Back on His Feet

Richard Daniels' dance card is full

January 1, 1999 By Jennifer Dunning

"I am still here because of dance," Richard Daniels says. At 47, Daniels has returned to his first love almost by accident and is bemused that he has become known as a "downtown," or experimental, solo dance performer in New York City. Now he's developing an ambitious national performing-and-workshop project. And he recently had the first review for work done since his return, from veteran dance critic William Littler of the *Toronto Star:*

"And then there was Richard Daniels," Littler wrote in what was otherwise a pan of last summer's Toronto Festival of Independent Dance Artists, "whose solo to the music of Beethoven's Op. 135 String Quartet, titled 'Ghazi' (Turkish for leader, survivor of war), flowed right from the music with the utmost economy, as if every movement counted."

Each movement does count with mature artists like Daniels, who are gradually being welcomed back into American modern dance. Their bodies may not be up to the extreme technical demands made of younger dancers today, but they've lived long enough to be unafraid of expressing emotion in an increasingly hip, chill art form.

This is especially true of Daniels, who tested positive in 1992 after his lover of 16 years, lawyer Curtis Sykes, was diagnosed with PCP. "Curtis never wanted to be tested," Daniels says. "He never believed there was such a thing as confidentiality." And Daniels had no illusions about his own HIV status: "I knew if he was, I was."

The two had met in ballet class in Kansas City, Missouri, where they both grew up. As a child, Daniels had always wanted to dance. "I'd put costumes on, play a record and perform in my room," he says. "But I never felt it was acceptable for a good Jewish boy to be a dancer. So I asked for piano lessons."

Eventually, Daniels headed east to college at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, where he received a degree in photography and took his first real dance classes. He returned home for two years, then he and Sykes moved to New York City together.

Daniels readily describes the performing career that followed as lackluster. His unsure attempts at choreography met with a resounding lack of interest. Then came an injury. "I was thirty," he says. "I thought, 'It's over. You'd better make a living.' So I went into arts management."

In 1994, five weeks before Sykes died, Daniels ran into Janie Brendel, a modern-dance teacher with whom he'd studied in the mid-'80s. Brendel wanted to help -- and she offered her teaching -- so Daniels returned to the studio.

"I was spending all day in the hospital," he recalls, "but I could take three or four classes a week. Dance let me get out of myself a little bit. You can talk to therapists, friends, doctors, but it just doesn't do the same thing. Janie would put on the tape, and I would do pliés with tears rolling down my cheeks."

The classes made him hungry for the stage again. His return, after 15 years, came in a 1995 benefit for Dancers Responding to AIDS. In class, Daniels had worn dance clothes he found when cleaning out Sykes' drawers after his death. And now, moving onstage on his own, Daniels felt that Sykes and Eric Beeler, an influential teacher and early AIDS casualty, "were holding me up."

He wants to do the same for others. Buoyed by audiences' positive reaction, Daniels had put together a program of solos -- dances he created on his own and with friends, as well as work by noted choreographers like Molissa Fenley, Eleanor King and Christopher Gillis. Now, he says, "I'm starting on a second program of dances by people facing a life-threatening disease."

He envisions a touring package of workshops for the seriously ill and their caregivers, to accompany his solo program. "I also want to have a solo night as a benefit for people with AIDS," he says.

"There are several things I want to communicate," Daniels continues. "One is about finding opportunity in crisis. The other is that there are still so many people not in a position to be public about what they are coping with. I want to be a visible face to that."

In "All the Time in the World," a haunting solo he created with Barbara Mahler in 1997, Daniels bends and stretches slowly, suggesting a pilot flying blind through the night, searching for telltale beacons of light far below to guide him. "When we were working on it, Barbara would tell me to take more time," he says. "There are a lot of quiet moments in that piece with nothing to do but focus. I have a tendency to rush. 'Dance as if you had all the time in the world,' she'd say."
