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DORFMAN STILL TAKING STEPS TO EXPLORE THE HOLOCAUST

By Anne Levin, Staff Writer – The Times, Trenton

As a child of Holocaust survivors, Carolyn Dorfman has carried the horrific experiences of her mother and father with her for as long as she can remember.

"My parents were very expressive about their experiences in the war," says the choreographer, whose Carolyn Dorfman Dance Company is performing this weekend at the F.M. Kirby Shakespeare Theatre in Madison. "I internalized it more than my two siblings, I think. For me, the Holocaust has always been an issue in my life."

It comes as no surprise, then, that more than one of Dorfman's works have centered on the Holocaust. With "Mayne Mentshn (My People)," which premieres this weekend, she continues her exploration of these themes.

But this time, Dorfman's focus is on the lives of her family and their world before the Holocaust changed them forever. She is looking here at the life, rather than the death, of her people.

"We've spent 50 years in the Jewish community remembering the pain," she says. "All my life, growing up, I heard 'Never forget, never forget.' But it was never forget the pain, the death, the loss. I realized I wanted to remember the life. I wanted to know about it."

It was a Hanukkah celebration over a year ago at her temple in North Jersey that Dorfman first got an inkling that this was an idea she wanted to pursue. A band was playing traditional Klezmer music, the lively, upbeat music she had heard all her life.

"I was dancing with my children and we were having a great time," Dorfman says. "I suddenly realized that this was the kind of thing I wanted them to know about – the life. It was like a lightning bolt hit me. I wanted to go back to exploring these themes again, but with a different motivation. And I think it came out of being a parent and wanting to teach and pass along."

"Mayne Mentshn" is a full-length work in two parts, including "The Klezmer Sketch," which premiered last year. It celebrates Dorfman's Eastern European Jewish heritage, touching on several topics – the Passover Seder, arranged

marriage, assimilation – but is designed to have universal appeal.

The second, brand new part of "Mayne Mentshn" is "The American Dream," which centers on the complexities of growing up in an Eastern European Jewish community in America. Dorfman's upbringing was in Detroit, where her parents, aunts, uncles and cousins also lived. Family was essential in her life, and Dorfman and her husband make a point of continuing the tradition with their own two children by attending annual reunions all over the country.

"My friends think it's so unusual, to have so much emphasis on extended family," she says. "But that's just the way I was raised. It's the way I am."

Once Dorfman's ideas for "Mayne Mentshn" began to come together, she began to think about hiring a composer. A friend recommended Greg Wall, a jazz and Klezmer musician and composer based in Livingston, and Dorfman got in touch with him. It turned out that Wall's band was the one playing at the Hanukkah party where Dorfman had been dancing with her children – "where the light bulb went on in my head," she says.

Wall has turned out to be a major inspiration for Dorfman.

"His range is incredible," she says. "He does everything from cantoral music to avant-garde. He was an amazing source for me."

Wall is performing the section of the work called "My Father's Solo" live at each performance of "Mayne Mentshn" this weekend.

Dorfman's parents were from Lodz, Poland, so it is especially meaningful for her to be taking her troupe to Poland this summer. The company will make its international debut as part of the eighth annual International Contemporary Dance Conference and Performance Festival in Bytom and Krakow, Poland. Dorfman's mother is hoping to accompany them.

"Mayne Mentshn" has been in the works for more than a year.

"I don't think there is any other work that I've made that touches every part of me," Dorfman says. "It defines who I am. And that's a really incredible thing to feel."

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