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DORFMAN'S 'ECHAD' POSES PHILOSOPHIC QUESTIONS

By Sheila Abrams, Dance Critic 04/04/2002 – Recorder Newspapers

'One' is a potent concept. When translated into Hebrew, "Echad," it brings into focus monotheism and a bundle of issues that follow.

Carolyn Dorfman, a choreographer whose work frequently stands out for its cerebral underpinnings, has taken "Echad" as the name of her newest work, performed by her company Friday, March 22 and Saturday, March 23 at the F. M. Kirby Shakespeare Theater at Drew University in Madison.

After dazzling her audience with "Mayne Mentshn" (My People) last year, the Union-based Dorfman has followed her muse into a different direction, with this intense, abstract and engrossing new piece.

Inspired in part by the experience of taking her company to Poland to perform "Mayne Mentshn" at the site of death camps, and in part by her reaction to the events of Sept. 11, Dorfman has turned to the most physical of idioms to express complex ethical ideas.

Obviously not one to shy away from a challenge, the choreographer has built her

work for eight dancers around a prop of her own conception. A wheel eight feet in diameter, built of tubular aluminum and weighing 120 pounds, it has spokes and supports that enable the dancers to hang on it, roll in it, lift it, hide beneath it and weave in and out of it. The physical risks of dancing with the wheel (which was built for the company by Acadia Scenic of Jersey City) echo the risks the choreographer was taking with difficult subject matter.

In pre-Biblical society, where cycles of seasons control the flow of life, the dancers begin in a time and place where community is everything, the individual, nothing. With the wheel as an altar-like

centerpiece, the dance begins with three women gesturing skyward, perhaps toward the sun, the motion evocative of Middle Eastern line dance. At one side, two men perform a series of acrobatic lifts and stretches. Two lovers intertwine on the floor. Ultimately one woman is singled out and imprisoned in the center of the wheel, marked as a sacrifice.

Dorfman believes the development of monotheism was a pivotal moment in human history, when the practice of human sacrifice was forbidden. At that point, the significance of an individual human life was acknowledged and history became linear and not cyclical.

This critical event is depicted as one of the men leaves the group and rescues the woman from the sacrificial altar of the wheel. As the other dancers leave the stage, the man, Jon Zimmerman, is left to struggle and come to terms with the wheel. In that brilliant solo, Zimmerman brings into focus the hardship of breaking with the weight of tradition, and of balancing the needs of the individual with those of the community.

It is the maintenance of this balance that remains the ongoing struggle of humanity. "How am I an individual and yet part of a whole," Dorfman asked in a recent conversation. "How can the structure support me without confining me?"

"Echad" has riveting power. It is performed to an original commissioned score by Greg Wall, who also wrote the music for "Mayne Mentshn." The music is electronic and intensely rhythmic, with vocal sounds and bird songs interwoven.

The dancers are dressed in simple and beautiful sand-colored tunics and white half-skirts that enhance the mood without impeding movement. The costumes were designed by Russell Aubrey. Charles S. Reece created the subtle and effective lighting.

This is a uniquely fascinating piece, which holds the attention and takes the audience on an intellectual, emotional and visual trip. The dancers exhibit amazing timing and brilliant athleticism, as well as sensitivity to the meaning of their movement. Dorfman's idiom is very special and she has built herself a wonderful company to express it.

Also on the program were two earlier works revived for the occasion. "Love Suite Love," first danced in 1982, is a playful piece about the ups, downs, ins and outs of romance, to songs by Patsy Cline. Jazz composer/drummer Horacee Arnold and a live ensemble provided the music for "A Fork in the Road," premiered in 1996. In this upbeat and amusing piece, the audience is asked to choose the direction of the dance at various critical moments.

Carolyn Dorfman's continuing growth as a choreographer and a company director here in New Jersey is a reason for Garden State dance aficionados to stand up and cheer. We can only look forward to what's coming next.

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