

# VINEYARD GAZETTE

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## **DORFMAN SHARES A JOYOUS DANCE WITH CREATIVITY BORN OF IDENTITY**

BY ALEXANDER TROWBRIDGE

It was a slightly jarring juxtaposition: at the front of the gym class two professional dancers moved seamlessly from their feet to the floor and back again. Strong and agile, the performers made modern dance look easy. Behind them, a class of seventh graders awkwardly followed along, falling, out of sync, and laughing at themselves--- a reminder of how hard it really was.

The scene at the Edgartown School was part of a week-long educational program presented by The Yard. The performers, Kate Hirstein and Mark Taylor, are part of the Carolyn Dorfman Dance Company, which has spent the past week in public schools across the Island teaching students about modern dance.

"It's always great for the kids to have somebody different, especially from The Yard," said Joe Thibodeau, a physical education teacher at Edgartown School. Mr. Thibodeau, who usually focuses on Olympic sports in his classes, spent the class next to his students, trying out the alternative exercise for himself.

The dance company's Island activities culminate this weekend with the performance Saturday of a work called *Mayne Mentshn* at the Martha's Vineyard Performing Arts Center at the regional high school in Oak Bluffs, and a program of works called *Jewish Legacy Repertory* on Sunday at The Yard.

*Mayne Mentshn*, which is Yiddish for "My People," explores the family history of choreographer and company founder Carolyn Dorfman.

Ms. Dorfman is the child of holocaust survivors, an experience that serves as both an element of her identity and an inspiration for her art.

"Creativity comes from who you are," Ms. Dorfman said following a rehearsal at the Yard in Chilmark on Tuesday afternoon.

With *Mayne Mentshn* she tells the story of her family's experience in two parts.

Part one, the *Klezmer Sketch*, takes place in Europe before World War II. The mood is joyous as the performers portray the expression and ritual of Jewish tradition. Part two, *The American Dream*, the piece focuses on the hardships of Jewish immigrants as they attempt to assimilate to the dominant American culture while maintaining their own identity.

For over 18 years, Ms. Dorfman has been affiliated with The Yard, which runs artist-in-the-schools programs throughout the year. The Carolyn Dorfman Dance Company is working with Island schools through *Bridging Differences Through Dance*, an educational residency at The Yard designed to give students a chance to examine the concepts of identity and social conflict through dance.

“What The Yard wants to do is welcome people into the world of dance,” Ms. Dorfman said.

During the past week, members of Ms. Dorfman’s company have brought pieces of Mayne Mentshn into the Island public schools, teaching students the themes of acceptance and balance as well as the basics of dance.

“I have a passion for sharing my art in that way,” said Ms. Dorfman. “I love teaching.”

It’s part of her story. Before studying dance at New York University’s Tisch School for the Arts, Ms. Dorfman received her BFA in dance with a certification to teach kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade from the University of Michigan.

Now based in Union, N.J., Ms. Dorfman is a consultant to the education program at City Center and a principal affiliate in arts education for the New Jersey Performing Arts Center.

With bringing Mayne Mentshn to schools, Ms. Dorfman wants to share the experience of her parents’ immigration to America; a story she said is similar to that of many immigrants of various backgrounds. She described the bigotry her parents faced in the U.S. and how her father had trouble finding a job because he was Jewish, foreign and not fluent in English.

“I want to show kids that we are part of the group that can change the way we embrace those who are different,” she said. “By understanding their story you can empathize with them.”

One of the greatest lessons Ms. Dorfman hopes to convey with dance is that of the delicate balance that must be struck in life between the identity of the individual and the needs of the ensemble.

“With each dance on stage, individuals exist in relation with each other,” Ms. Dorfman said. “At the company, it’s part of our daily life.” She hopped to her feet to demonstrate the group exercises she had been showing kids over the week. Working as a group, she said, is something today’s school children have trouble with.

“A lot of school is about ‘me,’” Ms. Dorfman said. And life in the end, even in the workforce, becomes really about ‘us.’”

For Ryan Gosson, a seventh-grader at Edgartwon School, it was a challenge just keeping up with the professionals.

“They were really good, like they spent a lot of time doing it,” he said. “It was hard, a lot of work.”

*Tickets for Saturday’s performance by the Carolyn Dorfman Dance Company at the Performing Arts Center at Martha’s Vineyard Regional High School are \$10 for general admission, \$50 for premium seating and \$100 for premium seating and a post-performance supper party with the cast. The company will perform Jewish Legacy on Sunday at The Yard in Chilmark. Tickets are \$25 general admission, \$15 for seniors and under-30s, \$50 for premium seating.*