



Bound for Broadway: Conn College's Dorfman choreographing show to hit New York in '17



David Dorfman, shown teaching a dance class at Connecticut College, is the choreographer for "Indecent," a play with dance and music that will open on Broadway in April. (Adam Campos)

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David Dorfman has spent much of his life in modern dance, founding the esteemed group David Dorfman Dance and serving as dance department head at Connecticut College. Now, he is about to add a new title to his resume: Broadway choreographer.

He has been working on the show "Indecent" for over a year, during which time it has enjoyed three different productions. On April 18, the play written by Paula Vogel that features music and dance is set to open on Broadway.

"I'm still pinching myself and smiling ear to ear and don't know which end is up," Dorfman says.

"Indecent" — created by Vogel and director Rebecca Taichman — takes its inspiration from the 1923 Broadway debut of "The God of Vengeance" by Sholem Asch. "The God of Vengeance" was "seen by some as a seminal work of Jewish culture, and by others as an act of traitorous libel," according to "Indecent" info. The play tells the tale of a Jewish brothel owner who hopes his

daughter will wed a Jewish scholar, but she falls instead for one of his prostitutes. Its love story between two women produced the first lesbian kiss on Broadway. Its producers and cast were jailed on obscenity charges.

Dorfman says he's very honored to be part of this project.

"I feel like I'm getting to live out one of my dreams in this piece, to be with like-minded people who are putting on a show about some important issues that have history but vast imagination in it," Dorfman says. "It's about love and it's about art and it's about censorship and it's about death and, even though it's about history, it's forward-looking and (exploring) how we can treat each other with more respect and make better art and better love and respect each other more."

While this will mark Dorfman's Broadway debut, it will also be the first time that Vogel (who won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for "How I Learned to Drive") and Taichman will have a work on the Great White Way.

"Indecent" will play at the Cort Theatre, whose previous shows have included Steve Martin and Edie Brickell's "Bright Star" earlier this year and the Tony-winning revival of "Fences" starring Denzel Washington and Viola Davis in 2010.

"Indecent" premiered Oct. 8, 2015, at Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven and then played at the La Jolla Playhouse in California at the end of 2015 and the Off-Broadway Vineyard Theatre in New York this past spring.

The show has morphed in each iteration. Part of that involves adapting the piece to the feel of a different theater, Dorfman says. Beyond that, though, every time the team spends six or seven weeks developing (or redeveloping) the work for a new production, he notes, "You find out more things about the way the play communicates."

So some dances and scenes were in one version and didn't exist in another. Some were drastically reworked.

"Indecent's" earlier versions have earned admiring reviews. New York Times critic Charles Isherwood wrote of the Vineyard production that "'Indecent' sheds an eye-opening light on a little-known time when theatrical history, Jewish culture and the frank depiction of homosexuality intersected, with explosive results." He called it a "powerful new play" with "sensitive direction and ... forceful performances." He also said, "The fluent choreography, by David Dorfman, also contributes to the almost cinematic flow."

Dorfman credits Taichman with possessing a tremendous sense of movement.

"There's never a moment that isn't considered by her. So if someone is taking a chair off, we want them to dance the chair off. But it can't call attention to itself as just a pure dance (that's) distracting. It needs to be just the right movement for that moment," he says.

That is one of the major differences for Dorfman between developing choreography for his dance company and for a stage piece with a plot. In a show like "Indecent," the choreography needs to put the story forward at every second and enliven the dramatic moment. For David Dorfman Dance, on the other hand, whole sections can be simply abstractly appealing because it's under the auspices of an evening of dance theater.

"Indecent" covers a significant span of times, from 1906 to the 1950s. Dorfman says he loves referencing historical periods or dances and then addressing how those relate to the play's content and how they might move a modern-day audience.

Different aspects of the story come into play in the choreography.

"The Jewishness of the play is very clear from start to finish," he says, and so some of the choreography draws on a Jewish tradition and uses it to create something new.

He adds, too, "The relation to Broadway is one of the issues (in 'Indecent'), so we do reference what we might think of as typical Broadway dancing briefly."

With "Indecent," he says, "Our goal continues to be to make the exact movement that looks fantastic with the performers and that speaks to that moment in time the play is referencing and yet lets us dream and lets us get excited, lets us be fanciful, give a little grin on our face or something that can almost cause a tear."

While Dorfman has spent most of his career in modern dance, he has been involved with a musical before. In fact, Dorfman met Taichman 13 years ago when they both worked on "Green Violin," a piece about Marc Chagall and Soviet theater.

"That was really my first exposure on a grand scale to what we would call a more commercial Off-Broadway/Broadway show. I learned a lot. Here we were, a couple weeks out, 'Okay, we need an opening number.' The music director was, like, 'This is how an opening number goes.' I really didn't know," says Dorfman, who ended up winning a Barrymore Award for the production in Philadelphia.

Dorfman will take a sabbatical in the spring so he can be in New York City to work on "Indecent." (He had been set to take a sabbatical next fall, since David Dorfman Dance has a big new show coming up then, but Conn College agreed that the sabbatical could be switched to the spring.) A two-week rehearsal period will be followed by tech, then previews and, finally, the official opening.

"I just couldn't be happier ... I feel like I'm just happy to be alive and having these wonderful opportunities and being surrounded by such beautiful people," Dorfman, who turned 61 a week ago, says of his various work.