

# The Star-Ledger

Monday, April 02, 2007

## A COMPELLING YARN

### Dorfman's 'Cat's Cradle' recounts family's memories of Holocaust ordeal

BY ROBERT JOHNSON

Carolyn Dorfman's dances are never so powerfully moving as when she draws on the stories told by her family.

The choreographer, whose Carolyn Dorfman Dance Company is based in Union, returned to this well of inspiration to create "Cat's Cradle," an achingly tender, terrifying evocation of the Holocaust, which received its premiere Saturday on a mixed bill at the Two River Theater in Red Bank.

Bringing together music composed by an inmate in a Nazi concentration camp in Czechoslovakia, and the kitchen-table conversation of Dorfman's mother and aunts, all Holocaust survivors from Poland, "Cat's Cradle" is a spare yet masterfully theatrical piece that underscores the power of storytelling. Like Dorfman, when she was a child, viewers are likely to hang on every detail, as the choreographer divulges the horrifying secrets that lie buried in the Jewish ghetto of Theresienstadt.

Dorfman's female relatives knitted, as they talked, so in "Cat's Cradle" balls of yarn become a metaphor. The yarn is soft, but as the story winds itself around the listener its strands begin to cling and bind. Then those gentle threads dig in with the pitilessness of barbed wire.

Stand-ins for Dorfman's mother and aunts, Joan Chiang, Jacqueline Dumas and Sarah Wagner form a group at the outset. A surpassing love knits them together in a twisting embrace, strengthened by their shared ordeal. This family intimacy, manifest in physical closeness, is the source of much of Dorfman's imagery both in "Cat's Cradle" and in other works where the choreographer depicts communities of uncommon warmth and solidarity.

While the three women are wearing house dresses, the characters whom they summon are

dressed in gray and black. These characters are ghosts, only marginally more substantial than the jagged shadows that they cast. Tall, coal-black reflections on the backdrop magnify the sorrow of another group of women seated on stools, whose abrupt, loose gestures overlies the projection of a broken fence.

***Carolyn Dorfman's dances are never so powerfully moving as when she draws on the stories told by her family.***

***Chilling in its impact, yet buoyed by the love shared by the narrators, "Cat's Cradle" tells a story in dance that theatergoers will not forget.***

Wendee Rogerson is the chief mourner, and caring for her in her fierce despair becomes the women's preoccupation, until they lay her to rest in a galvanized washtub.

Two strands of yarn stretch across the stage, delicately imprisoning Kyla Barkin in the next episode. Others come and go, but she cannot slip under the barriers and begins to throw herself at passersby in desperation. Then a circling group holds Barkin cleverly in invisible bonds; and she becomes tangled in yarn like a fly caught in a spider's web.

Theresienstadt was a "model" concentration camp, and the site of an infamous Red Cross hoax. Many Jewish artists and musicians were trapped there. They continued to work creatively and to hope for freedom, despite an irrevocable death sentence. Ilse Weber was one such artist. Whether sentimental or gay, her songs, interpreted in German and English by Bente Kahan, are riddled with mystery and terrible irony, especially the ditty about the "little suitcase" lost by an old man in transit.

Another song, "I Ask You Please Not to Laugh," gives Dorfman the material for a scene of robotic, mock gaiety. In shocking contrast, the "Theresienstadt Nursery Rhyme" introduces a disjointed solo for Mark Taylor, and a pile of bodies threaded with yarn.

Chilling in its impact, yet buoyed by the love shared by the narrators, "Cat's Cradle" tells a story in dance that theatergoers will not forget.