:** What drives you to create?

**Andrew Palermo:** I began dance at such a young age that I downplayed it because I was acting and singing, too. Then, as I started choreographing later I realized that it was something built within me. I feel I have something to say, whether it's through choreography or teaching, and that's just how I am made.

Dance is the purest expression there is and maybe the oldest—dance and song are universal. Something we are doing now could've been seen and understood 2,000 years ago, and that's pretty cool.

**Taye Diggs:** The need to create just comes from this raw relationship that I have with music. I don't know why it chose me, but when I hear music I just want to move. And the way I feel when I move is unlike any other feeling that I have experienced. It's something that I don't even understand, but I'm very grateful for it. It allows me to focus and better direct all this energy that I have.

**DT:** What has influenced your style?

**AP:** We both love Jerome Robbins—he's a perfect mixture of technical ability, athleticism and everyday movement; we're big fans of pedestrian movement. Marty Kudelka, Wade Robson and Ohad Naharin are also big influences. Then again, there are a million different people out there who inspire us on a daily basis. We both grew up playing a lot of sports while dancing, so incorporating athletic movement is a big part of it. Our dancers, both men and women, have to be like brick houses. They have to be really strong; we don't change things up for the girls.

**TD:** There was always music playing in my house, so I feel like I owe my love of dance in its rawest form to my parents. We grew up dancing to the Jackson 5 and Earth, Wind and Fire. We'd have Saturday morning family sessions where we'd dance until the record skipped. Also, the resident modern dance company in Rochester was Garth Fagan Dance, and it was the first time I was exposed to this style of modern. It really caught my attention because it was a predominantly black modern dance company. It was something so distant from what I was used to seeing onstage. There were these big muscular men doing strong and dynamic athletic movements. Today the movement I'm still drawn to when I choreograph is very similar—staccato, jumps and

changes of direction. I just want to make sure that I'm constantly stimulated by the movement.

**DT:** What is your creative process, and is collaborating long distance due to Diggs' Los Angeles-based filming schedule challenging?

**AP:** Normally, I'll start with the music and get my inspiration from there, but each piece is different. Lately I'm of the "anything goes" school—the less you limit yourself, the more open you are to interesting possibilities. The key is to challenge the dancers and myself by making each piece unique and changing up the creative process.

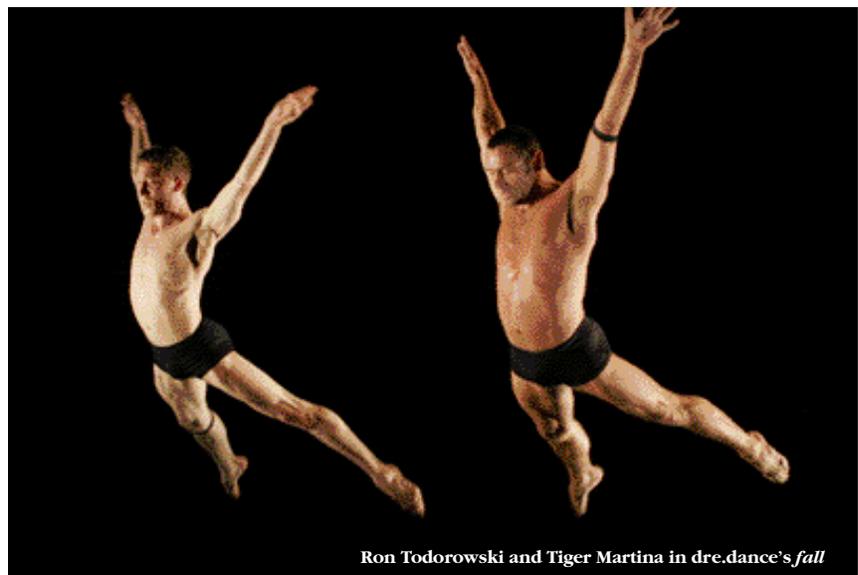
Because of other things we have going on, we are not a full-time 9-to-5 company, and to keep that focus is a challenge. It can be hectic for me sometimes to keep things running while teaching, but at the same time, I think that this split focus can be put to good use through stepping away from something and coming back. Just the other day I came from a play rehearsal back to working on *the people* and my steps were all showbiz-y, having been influenced by what I was doing earlier.

**TD:** It's obviously best when we're both in the same city and can vibe off of each other. It is difficult when we're worlds apart, so we've had to try out

different configurations. We divide the movements into eighths, take on full segments, trade off as we go along or choreograph entire pieces separately. It's a lot of telephone calls and coming up with interesting new ways to collaborate. I'll find dancers on the West Coast, put them on video and e-mail that to Drew. He has been e-mailing me the current rehearsal process and I'm able to view what he's been working on up to this point. It's our own style and I think it adds to the quirkiness of *dre.dance*. We are forced to take what we've been given and benefit from it, knowing that whatever comes out is going to be really interesting. Were it any other situation, we would be choreographing completely differently and might miss out on an interesting outcome. Embracing that fact is going to result in a true creation.

