

ENTERTAINMENT

To see violence with greater clarity, troupe goes “underground”

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PUBLISHED: February 25, 2009 at 11:05 am | UPDATED: May 7, 2016 at 1:05 am

For all its qualities, dance isn't the first thing that comes to mind when confronting violence. And no — the dance-fighting in “West Side Story” doesn't count.

But award-winning choreographer David Dorfman uses dance to ask the question, “Is violence ever justified?” in his provocative work “underground,” which plays DU's Gates Concert Hall on Saturday.

Many on either side of the political divide would certainly answer “yes” — citing threats to their ways of life that ostensibly can be addressed only with physical force. Dorfman uses the activities of the 1960s radical group the Weather Underground to look further and ask: “When does activism become terrorism?”

“This notion of distant dualities and black and white, I think it's becoming yesterday,” Dorfman said over the phone this week from his office at Connecticut College. “We're getting a little bit more in tune with the gray area. In the piece, I bring up the notion of ‘Is your country worth killing for?’ And the very next line is, ‘Is your family worth killing for?’ As you get older, you realize the absolutes go out the window and it's a case-by-case basis.”

Praised and debated by The New York Times and the San Francisco Bay Guardian, the piece has circled the globe since it premiered in 2006 with Dorfman’s now 24-year- old company.

“We performed it in Russia, and this TV director told me right afterward, ‘That last scene is a little funny but very disquieting.’ The essence of fanaticism, which is very connected to terrorism, is definitely there,” Dorfman said. “You see it in rock concerts, at political rallies.”

But how does the work address these issues?

Dorfman drapes original music from composer Jonathan Bepler and songs by groups M83 and Broken Social Scene over spoken and projected words, video and photos as his dancers act out scenarios that toe the line between literal and interpretive.

“David’s dance vocabulary is exuberantly physical, a real thrust towards freedom of expression,” said David Alan Harris, a friend of Dorfman’s who will be dancing in “underground.” “That aligns closely with the themes. Lots of dance has explosive freedom as an impetus, but what’s distinct about David is that he works with a particular intellect and a commitment to social justice.”

The show doesn’t endorse a point of view, but rather takes an ambivalent stance toward violent protest groups like the Weather Underground, which Dorfman was exposed to while growing up in Chicago in the ’60s.

Dorfman’s commitment to community extends to the cast of the work, which at times includes nearly 50 people on stage, most culled from community auditions.

“It was interesting that he was open to a lot of different styles and ages and sizes of people,” said Coleen Walsh, a choreographer who teaches at CU and UNC. She heard about the piece through her board membership on the Colorado Dance Alliance and was immediately intrigued. “It was great opportunity for me, who hasn’t performed in 10 years, to jump back in.”

Theatrical, yet movement- centered. Weighty, but not preachy or pedantic. Dorfman thinks “underground” is able to bridge these gaps.

“It’s literal at points and has a narrative, but not one that’s so tight that we’re doing a story line,” Dorfman said. “It mostly deals with how each person defines the responsibility that they want to take in their lives.

"I like to dance really hard and even used to play football in high school, but I would never throw a rock through a window or kill another human being. The question is: Is legislation the complete answer all the time, or do we need to get people in the streets sometimes and express outrage?"

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John Wenzel is a member of the Now Team, having covered comedy, music, film, books and video games for The Denver Post for more than a decade. As a proud Dayton, Ohio native, his love of Guided by Voices is

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