

washingtonpost.com > Arts & Living > Theater

Dancemaker Doesn't Sweat A Hot Topic

Advertisement
Advertisement

By Sarah Kaufman
Washington Post Staff Writer
Sunday, November 2, 2008

You may have been led to believe that there is little love out there for Bill Ayers, the former member of the militant leftist group known as the Weather Underground, whose onetime ties to Sen. Barack Obama have raised temperatures across both presidential campaigns. But there is one man standing firmly in Ayers's corner, and he's coming to a theater near us.

"I'll be pretty straight with you: They're incredible people," choreographer David Dorfman says of Ayers and his surviving Weather Underground brethren, several of whom Dorfman has met while touring his dance-theater production inspired by the group's violent protests of the Vietnam War and racism. Titled "underground," the piece will be performed by David Dorfman Dance on Thursday and Friday at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland.



PHOTOS Previous Next

Controversy over Barack Obama's onetime ties to a former Weather Underground member has boosted interest in the dance-theater piece "underground," inspired by the militant leftist group. (Top And Above: By Gary Noel)

TOOLBOX

Resize Print
 E-mail Reprints

Advertisement For the past 23 years, Dorfman, who turns 53 on Friday, has created smallish dances and community-based projects that focus by and large on fairly standard topics of art: family, memory, mortality, belonging. Ripped-from-the-headlines topicality has not been his bag. Until now (though, he points out, he premiered "underground" in 2006, before Ayers's name became front-page news). Suddenly, his 55-minute-long dance piece from the fringes has become kind of hot.

Of course, an 11-member modern dance company defines "hot" in modest ways. Such as: A couple of performances at a college auditorium in Chicago two months ago nearly sold out.

Still, Dorfman says he'll take that kind of renown. "It's an amazing coincidence," he says of his work's juncture with the presidential election. When he created his piece, the Weather Underground, initially known as the Weathermen, had been largely forgotten by the general public. Dorfman drew his inspiration from a 2002 documentary about its members, who took the 1960s and '70s protest movement to extremes until their tactics backfired.

After splitting off from the activist group Students for a Democratic Society, the Weathermen began a bombing campaign targeting banks and federal buildings, including the U.S. Capitol and the Pentagon. To escalate matters further, they planned to bomb military personnel at an officers' dance at Fort Dix, N.J., where a bloodbath was expected -- but before this happened, three of the group's members were killed when explosives they were assembling went off. The rest of the group, having gone underground after that, continued to bomb buildings -- without casualties -- but the anti-establishment, antiwar movement dissolved a few years later.

What gripped Dorfman about their story was the fact that after their friends died, the group "made a pact not to hurt people," even as it continued attacks on property. "I have unending admiration for Bill Ayers that once they had an accident and blew up three of their own, they said, 'That's not the way,'" says Dorfman, speaking in a phone interview from his home in New London, Conn. "I am not someone who would do something like blow up a building, yet I believe in their courage at the time and in their transformation."

Dorfman said he had long seen similarities between the Vietnam War, during which he was growing up in Chicago, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Where the Weather Underground fits in, he says, is in prompting hard thinking about what's acceptable and rational as a protest.

"They were trying to stop a war that was responsible for the death of many, many children," he says, "and our soldiers were getting killed without really knowing who the enemy was. And it seems way too familiar today."

Dorfman says he's proud to pal around with Ayers and his wife, former Undergrounder Bernardine Dohrn, whom he has visited a couple of times in Chicago. (Dohrn saw "underground" in New York and was pleased, Dorfman says; Ayers has not yet seen it, as he was out of town for its Chicago run.) But "underground" is not anything close to a factual retelling of history, he says. It includes footage of antiwar demonstrations in its video design, and there are choreographic references to physical trauma, rock- or grenade-throwing and mass disturbances. More than 30 College Park residents were recently selected from an audition to take part in the work's protest scenes. But Dorfman emphasizes that the piece is semi-abstract art, not a newsreel or -- God forbid -- a lecture. It's a collection of his thoughts about apathy, activism and terrorism, he says, and where the lines blur.

The sound design includes explosions and smashing glass; lighting effects depict fire, smoke and searchlight glare. It is in the dancing, however, where Dorfman works out his conflicting feelings about when it might be okay to kill (for freedom? human rights?) and when it's not (for vengeance? pride?). The dancing is often bluntly violent: The dancers hurl themselves to the floor, fly into rages, tumble, kick and flay.

Dorfman is not the only choreographer seeing ways for dance to address war. Last spring, California choreographer Victoria Marks brought her "Not About Iraq" to Dance Place; among other things, the work challenged the public's acceptance of doublespeak and lies in the buildup to the Iraq war and beyond. Marks will join Dorfman in a discussion tomorrow evening at the Clarice Smith Center's Laboratory Theatre titled "Dance Responds to War," in which taped excerpts from both of their works will be shown. She saw "underground" a year ago in San Francisco, and praised Dorfman for using his piece "to loosen our hold from the kind of restrictive, dogmatic thinking that we'd been fed for a while on patriotism."

"One of the things that David was really thinking about is what is patriotism and what is activism, and even, can a dancer be an activist?" Marks said last week.

Dancing, says Dorfman, is uniquely suited to providing a model for community action. He tells of one audience member who, during one of the talks Dorfman always hosts after this piece, asked: Why are the only responses to the current war that he presents in "underground" either throwing rocks or apathy? "I'm exaggerating for theatrical purposes," Dorfman says he answered. "What I'm saying is we can act together." He points to the quietest section of the piece, when the dancers form small groups who toss and catch one another with trusting ease.

"Here are nine people who are wonderfully cooperative in this moment," Dorfman says. The segment illustrates that "this is what we can do with each other."

Ultimately, Dorfman says, he intends "underground" to promote thoughtfulness rather than any specific course of action. "It's meant to get an audience thinking and feeling and hopefully acting," he says. "I'd rather not be prescriptive or didactic. I'm not such a fan of art that does that. I'd rather bring people to reflection."

© 2008 The Washington Post Company