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# Departing From the Old Themes to Make a Big Political Statement

By JENNIFER DUNNING NOV. 16, 2006

David Dorfman ponders the relationship between activism and terrorism in "underground," which received its New York premiere on Tuesday night at the Harvey Theater of the Brooklyn Academy of Music as part of the BAM 2006 Next Wave Festival. The new piece is a brave, ambitious departure from the norm. New York choreographers for the most part avoid tackling major social themes and perhaps are no longer equipped to do so, given their long love affair with nonnarrative dance. But Mr. Dorfman's quietly searing personal relationship with much of his choreographic material is missing here. And its absence diminishes the work.

Mr. Dorfman has talked in recent interviews of his fascination, as a young teenager, with the passion and idealism of the radical Weather Underground movement of the 1960s and '70s, an interest that was reawakened after his viewing of the 2005 documentary, "Weather Underground." (Several members will participate in post-performance discussions.) He has even said that the activism of that era helped to form his artistic core. But only in the last, somewhat too facile image of "underground" is there a sense of Mr. Dorfman's connection to his subject, as a man suddenly darts out of the ensemble to join a reawakened, bomb-throwing old Weatherman.

"Underground," set to music by composers and groups that include Jonathan Bepler and Broken Social Scene, juxtaposes surging all-out dancing with spoken text in which a man holding out an imaginary microphone questions young activists. The young, it turns out, ask much harder questions of themselves. Should they lash out or cringe? one woman asks, dancing an affecting approximation of each emotional state. Does the end justify the means? another asks. Kill 850 people and save 5,692 others, still another says in a simultaneously funny and chilling litany of escalating numbers. "Who am I?" one woman asks. That timeless search for one's own young self runs like a vein through the piece, which alludes subtly to recent political protest.

The look of "underground" is handsome, with video projections across the set designed by Cameron Anderson, smoky lighting by Jane Cox and ready-for-action street wear designed by Heather McArdle. The piece is expertly put together. But the greatest interest of the piece is the strange sense that it offers, perhaps intentionally, a view into the mind-set of young Middle Eastern terrorists today.

"Underground" will be performed again through Saturday at the Harvey Theater, Brooklyn Academy of Music, 651 Fulton Street, Fort Greene, Brooklyn; (718) 636-4100.

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