



underground, David Dorfman Dance by Gary Noel



David Dorfman, photo provided by company

hope (em)body

David Dorfman's Radical Provocation

by Alycia Scott

“Invite and Indict,
and do so in an
embracing way.”

This is David
Dorfman’s mini
manifesto
for creating
dance works.

Born on Cornelia and Broadway in Chicago, David Dorfman is an internationally acclaimed dancer and choreographer whose company, David Dorfman Dance, has been considered one of the most influential American dance companies for the past two decades. Dorfman is the recipient of a 2005 Guggenheim Foundation fellowship as well as four fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, three New York Foundation for the Arts fellowships, an American Choreographer’s Award, the first Paul Taylor Fellowship from The Yard, and a New York Dance & Performance Award (“Bessie”) for David Dorfman Dance’s community-based project *Familiar Movements (The Family Project)*. His company has performed extensively throughout North and South America, Great Britain, and Europe.

Throughout this list of honorable accomplishments and years in the dance world, David Dorfman has continued to expand the reach of dance to both dancers and non-dancers in a daring, insightful and inherently human way. In addition to creating works with dancers in his company and other artistic collaborators, Dorfman has worked with athletes, corporate executives, youth, carpenters, and doctors, to name a few. Through dance works and community-based projects, his investigations into the social and political aspects of living delve into the quintessence of life, from fear to hope, and life to death. His interests as a dancer and choreographer are rooted in what a mentor of his once coined “radical humanistic dance,” meaning if you are measuring what you are giving, you are not giving.

Dorfman will bring two works to The Dance Center. *Disavowal*, inspired by the life and legacy of abolitionist John Brown, will have its world premiere at The Dance Center; and *underground* which uses the late 1960s, in particular, the actions of the activist group the “Weather Underground” as its starting point. Within these works, Dorfman gives us challenging questions to ponder: How do conditions of racism, violence, alienation, and calls for solidarity reap hope and fear, courage and pain, pride and dispossession? When can activism become terrorism, or vice versa? Is condoned or endorsed killing and destruction ever justified?

In speaking about the Civil War, John Brown and slavery, African-American abolitionist Frederick Douglass once said, “John Brown began the war that ended American slavery and made this a free republic. His zeal in the cause of my race was far greater than mine. I could live for the slave, but he could die for them.” In 1858, John Brown was ready to launch his war to abolish slavery. He had established his base in the Blue Ridge Mountains to assist runaway slaves and attack slaveholders. By 1859, however, his plan took on a new direction, detailing an attack on the Harpers Ferry arsenal to better arm his men and, in effect, attack the federal government. In October of 1859, John Brown and his men, including runaway and freed slaves and other white men, raided Harpers Ferry, which ended up being a battle of losses and led to Brown’s eventual execution. In between the raid and his death though, John Brown’s statements of abolition reached the nation through the pages of the press.

In *Disavowal*, Dorfman goes to the heart of John Brown’s intentions as a way of urging audiences (and himself) to think about what they may be disavowing in their own lives and how to move beyond self imposed boundaries. “Maybe we have more potential than we think we have, and there is so much more we can do.” Dorfman continues, “How can we get to a higher level? How can we embrace the skin of other people?”

Dorfman’s interest in John Brown also intersects with his inquiry into modes of leadership and the sometimes Machiavellian conundrum involved in choosing the best path for radical change. In the performance of *Disavowal*, a woman’s voice is heard from above directing Dorfman and the company throughout sections of the work. “This is a deliberate and skillful ploy to playfully undermine my leadership and question some of the choices I am making as both “John Brown” and the leader of a twenty-three year old dance company. Her presence as a woman is important too,” Dorfman adds, “as a way to question John Brown’s attitudes toward his “women folk” and as a way to question dance’s attitude toward its “women folk.” This radical exposure of the greatness and vulnerability of a leader’s decision resonates with Dorfman’s embracing approach toward both dance and the community.





There are moments in the performance of *Disavowal* filled with chaotic throwing of bodies. At times bodies hit the floor hard; at other times, one dancer catches another in an act that simultaneously feels like a symbol of hope and an additional element of struggle. Perhaps the two are synonymous.

The idea to explore John Brown came to David Dorfman from his colleague David Kyuman Kim at Connecticut College where David Dorfman chairs the Dance Department and Kim is the Director of the Center for the Comparative Study of Race and Ethnicity. Kim has been called, “the leading philosopher of religion and culture for his generation” by scholar and public intellectual, Cornel West. Kim asked Dorfman what he thought about the title

Disavowal as a way of provoking thought on what we separate ourselves from—whether it be certain parts of history, certain people, or certain parts of ourselves. *Melancholic Freedom: Agency and the Spirit of Politics*, Kim’s first book, spurred conversations with Dorfman about freedom. “What are we afraid of with regard to freedom? What can we do with our freedom? We have a lot of privilege. What will you do? What can you do?” Dorfman asks.