**DT:** How did you react when watching your first piece together?

**AP:** Mine was a feeling of sheer terror. But it made me notice that my attachment to *dre.dance* is at a whole other level than any other work I choreograph because it's 100 percent us. If we stopped it would stop, and that really brings a lot of responsibility and pride with it, and huge self-criticism at the same time—it's a blessing and a curse, I guess. Like at the DRA event, Taye and



Ron Todorowski and Tiger Martina in *dre.dance's fall*

Steven Schreiber

## FACE TO FACE

I were sitting in the back and I was freaking out about technical mishaps like lighting cues, not the choreography.

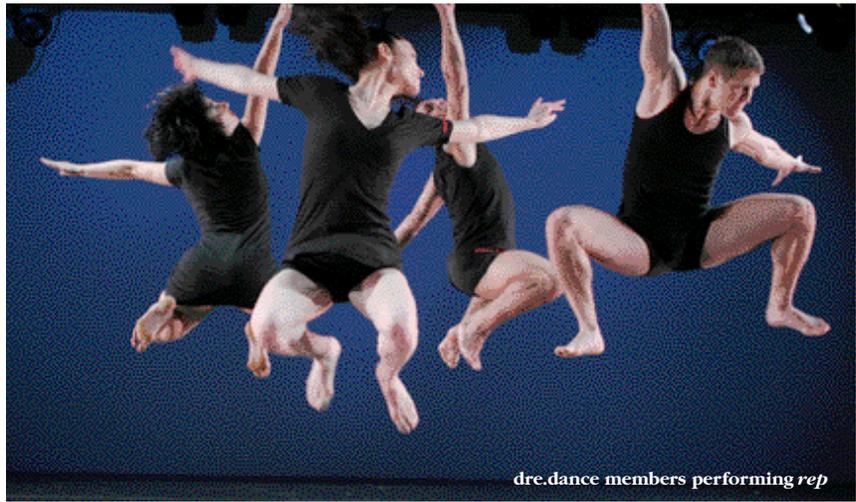
**TD:** We're both pretty cool, calm and collected and have great senses of humor, so I had never seen him in that state before; he was just beside himself. We were brand-new choreographers at the time and it demonstrated to me how important and how real this is to him.

**DT:** What do you hope to instill within your company as well as your audience?

**AP:** I stress repeatedly, in this day and age of tricks and dancers wanting to be on "So You Think You Can Dance" and all those shows, that dance is an art and we can't forget that. It's about expression and acting. We always tell our students that you have to be actors first; you have to be able to tell a story or at least evoke something partially through your body and storytelling abilities. But it's something that I often forget until opening night since I'm always in the studio crafting what I want to say until that moment. I strive to challenge our dancers to stretch themselves, to look at things from a different angle rather than react to their first instinct—to think beyond normality.

**TD:** Selfishly, I want everyone to enjoy it. I want to create works with Drew that people will love and will be moved by. From there we can get more specific; if there's a message we're trying to convey, or an issue we want to bring a certain amount of awareness to, that's always great. That insecure performer in me wants to be liked, which can get difficult when you're artistic-directing. We'll ask the opinions of our dancers and sometimes we'll take what they offer, but I have to check myself because I don't want to be swayed too much. You have to stick to your own vision. I have to remind the dancers that it's not just about movement; you have to make a connection.

**DT:** You select serious topics for your works. Why and how do you approach



Steven Schnaber

these issues, and is this something you will continue to do?

**AP:** It's a bit ironic, I guess, because up until *beyond.words*, every piece had its own story; they were driven by what we were feeling at that moment. While our pieces sometimes touch on serious topics, we do have those that are fun, and even if you're not a concert dance lover, you can still come to a dre.dance evening and find things you're going to like. I can't imagine us abandoning this as it's who we are. We tend to go with what we feel at the moment for the movement, dance and subject matter, so I don't think there's any way to know what will come next.

**TD:** This is a direction we just started to move into. It has a lot to do with where we are politically in the world, and us just getting older and being inspired by other choreographers and artists. You start to feel a bit of responsibility and want to have a say and be heard, but I can't imagine we would ever turn into a political dance company. These are just two pieces as a result of us experimenting down a new path.

**DT:** What role do you feel such thought-provoking subjects play within the dance world?

**AP:** When working on a piece, dancers are not really thinking about the topic because they're doing the movement and interpreting what we're giving them. But when it comes to talking about it, we've had dancers tell us that the pieces raised their own awareness—it opened their

eyes. To me, being able to affect those people who are working on a piece and performing it is the highest compliment.

**TD:** As choreographers, we have certain ideas we want to get out there and put across so you can remind people what's going on in the world. It seems to be changing recently with how much mainstream attention the dance world is receiving, which I think is wonderful. But society doesn't look to dance as a place to find political views and ideas, so it's great that choreographers are choosing that venue to express themselves and to try to get people to wake up. Plus, it broadens our own horizons and stretches our limits. I know I learned something new every day while Andrew was doing research for the autism piece.

**DT:** What are your future goals for yourselves and for dre.dance?

**AP:** I ask myself this every day. We want to work on every plane. We want to have the company tour the world and we want to choreograph on Broadway, but having a proven track record is something we're still working toward. We really feel like we're on the threshold of breaking out; we're already starting to book a tour for next year and that is the real deal to me—the beginning of a new, exciting phase.

**TD:** Getting a couple of grants would be a good start, but we want to do it all. We think we have great, interesting ideas. We'd love to steer the company, of course, and work on all these different levels at the same time. **DT**