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DAVID DORFMAN

- By Suzanne Carbonneau

David Dorfman is the guy-next-door revolutionary. Underneath his Jimmy Stewart exterior, there's a rampant subversive streak. While on the surface his work might not look startlingly radical, in fact, on almost every level, Dorfman is challenging business-as-usual in the dance world. Since founding his company, David Dorfman Dance, in 1985, he has blown through modern dance like a bracing gust of wind, sweeping away convention, and bringing with him new ideas about what dancing and dancers can be.

While it is a given in contemporary art that all artists aspire to create something novel and individual, it is rare that they are questioning the very structures and values that shape the art world. True paradigm shifts come about infrequently, but Dorfman's way of creating dances does indeed confront the most basic of assumptions of theatrical dance: Who gets to dance? Who gets to create art? Why do people engage in these activities? In rethinking these premises, Dorfman has enlarged the sources of the movement vocabulary and expanded the ways that the body is used. Dissenting by example, he also has been as interested in humanistic concerns as he has been in aesthetic values. In working with various partners and communities, Dorfman questions the notion that only a select caste of the anointed can create art.

Dorfman is himself not a *danseur noble*, that trite ideal of an aristocratic virtuoso, nor does he aspire to be. His entire company, in fact, eschews the cookie-cutter look of the contemporary dancer, brandishing in its place a prosaic demeanor and look that declares their allegiance to matter-of-factness. His company members are not taking on personae but are presenting themselves as themselves, a fact that is most pointed in *Gone Right Back* (1997), in which they address each other on stage by their real names. Even though they are, in fact, highly trained and extraordinarily disciplined, these dancers consciously cultivate a pedestrian look that rejects glamour and larger-than-life presence. While

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this is a concept that has been kicking around modern dance at least since Judson choreographer Yvonne Rainer's famous 1965 "NO Manifesto," with Dorfman it is not a theoretical trope, but a way of humanizing a discipline that's been all too sacrificial of its adherents. In insisting on the pleasures of watching seemingly ordinary people dance, Dorfman does much to dispel the notion that there is some kind of ideal, or that there is only one way to look and be.

Dorfman has taken this notion even further in a series of projects made for people with no previous dance experience. In performances made for communities of athletes (*Out of Season*, 1993), families (*Familiar Movements*, 1996), and organizations (*No Roles Barred*, 1999), Dorfman has demonstrated the power of non-technical movement and storytelling to express what is deep and true about the human condition. Here, he is using untrained dancers not as poor substitutes for the real thing, but as people whose life experiences leave them with profound revelations to which dance technique seems only incidental. Unmediated by the seductive surface of slick expertise, their movement is unaffected, honest, and fresh. And there is no denying that these unpretentious dances reach general audiences directly, in a way that more "sophisticated" modern dance just cannot. In describing his *Out of Season*, Dorfman identifies the project as central to his creative vision, citing its "rawness and inclusiveness" as a "microcosm of my artistic desires." The community projects forge a notion of performance in which the dancer undergoes a kind of transformation that is just as important as that achieved by the audience. In an art form that so often focuses almost exclusively on aesthetic goals, Dorfman has restored humanistic and therapeutic ideals as intrinsic values. Too, the projects implicitly declare the process of creation equal in value to its product.

It is not only the authority of the dancer that Dorfman has been willing to jettison, but even the prerogative of the choreographer. Dorfman declares himself "an avid fan of collaboration and collective processes," and, while maintaining a company that bears his name, he has made a career of cooperative creation. In seeking out group systems of artmaking, Dorfman has shown himself willing to give up the presumption of the authority of the *auteur*. In addition to the community projects, Dorfman has engaged in collaborations with other choreographers, including Mark Taylor and Stuart Pimsler, as well as ongoing coauthorship of a series of duets with performance artist Dan Froot. Made over the last decade, this *Live Sax Acts* trilogy (consisting of

Horn, 1990; *Bull*, 1994; and *Job*, 1996; with a fourth, *Shtick* or *Shtuck*, about being stuck in your shtick, to be added next year) is among the most compelling work in the contemporary repertory. Dealing with the relatively neglected issue of how men negotiate their relationships with each other in a culture that provides only the broadest cartoon as a model for their emotional lives, these duets have revitalized the hackneyed idea of the *pas de deux*.

Dorfman has also aimed at a transformation of the content of dance, opening its parameters to new ways of moving, of combining the arts, and of drawing on sources for movement invention. He has formulated a variety of means for movement and sound to interrelate, with dancers speaking text, musicians moving as dancers, and dancers playing instruments as they move. Dance technique, too, has come into question, as Dorfman defied traditional dynamic categories in concocting a highly athletic and exuberantly physical, yet gently flowing and gesturally nuanced base of movement. Even the assumption that the main form of support in dance must be the feet is not one that he makes, as he devises dancing that also takes place on the forearms, hands, and shoulders—literally, turning dance upside down. His movement style celebrates the idiosyncratic, but in a gloriously dorky rather than a cynically hip way. The work can be side-splittingly funny—one critic has described it as “goofing around”—but here again Dorfman won’t let us cling to easy categories. Even the humorous work has at its heart serious business. The dances that he creates for his own company tend toward abstraction, operating by indirection and evocation. The communal goals of the cooperative projects are also present in this work, but these relationships are presented more obliquely, with issues of community and conflict implied through dynamic and spatial choices, rather than through mimetic or narrative strategies. Such pieces as *Sky Down* (1996), with its poignant evocations of connection, *A Cure for Gravity* (1997), which uses the music of Joe Jackson as a springboard for contemplation about aspirations that remove us from the here and now, and *Subverse* (1999), which deals with the reality underlying appearances, make the case for the ability of abstracted movement to carry vivid depictions of undefined but recognizable experience.

And, finally, what is perhaps the most radical of all Dorfman’s innovations, is the very subject of his choreography: the stuff of daily life. For even the lowliest among us, Dorfman recognizes, just being alive is dramatic. Honoring the welter of emotions, choices, and

connections that constitute the most seemingly mundane of existences, Dorfman concerns himself with physicalizing the inner life. He reveals his own experiences with a candor that can be startling, and, while it is heartfelt, this intimacy of revelation is thoroughly free of mawkishness or bathos. In refusing to ennoble or aggrandize his life and thoughts, Dorfman creates ground for us to recognize ourselves in these dances. There is, in fact, a quality of uncanny extrasensory surveillance in how closely these works seem to be eavesdropping into our hearts, displaying the id, with all its constant craving and demands, for all to see. This is always done, however, with the utmost compassion in Dorfman's acknowledgment of how difficult it is to be human, adrift in the world and trying to do good despite our frailties and continual penchant for messing up. The works zing right into the heart of what really matters, compelling a recognition of the commonality of personal experience and the larger issues that reside in daily interactions. Ultimately, Dorfman's dances reveal that the struggle to be part of our various communities and relationships constitutes the true drama and challenge of our lives.

In having found humane ways to make dances, direct a company, connect with the general populace, and rehabilitate interest in the ordinary, Dorfman has provided a model for the ways that compassion can become embedded in art and artmaking. Giving voice to the poetry of personal life and honoring the gravitas of felt experience, he has made a brief for art as something relevant to all people. While realistic in its recognition of pain and foible, Dorfman's vision of community is ultimately concerned with transcending these difficulties and finding ways to work together. If art can offer us no more than this, surely that is more than enough.

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