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David Dorfman

The Family Stone joins the choreographer for Prophets of Funk.

By Gia Kourlas Fri Jul 29 2011



FUNK OFF Dancers find their inner Sly. Photograph: Adam Campos

More than ever, choreographers resort to recorded music, but for a new collaboration brewing at Lincoln Center Out of Doors, David Dorfman has scored a major coup. *Prophets of Funk*, which is set to the music of Sly and the Family Stone, will feature the band (minus the reclusive Sly Stone) in a free performance on August 11 at Damrosch Park Bandshell. Still, for the work, which explores the prophetic possibilities of music and dance, Dorfman brings it all back to Stone: Funk, for the choreographer, is about keeping hope alive.

Is this a new version of something that you've been touring?

It's definitely new, and we're calling it a premiere because it will be the first time that we dance with the band playing live. We're calling this a "concert edition." Not only is the band playing live, but at the end of the piece, they will play a half-hour set of their incredible hits that have not been featured in the dance. So it will be like a concert at the end of the evening, immediately flowing out of our dance.

Let's go back in time. How did you happen to meet the band?

I saw them at the Wolf Den at Mohegan Sun. It's near our house in New London, Connecticut, and I was just paging through the paper and hopped in the car at the last second. They were fantastic. The Family Stone is very generous with audiences, and they do this thing where they come out and sit at a table and talk to everyone who wants to come and talk to them. I got a signed picture and the card of the manager at the time, and began a correspondence with them about the possibility of one day performing live. I hadn't had the idea until that very moment. So it wasn't like, Oh, I can't wait until the Family Stone

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comes because I want to do a dance about them. All communications were very positive. They said, "We've never done anything like that before, but we're game." A lot of the band lives in Las Vegas, a couple in California—they just get together for these tours. They said, "It would be like a tour and I think we could do it." So it went forward, but I knew at the time that if we went through with the piece, most of the performances—probably 99 percent—would be with recorded music. We've been touring it to a bunch of places, and that's what we're calling *Prophets of Funk*, with a sound design by Sam Crawford and the Family Stone recorded music.

But you wanted it live?

Bill Bragin [director of public programming for Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts] and I just kept up with the notion of, "Wouldn't it be great [for Dorfman's company] to come back to Lincoln Center Out of Doors, and perhaps with the band? We almost gave up on the idea, but found their current management and had a conference call. They were enthusiastic, particularly Jerry Martini, who has been the saxophonist since the origin of the band in '68. Jerry Martini, Cynthia Robinson and Gregg Errico are three of the original band members. Gregg was 17 when they started the band, and Jerry is 68 now. They have four other band members that are just outrageous. They're a really great band now, and you feel the original energy of the late '60s, '70s, and then you see the generations now. And that's kind of what I've been interested in for years.

How do you mean?

All of these pieces, from *Underground to Disavowal to Prophets of Funk*, are going back to the 1960s—or the 1860s in the case of *Disavowal*—and seeing what was driving the period, through politics, music and social change. And then seeing how that applies now to populations that are ranging from teenagers—or our son, who's ten years old, and his friends—on up to people who were around for Woodstock. So I'm seeing this as the third part of a trilogy of time-traveling, and I find their music—the more I've gotten into it—really ageless. The part that I left out is that I had been a huge Sly and the Family Stone fan when I was making that bridge into high school. I still have memories of working out with weights in my friend's basement and then playing various sports and getting inspired by the eight-track of Sly and the Family Stone: "Stand!" and "I Want to Take You Higher" and "Everybody Is a Star." Kind of these populist notions that you can do what you want to do. Don't let *anyone* tell you that you can't do it. It's funny; I've been reading all these political articles lately about pragmatism versus idealism—in foreign policy in particular, the notions of war and economics—and here we are with the debt ceiling. I think that that's Sly's message in music *and*, in an ironic and unfortunate sense, even the curve of his life—which we touch on in the piece, but that's not the main purpose of the piece at all. It's not a biodance. We are dealing a little bit with vulnerability, celebrity, fame on one level. I've had the opportunity to briefly talk to him on the phone. He has the most gentle, beautiful voice and is in support of the project, and so it's been all that I've wanted it to be. [Laughs] Kind of going back, but not just for a nostalgic or retro feel, but also to situate it in the present day.

So you were a fan early on?

