

# Observer-Tribune

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## DORFMAN DANCERS EVOKE SENSE OF FAMILY HISTORY

By Sheila Abrams, Dance Critic – Recorder Newspapers

With her creative energies reaching higher and higher levels and with a superbly gifted troupe of dancers, Union-based choreographer Carolyn Dorfman brought audiences to their feet during a five-day engagement at the F.M. Kirby Shakespeare Theatre in Madison. From March 14 through 18, the company performed "Mayne Mentshn" (My People), an evening-long work recalling the history of two generations of the choreographer's family.

The first half of the piece, called "The Klezmer Sketch," premiered in October. Now she has added the second act, "The American Dream." It attains a goal toward which Dorfman has been working for some years.

"With mind, body, spirit, both past and present, the creation of Mayne Mentshn was an inevitability for me," Dorfman writes in program notes. "As a child of Holocaust survivors, I spent the last 18 years creating work that explored the pain of that experience for my parents, family and me. As I have grown, I have come to realize that to fully understand the profoundness of pain and loss, one must experience and celebrate the life that was interrupted."

Thus the piece begins with klezmer, the energetic secular music of the eastern European Jews, combining elements as disparate as Slavic folk music, Hebrew liturgical music and even American Dixieland.

With Greg Wall's saxophone wailing, the dance starts with a figure which is perhaps Dorfman's archetype, the spirit of her people. The androgynous character is danced by a woman (Wendee Rogerson) dressed as a man, in a long, loose overcoat and brimmed hat.

The work, set to a commissioned score by Wall, features a company of five women and three men. It is romantic and lyrical, funny and startling. The dancers stretch physically as the choreography stretches metaphorically. The dancers' hyperextended limbs draw the eye upward and outward, and the mind follows as the music winds its spell.

Props are simple and effective. In the first part, set in an eastern European community, a table and some chairs perform many roles. The chairs are supports for gorgeous lifts, rolls and twists. The table, with a lace tablecloth, doubles as a wedding canopy, as Nancy Shevitz and Christophe Jeannot meet, court and are married amid riotous celebration.

The sketch ends arrestingly with the sound of the ram's horn, the Shofar, which is blown ceremonially to mark the

Jewish New Year. In this case, its sound is eerily like a siren, as the dancers freeze in a group at one side of the stage. We know that the joys of everyday life have been interrupted.

When the curtain rises after an intermission, there is a structure of rails on stage, which plays many roles. There perched on a high railing is the spirit in its overcoat, witnessing the agonies of the dancers, now dressed in gray.

Reaching up for salvation, they fall into the abyss which is the stage again and again. And finally the scene ends.

We are thrown musically into America of the 1940s, with an energetic boogie-woogie beat. Trying to cast off the remnants of affliction, the people seek rebirth in the freedom of a new American identity. Assimilation becomes an issue.

As if sloughing off the ghosts of the past (in a dance that borrows movements from a parallel dance in "The Klezmer Sketch") four women perform to a funny swing performance of "Dayenu," a traditional Passover song.

Using words as part of her dance, Dorfman has two women, Deirdre Smith and Pamela Wagner, duel. The traditionalist speaks first and the assimilationist responds.

"Oy," says the first. "Oh," replies the second. "Gefilte fish," says the first. "Caviar," answers her nemesis. "Blintzes." "Crepes." "Shul." "Boring." "Holocaust." "Over." "Mentshn." "Oy!"

In the end, the work tells us, an accommodation is made. Joy overcomes pain, art and love defeat death and despair. The work ends on a note so upbeat that, were the design of the Kirby Theatre different, we think the audience might have danced up the aisles.

As has always been the case in Dorfman's company, now in its 18th season, the women display exceptional strength. In this triumphant work, they, and the men as well, also evince a splendid capacity for drama and a keen wit.

It was with great pleasure that we were able to meet the choreographer's mother, Mala Dorfman, and other members of her family. The work was dedicated to Carolyn Dorfman's parents, who have a right to feel great pride. One can look forward to the future creative output of this dancemaker with nothing less than eagerness.

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