

Making 'underground' Mainstream

By **JOY GOODWIN** | November 16, 2006

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A MIDDLE-AGED MAN IS ALREADY ONSTAGE WHEN THE AUDIENCE FILES INTO BAM'S HARVEY THEATER FOR

"underground." He's wearing some kind of hippie jacket, and he's barefoot. Lunging forward in a deep knee bend, he raises one angry fist in the air. Now he rocks backward and hurls himself into the air, hitting the floor with his body. Now it looks like he's throwing something — hard.

But this aging activist's hand is empty; he's not throwing anything. He's David Dorfman, the choreographer of "underground" — and he's conflicted about throwing rocks or bombs for a righteous cause. Later, standing in a spotlight, he delivers a riveting (if qualified) fan letter to the 1960s militant group known as the Weathermen. "I — and I'm almost embarrassed to admit it — I idolized you for taking the risks you took ... for blowing up 30 buildings without killing a single person," he says at one point, thrusting that fist skyward again.

But, he also says, "I don't know if I could have done what you did."

Uncomfortable honesty courses through "underground" like an electrical charge. This is the rare kind of dance theater that keeps people on the edge of their seats. You can't look away from the powerhouse dancing, which sucks energy from a rocking score by Jonathan Bepler. Nor can you avoid its in-your-face questions.

"Is violence ever justified?" a reporter character (Karl Rogers) asks, prompting several of his fellow dancers to leap forward into rectangles of light. Others leap backward. "Is your country worth killing for?" he says. Again, dancers leap in both directions, while his question flashes behind them in text on the giant back wall. "Is your family worth killing for?" he asks. Suddenly, the jumps take on a new seriousness.

Much of the power of such sequences comes from the clarity of Mr. Dorfman's artistic vision. He and his co-director, Alex Timbers, dress the dancers in baggy street clothes that look vaguely vintage — suggesting not flower children, but the children of flower children. The loose clothing obscures the dancers' training, making it harder to see bodyline and easier to see the movement in a pedestrian, everyman light.

But underneath all those clothes, the dancing is full-throttle. Torsos twist, legs spin the body while moving it high to low. Bodies in orbit brush past each other, continuing on their solo paths. At times, as many as 40 other dancers (Mr. Dorfman's 10-member ensemble, plus a pickup group) surround a lonely soloist or duo. When they flood the stage, their volume alone is thrilling — a show of force, almost. But it's the mass of dancers performing Mr. Dorfman's forceful gestures — with the casual cool of the young — that is really stunning.

Still, on this stage, with its pockets of shadow and white light (designed by Jane Cox), dancing is started or stopped by words. A lone dancer's cry of "No!" or "Now!" can jolt bodies. The commands produce nothing more radical

than choreographed sequences, but somehow, at least superficially, they link "underground" to an avant-garde, experimental era.

Mr. Dorfman, in fact, consistently works downtown dance elements into what is ultimately a mainstream package. (One can picture "underground" playing well in theaters across the country; one of its virtues is its ability to sustain its hold on its audience.) The precurtain dancing, the integration of text with dance, the graphically deconstructed protest videos flashed on both a back wall and a second, temporary overhead screen don't feel like artsy indulgences. They feel like building blocks of a lean, highly visceral theatrical experience.

Surely part of what helps Mr. Dorfman plug into audiences is his extensive background in community-based dance projects. For years, he has been making work with non-dancers in settings as far removed from BAM as one could imagine — rooms full of corporate executives, or athletes, or carpenters. He also teaches dance at Connecticut College, which may account for the fact that his dancers are believable as college students. And with Mr. Timbers, he's found a tone for his show that permits his own goofiness and humor to share space with serious, affecting sequences.

This is crystal clear in an exchange between the roving reporter and an angry blonde (Jennifer Nugent). "What should I do?" she asks him, referring to her frustration with the world. He doesn't answer. "Should I ... ?" she asks, and launches into a mighty scream, crisscrossing the stage with angry, ninja-like moves that are first sidesplittingly funny, then poignant.

Later, three college girls stumble on a statue of a young activist (Joseph Poulson), lunging with fist raised. In a sort of corny collegiate skit, they wonder what to do with the statue. They end up propping it up and heaving it forward, assisted by a growing crowd of classmates. To their delight, the activist gradually comes to life, raising his fist when they throw him forward, then leaping back into their arms like a rock star in a mosh pit.

Then out comes Mr. Dorfman — the prototype for the statue. The activist leans against him — for support? — and they step away from the crowd. Together, stumbling, they charge, raising their fists. And what was a corny skit only minutes earlier has instantly become a life-and-death matter.

Until November 18 (BAM Harvey Theater, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn, 718-636-4100).
