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HUMOR ON THE FRONTLINE

By ROBERT JOHNSON

Choreographer Carolyn Dorfman is a formalist with a mischievous streak. Her playfulness contributes to the enjoyment of viewing even a brainy, abstract dance like her "Sextet." Watching patterns emerge becomes a game that's fun and absorbing.

Only occasionally, however, does Dorfman allow humor to step to the forefront. When the choreographer really uncorks her whimsy, what you get is a piece like "Love Lines," a rollicking, good-natured satire of the human condition.

"Love Lines" received its premiere over the weekend when the Carolyn Dorfman Dance Company, based in Union, performed a mixed bill as part of its annual residency at the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey at Drew University in Madison. In addition to "Sextet," the spectacular "Echad" and "Under My Skin," an intimate duo, beautifully performed by Noel MacDuffie and Pamela Wagner, completed the program.

Set to country-western ballads by Lonestar, "Love Lines" takes aim at the human need for warmth and affection - which is always good for a laugh. Rarely are people as exposed or ridiculous as when they're desperate for love, and Dorfman is there to record the dreadful consequences of a period of enforced abstinence.

The satire begins as her characters prepare to leave the house on a hunting expedition. With a choreographer's eye, she captures them in mid-floss or with one hip jutting out, practicing a come-hither stance before the mirror. While dressing for conquest, they telegraph neediness.

Their plight becomes apparent in "Wall Flower," a sorry trio in which three women stretch rustily on barstools, while men lie curled at their feet, oblivious to their existence. In a dreamlike fantasy, the wall itself develops a crush on Deirdre Smith, and a pair of arms emerges to embrace her.

Smith gets credit for her originality in the following, more-upbeat sequence, "Unusually Unusual," where with a wink at the audience, she takes her partner, Jon Zimmerman, for an unconventional ride.

The dancers address themselves directly to the audience again, in "Getting Personal." Here, they share incredulous responses to personal ads from the likes of a "99 percent straight male," and a Ph.D. who longs to engage in

intellectual horseplay with a buxom companion. Yes, it's scary out there.

MacDuffie gets a workout, buffing himself with barbells in "Everything's Changed," where the lyrics explain that he might have a second chance with the girl who got away. First though, he has to learn to stop climbing over people, and the furniture.

In "Take Your Pick," slick new company member Juel Lane pretends to be a nerd, rehearsing pickup lines with practice dummies. Things seem to be going well, until he meets a live woman; then he panics.

While Dorfman exaggerates the absurd, she also reinforces her choreography with a canny structure. Her frequent recourse to arranging the dancers in lines is symbolic referring to country Line Dances, pickup lines and the number of lines in a personal ad.

Interestingly, she departs from her usual practice of crafting clean, sculptural shapes in

"Keys to My Heart," an enraptured duet for Wendee Rogerson and Zimmerman that comes near the end.

Despite the risk of looking foolish, Dorfman suggests that making a connection still requires potential mates to let it all hang out.

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