



## *Dance Delivers Disavowal* as David Dorfman Does Duke

by Kate Dobbs Ariail

**November 13, 2008, Durham, NC:** Ssshhh...don't tell Sarah Palin: David Dorfman has dedicated his new work, *Disavowal*, to Bill Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn, the now-moderated radicals of Weather Underground fame. Dorfman and his company, [David Dorfman Dance](#), have been in residence for a week at Duke University under the aegis of [Duke Performances](#), and they gave the first of two performances of this new work Thursday in Reynolds Theater as part of DP's *Art/Politics/Now* programming. For all its exasperations, it is worth seeing.

*Disavowal* follows [underground](#), which premiered at the 2006 American Dance Festival, and which looked at power, politics, and the ethical limits of extra-legal direct action in pursuit of social change. *Disavowal*, ostensibly inspired by the life and actions of 19th century abolitionist John Brown, continues those investigations, but from a more psycho-social stance. It is not the wet mess that *underground* was at its premiere, but it is even more baffling. Unless you were ignorant of John Brown's existence, you will not learn from this performance anything about him or the historical impact of his 1859 raid on the Harper's Ferry federal armory, from which he intended to arm slaves and lead a rebellion. Several people were killed, but the raid failed in its purpose, and Brown was hanged for treason after being captured by federal forces led (in one of the great ironies of history) by Robert E. Lee. Like the leaders of the Weather Underground, however, Brown became a hero to a great many agitating for social change, while to others he was a devil incarnate. John Brown's body lies a'mouldering in the grave but, as the old song says, his soul is marching on — and, at least for a time, it marched in the bodies of Ayers and Dohrn.

So, if you are in command of a few facts, you can follow Dorfman's line of thought, from *underground* to *Disavowal*. After that, the following gets hard. *Disavowal* veers between the obvious and the opaque, with the extra added attractions of too-loud music and audience coercion. The latter begins with a fake "backstage tour" in which unsuspecting audience members are treated to an "introduction" to some of the dancers — or rather to their simulacra, shadows projected on curtains — by Dorfman, who comes across as a strange hybrid of the Pied Piper and a Hare Krishna. (Later, he also takes on characteristics of the Irate Director and the Evil Puppetmaster.) This exercise signals that the separation between performer space and audience space has been eliminated, that the boundary between actor and auditor has been transgressed, and that the action will comprise both parties (willing or not) and take place throughout the theater.

Sure enough, here come the dancers out into the aisles, though not to dance. They bear skeins of different-colored yarns, with which they loop up anyone willing. These yarns are later used in a tedious, grade-school-level exercise about the artificiality of difference, the difficulties of apology and reparation, and the ease of clustering people into brainwashable groups. Dorfman being a nice person, he doesn't have the blue yarn people attack others — he has them hug. I don't have

any problem with hugging, or being hugged by strangers, but I thoroughly resent being instructed to do so by a third party. There is much more of this kind of thing, culminating with the audience being exhorted to go onto the stage (those who go don't get to dance, just be there, like captured pawns), and punctuated with the house lights going up and glaring into the putative audience's eyes. It was all very tiring.

But — *it is worth putting up with*, because in between all the carrying-on, there are fabulous, beautiful movement sequences and even whole dances. These were far more intelligible and moving than all the spoken elements put together. Dorfman's movement language possesses a force and eloquence that make the boundary-busting shenanigans superfluous. While the desire to make total, all-inclusive works of theatre is understandable, even laudable, in this case at least the other performative aspects drain the power from the dance. However, much of the merit in art lies in the trying. David Dorfman Dance is to be praised for its efforts, for trying to expound more accurately, clearly, fully on something of great importance; and Duke Performances is to be praised for supporting this kind of new artmaking.

*Disavowal* repeats Friday, November 14. See our [calendar](#) for details.

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