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A Shot of Political Urgency on an Outdoor Double Bill

By GIA KOURLAS  AUG. 25, 2008

On Thursday night at Damrosch Park, the scent of patchouli oil wafted generously in the air. Bill Bragin, the director of public programming at Lincoln Center, introduced the evening's double bill of a musician and a choreographer with a fitting — and, for some, squirm-inducing — description of their artistic intent: social activism.

The program began with the musical group, Toshi Reagon and BIGLovely with Bernice Johnson Reagon, expressing outrage at the current American political climate through rousing songs. David Dorfman Dance filled out the second half with a piece called “underground.”

The dance, from 2006, begins with Mr. Dorfman performing a loose-limbed prelude. Wearing floppy layers, he lunges forward with one knee bent and the opposite arm held ramrod straight with a clenched fist. He skitters backward, flips onto his side and dashes to the front of the stage to throw an invisible object toward the crowd — most likely a bomb.

The radical Weather Underground group of the 1960s and '70s inspires Mr. Dorfman, a native of Chicago, in his dance. At one point he recites, in the form of a letter, some reasons for his adoration of the risks that its members took. But as a professed pacifist, where does their violent form of activism leave him now?
There are a great many questions posed in “underground” — about the apathy of a generation and the justification of a right to kill — and these are frequently punctuated with dancers stopping in their tracks to raise a fist in the air. “What do you do to make a difference?” a dancer asks in anguish. “What would you do?”

Jonathan Bepler’s searing rock score remains the best part of the production, but the repetitive and underdeveloped choreography, featuring dancers running in circles or crossing the stage with far-flung abandon as if fleeing the scene of a protest, offers little in the way of variety.

Mr. Dorfman likes to chat with the audience after a show — he does so with a graciousness few can attain in such situations — and his appearance at Lincoln Center Out of Doors was no exception. He maintained that art exists to ask questions, not to answer them.

While that may be true, the questions raised in “underground,” along with projected black-and-white snapshots of ’60s activists, clutter this production with so many overly literal concepts that the very idea of activism becomes trite. And unremarkably, it reeks of patchouli.

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