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David Dorfman challenges racialism in *Disavowal*

Papa knows best

By Byron Woods

Disavowal

David Dorfman Dance

Reynolds Theater

Nov. 13–14

Critical assessments of 19th-century abolitionist John Brown differ radically in their conclusions: Documentarian Ken Chowder calls him the father of American terrorism; biographer David Reynolds' book credits Brown in its subtitle as "the man who killed slavery."

But in choreographer David Dorfman's latest work, *Disavowal*, the firebrand takes on an even more unlikely role—as something of a red herring.

True, Dorfman cites Brown as the inspiration for the new work in his program notes. And scenes in *Disavowal* touch more than once upon race, identity and proposed reparations, ranging from repaid college loans to the invisibility one character believes another feels when walking down a street.

But the first thing disavowed in *Disavowal* is apparently the cast itself, in a series of condescending, too-much-information "introductions" the choreographer's boorish character conducts during small group on-stage tours, ostensibly before the start of the show. Thus from the start we get the distinct impression that Dorfman's thoughts are more focused on what's implicit in the distance between a leader and his followers—this choreographer, these dancers, or characters based on them—than on any cause that brings them together.

Moreover, *Disavowal*'s monologues and movements clearly interrogate just how much such groups are ever "brought together" in the first place. Dorfman's choreographer controls his performers' every movement—and then complains his dancers seem unable to take a little responsibility for themselves once in a while. In another sequence, an African-American dancer's monologue says she wants "blankness"—but only after her character has gone into histrionics when another dancer claims she can take on the racial appearance of the people she's around. Repeatedly, the various divisions—gender and race, as well as audience, performer, director—are disparaged just as they are being portrayed as a necessity.

It's an edgy notion, for this election year in particular: From an obscure Latin motto to the first word in our country's name, as a people we routinely claim we want to bring such divisions down. But when we act—and vote—to

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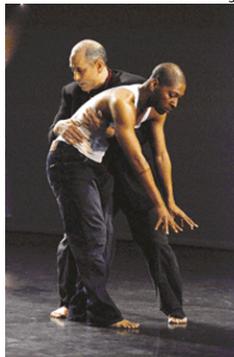


Photo courtesy of Duke Performances
 David Dorfman (left)
 and Kyle Abraham in
Disavowal

reinforce those same separations, we prove how closely married the politics of identity are to the psychology of identity itself. When performers fight while mapping out and claiming sections of the audience with different colors of yarn, *Disavowal* asks, How can we conceivably get beyond the politics of divisiveness when our identities are based on those divisions?

No less problematic here is the unifying principle we come up with when we do seem to overcome such primary delimiters. Dorfman has one word for it: "Papa."

We see the character and concept at the show's opening. Backlit behind a white curtain, Dorfman strikes a ludicrous series of action poses. Over suitably corporate background music, he says, "This is Papa. What is Papa? People in Advocacy for Perspective Adjustment."

The ersatz infomercial claims that "Papa aims to open minds" by "discussing a variety of issues" in order to foster "a spirit of tolerance and understanding."

Then comes a more ominous mission statement: "If dialogue doesn't work, Papa will create tolerance by any means necessary."

Meanwhile, a tight formation of dancers in white T-shirts and briefs do a closely supervised dance drill, their arms and fists swinging to a loud—and certainly reductive—disco beat.

Shortly we learn how easily Papa is displeased. Dorfman wanders the darkened audience, staring balefully at the stage, barking out corrections; a sinister figure lit from beneath by a ghostly white light. When a grappling match erupts on-stage, he bellows, "That's enough"—before demanding the actors "fight more downstage!"

But in a mid-show conflict over racial roles, Dorfman's intervention has dancers Kyle Abraham and Karl Rogers make a complete about-face in emotional intensity through touch—as the audience watches, in stunned silence. Chalk one up for Papa.

In his monologue, Dorfman stresses how, once, Papa always knew better; knew best. Implicit is a darker observation: If we haven't fully matured, we look to our leaders for parents we did or didn't have, and become—again—disempowered children.

Dorfman probes just how one-sided that relationship is. His Papa denies perpetrating anything, before a black-and-white projection of flames. But by then, his character has already determined that his dance is a cause worth sacrificing the time and energy of his fellows.

Not that his dancers are really his fellows, when you get down to it. Not when they're actually subordinates, lessers whom he ultimately has to look down on for their comparative lack of vision—his vision, to be precise.

Call it Coincidentalism—the notion that when the candidates, countries, sets of values and big pictures were being handed out, we just happen to have gotten the best. Depending on what fuels it, its leader can either be a Jim Jones or a Martin Luther King. Reason enough for the audience to have thought twice, before following orders during *Disavowal's* audience participation sections.

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