

Weather channeling

David Dorfman's latest finds inspiration in activism

BY RITA FELCIANO

Dancer-choreographer David Dorfman is a poet of the ordinary. He digs below the commonplace and lets us see what's underneath. Early in his career, with *Out of Season*, he paired football players with highly trained dancers. Ten years ago he invited his ensemble's family members to join in performances of *Familiar Movements*. Both pieces revealed fresh ideas about dance, community, and beauty. They also showed Dorfman to be an artist of sparkling wit with a generous spirit.

In the two pieces that his David Dorfman Dance company made its Bay Area debut with last year, he worked single conceits into exuberant, athletic choreography that resonated beyond its voluptuously evocative appeal. In *See Level*, sprawled bodies on a studio floor suggested maps of continents, with individual countries that were self-contained yet had relationships with each other. A naked lightbulb inspired *Lightbulb Theory*, a meditation on death. Is it better, the piece asked in densely layered images, to die quickly or to flicker for a while?

Dorfman's newest work, the 50-minute *underground*, opens the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' new *Worlds Apart* series, which according to executive director Ken Foster features artists who "create work that inspires us to think deeply and become responsible citizens of the global village."

For *underground*, Dorfman started with history, using local filmmaker Sam Green's Oscar-nominated documentary *The Weather Underground* as a jumping-off point. The film documents the activities of the Weathermen (later, Weather Underground). In the 1960s and '70s, this radical offshoot of Students for a Democratic Society advocated violence to incite change. For Dorfman, the film and his associated research raised questions about individual and social responsibilities when faced with injustice. He also began to wonder about the effect of age on one's perspective and decision-making process.

Speaking from his home in Connecticut, Dorfman explained that he was a Chicago teenager during the Days of Rage — four days in 1969 when stores and public buildings were attacked in protest of the Chicago Seven trial. "Now, I wanted to look at the idea of resistance against an unwarranted war from the perspective of a man with a 50-year-old body."

Dorfman's underground will strike a raw nerve with audiences, though he refuses to narrowly assign blame for the causes of societal unrest. He wants to unearth root causes, not apply Band-Aids. "Yes, of course I feel burned by the elections of 2000 and 2004 and the shameful behavior of our government. But this is not just about the current administration. Much damage was done before," he said, pointing out that our conversation happened to be taking place on the anniversary of 9/11.

"I try hard to be a good global citizen, and I mourn the needless loss of life. So I want my generation and younger people ...

to look at the nature of activism and what, if anything, justifies the use of force and violence."

After the June premiere at the American Dance Festival, which occurred during the Israel-Lebanon conflict, a young audience member told Dorfman that he wanted to get off his backside and do something. "I don't know what that something is," Dorfman responded. "But we have to talk about it."

The show stitches documentary footage, photo collages, spoken and projected text, and a commissioned score by Bessie winner Jonathan Bepler to Dorfman's choreography for his nine dancers — plus some 20 local performers whom he auditioned this month.

Though he still loves to work with people he calls "folks who don't think they can dance," underground's choreography requires professionally trained artists.

Reminded of his ideal "to get the whole world dancing," Dorfman is quick to point out that while realistically war may not always be avoided, perhaps we could learn to tolerate each other, and that dance — "nonsexual, noninvasive physical contact" — just might help.

Besides, he said, "If people are dancing, for that one brief moment they cannot kill each other." SFBG