One hundred years after John Brown’s plan to abolish slavery and his raid on Harpers Ferry, the 1968 Democratic National Convention engendered a citizen movement that resulted in one of America’s most iconic domestic battles, highlighting the power in the politics of dissent. In October of 1969, outraged

by the Vietnam War and racism in America, the Weather Underground, a young activist offshoot of the University of Chicago’s Student Democratic Society, organized their first public demonstration in Chicago’s Lincoln Park. The demonstration resulted in riots that lasted for four days and later came to be known as “The Days of Rage.” The following year, the Weather Underground issued a “Declaration of a State of War” against the United States government.

The actions of members of the Weather Underground led Dorfman to investigate the fine line between activism and terrorism, and history and the future. The investigation in his work *underground* is raw in its intensity and transparency. From a dancer’s oral calculations that ramify the use of violence

as a means of peace or saving lives, to the urgent movements, sounds, and projections behind the dancers that bring history into the present through film footage and metaphoric imagery, the question one dancer poses at the beginning of *underground* resounds, “Does what you do make a difference?”

These complexities and realization of change are what interest Dorfman in the lives of Weather Underground members, like Bernadine Dohrn and Bill Ayers, along with the cross currents between the events in 1858/59, 1968/69, and now 2008/09. “I think we are in the throws of one of the most regressive administrations since I was born. This made it feel really important to say “What the hell are we doing? Why are we not waking up? And why are the youth of America not waking up more? Now, we have a leader in Obama and perhaps the nation can be more hopeful than we’ve been in decades.” This makes Dorfman really excited. He explains, “Any work of art or historical illumination that lets us see what has happened in the past and then lets us dream what is possible in the future is just incredible.”

As much as Dorfman plants his work in the realities of our socio-political world, he doesn’t mind tapping into the “realm of semi-idealism and ultra hope,” as he affectionately calls it. To questions like: Does dance really make a difference? Does art make a difference? Does being nice make a difference?, he responds, “I believe they all do, but on any given day you can feel like you’ve gotten the wind knocked out of you. The thing about rehearsing and then presenting these pieces is that they become substantive. They become real, and they become a real way to communicate. We are embodying these ideas because dance is a physical act and that is what I love about it. We’re mixing skin, and physicalizing emotion, and intellectual intents...I also love the

idea of design and movement in space so that hopefully some of it is just kinetically exciting.”

In a 2001 New York Times interview with Weather Underground member Bill Ayers about his memoir, *Fugitive Days*, he quoted an excerpt of the poem *Doubletake* by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney:

**Human beings suffer,
they torture one another,
they get hurt and get hard.**

...

**History says, Don’t hope
on this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
the longed for tidal wave
of justice can rise up,
and hope and history rhyme.**

...

Dorfman and his dancers manifest the raw moments within the decision of how to act – violently/peacefully, internally/externally – in the essence and physicality of their movements. In *Disavowal* and *underground*, David Dorfman Dance brings humanity and art into closer proximity, illustrating the vital relationship between dance, activism, and life. Indictment can have a negative connotation, but to Dorfman it is an invitation for change.

This monumental year of 2008 harbors many hopes for change. The occasion of both *Disavowal* and *underground* being presented in Chicago during this year seems too coincidental for serendipity. As Dorfman wrote, “Reflecting on Chicago as a nexus for demonstrations, hope, change, black power, the patronage system, and an overlooked progressive arts scene, I am thrilled to be premiering *Disavowal* in the city and to bring *underground* as well!”

I asked Dorfman what some bullet points would be on an instructional manual for viewing *Disavowal* and *underground*:

- » Be alert, be ready for anything
- » Come in an open way
- » Come wanting to get something with us and we will really give to you

David Dorfman Dance

September 25, 26, 27 * 8:00 p.m.

September 28 * 3:00 p.m.

Disavowal (World Premiere)

September 25 & 28

underground

September 26 & 27

Special Events

Citizen Movement Film Screenings

Columbia College Chicago
Ludington Bldg., Film Row Cinema
1104 S. Wabash Ave., 8th floor
Free Admission

SEPT
09
TUE

Traces of the Trade
6:30 p.m.

SEPT
16
TUE

John Brown’s Holy War
6:30 p.m.

SEPT
23
TUE

Weather Underground
6:30 p.m.

Other Events

SEPT
18
THUR

**Movement Workshop
with David Dorfman**
12:00 – 1:30 p.m.
Jane Addams Hull-House Museum
800 S. Halsted
Free admission. Open to the public.

SEPT
22
MON

**DanceMasters Class,
led by David Dorfman**
6:00 – 8:00 p.m.
Museum of Contemporary Art
220 E. Chicago, Theater entrance

SEPT
25
THUR

Post-Performance Discussion
Free and open to ticket holders

SEPT
26
FRI

**Complimentary
Post-Performance Reception**
Cuatro, 2030 S. Wabash
Open to ticket holders. Sponsored by Newcity.

FOR TICKETS 

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Alycia Scott

*is the Community Outreach and
Education Manager at The Dance Center.*

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