Yes. The first week of college—I went to Washington University for most of my undergrad—they came to play in the quad that first week, and that first week of college you feel, Oh my God, I'm on my own. I can do anything. I'm all-powerful. [Laughs] I can fly! And I'm insecure. So they kept recurring in formative times. When they went a little more disco, I went *really* disco. I mean *really*. That's how I got into dance. I was doing disco contests. I did my junior year at University of Illinois. It was the place where I took my first dance class, and it was also the place where I nearly flunked out of business school because I was at the discos every night learning and competing in my platform shoes, one of the pairs of which I wear in the show.

What is your role?

I'm kind of playing the odd, older manager guy—in a very loud sport coat and almost all my own attire—showing off the band to the world. There's a little subtext of black and white. I feel like I'm playing the white Jewish manager, and there are issues in the real-life band that are similar. There are some complexities running through it, but by and large, we really want to dance to the music. We want to bring joy to us and to the audience in a visceral sense by revealing and sometimes introducing the public to music that they haven't heard, and really enjoying the outlandishness of the hope and the musicality that was presented. We're trying to bring the music to life in our bodies. I don't want to hyperintellectualize the piece, because it's really there to be accessible and to relate to anyone. You don't have to know anything about dance. You don't have to know anything about Sly and the Family Stone. We will take you there. Then there's this notion in the title of prophecy and funk and the multiple meanings of funk: whether it's this thing that everyone can envy, like, Oh man, that person's got a great funk. It can be in the most literal and obvious way. We do purposely play with caricature.

How so?

It could be the white person wanting the funk of the black person. We're trying to play with that in an overly obvious way for theatrical purpose. And Sly is a really cool prophet. [Kyle] Abraham plays the older black prophet, and Karl Rogers plays the decidedly unfunky token white guy. Whitney Tucker, with this blond-Afro wig, is the white prophetess. And the prophecy is this notion of, whether it's through popular entertainment or politics or mysticism or whatever, [this person] is ahead of their time. They're going to tell us what's going to happen. That can really be exiting or it can be damning. It's all those levels of prophecy.

Is your agenda to be accessible?

Yes. [Laughs] And I'm proud of it. But I like to do it in an innovative and somewhat subversive way so that it's not spoon-feeding. I really do want to reach out and communicate. It's going to be different for every audience member, but I want to have something happen. The root of the word is *access*. So instead of keeping people away, I want to bring them to it and then just from my postmodern training or my era, I want to try to do it in a way that's a little bit—if not a lot bit—new for the occasion.

I'm a bit confused: Does a dancer specifically play Sly or different aspects of Sly?

In this particular production, there is one character that audiences can, if they wish, read as Sly. We give that to them in the first moment. We are pointing toward Sly, but it is in no way a narrative that one would follow in a literal, ordered way. There are a couple of times when we feature Sly with someone else. [Raja Kelly] has a great romantic duet with Kendra Portier. There are moments when we return to a Sly figure, who could be any brilliant celebrity at any stage in their career—or it could be Sly. The other folks have contact with him and are inextricably linked in a powerful way, but I'm not trying to make them band members.

Why is the band having a renaissance now?

I'll go into my idealistic pose. I think that there's this notion of treating another person kindly and going to the ends of the earth for someone that you care about and trying to get to a higher plane. We're using the song "Don't Call Me Nigger, Whitey," and that was not in the preview we did. We got a comment, "I thought it was going to be a little more political, a little grittier," and after our momentary knee-jerk defensiveness, we put it in. I love that song in the show. It still has this positivity, and this thing of, "treat me as you would treat yourself." Give me dignity. I know that can sound as corny as the day is long, but I think it is so relevant today. I don't think they had many equals or groups that copied their style that eclipsed them. I think they're really unique. I think people want to see and experience that. So I don't know exactly why—maybe, on a practical side, their management is more together. But I also think the world is so troubled. The world has always been troubled, but now we know about it more and we see that with every economy, every political state and nation, even the ones with fantastic grassroots Twitter/Facebook-originated demonstrations and freedom marches. I think that because this band had that message starting in 1968-ish, and people are getting into hearing it more. We're looking for rallying cries to

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say, "Wow—this is possible! We can stand. We can do something." So the band is dovetailing with popular movements in a really good way.

David Dorfman Dance/The Family Stone performs at on Aug 11.

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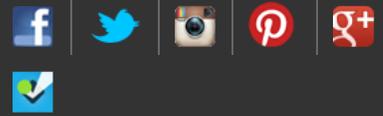
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