

Sly approach helps Dorfman's troupe assure that no one leaves in a funk

By Jeffrey Gantz

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"Prophets of Funk — Dance to the Music," which the New York-based David Dorfman Dance brought to the Institute of Contemporary Art last night under the auspices of World Music/CRASHarts, promised to be a lighthearted return to the early 1970s. But it took a few serious turns on the way to the audience dance party that ended it.

"Disavowal," Dorfman's previous piece, which he presented at Salem State College in 2009, was openly political, even confrontational, taking as its subject the abolitionist John Brown. "Prophets of Funk" goes the entertainment route to creating community. Who doesn't love Sly and the Family Stone? And who doesn't want to dance to the music?

Well, maybe everyone isn't as addicted to early-'70s soul and funk as Dorfman, but it might be hard to remember that when his eight dancers — four black, four white — are hopping and popping and booty-shaking to "Love City" lyrics like "Look into the future/Tell me what you see/Brothers and sisters holding hands/And you sitting next to me." Yes to peace, love, and understanding; no to racism, discrimination, and war. "Prophets of Funk" is about overcoming, but also celebrating, what Dorfman has called "the funk of everyday life."

Dorfman himself starts it off, entering upstage left and traveling, almost as if on a tightrope, down a diagonal slash of light on the floor. Dressed in a suit coat and trousers and a scally cap, and shadowboxing with his hands and feet, he could be a chunky white middleweight boxer from the '50s. After a minute or so, he is joined by Raja Kelly as Sly, and, to recorded cheers and whistles and video projections of the real Sly and company on the backdrop, the rest of the troupe bring it in with "Underdog" and then "Stand!"

There is a freestyle approach to dress and hairstyle, from Karl Rogers's conservative white shirt and tie and suspenders to some multicolored pants and Afros, both black and white. The party vibe persists through "Love City" and "If You Want Me To Stay" (with some same-sex couples) and "I Want To Take You Higher" (with suggestive smoke swirling up on the video).

But then hard stares are exchanged and dancers begin to curl up on the floor, overcome by the funk, and couples form and dissolve. The rhythm of the evening keeps shifting, from a spoofy demonstration of dance moves like "the syncopated chop suey" and "the whipping post" to a wistful solo and duet to "That Kind of Person" to a segment danced to the soundtrack of Sly's stoned appearance on "The Dick Cavett Show" in the early 1970s.

But just as the hourlong evening starts to get heavy, Kelly is imploring the audience to put their hands in the air, and with that as a warm-up, the dancers are soon spreading out to encourage everyone to come down on stage and join in the fun. Last night, "Dance to the Music" and "Different Strokes" made it easy for people to move their feet.

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