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STEPPING INTO THE DREAM

CAROLYN DORFMAN TROUPE ENERGIZES TALE OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS' STRUGGLE TO FIND PLACE IN AMERICA

By ROBERT JOHNSON

Carolyn Dorfman's dancers looked great on Sunday, giving their fourth performance in as many days at the F.M. Kirby Shakespeare Theatre in Madison.

The dynamic energy and polish that they brought to Dorfman's dance-theater piece "Mayne Mentshn" ("My People") makes a good argument in favor of extended residencies like the one that this Union-based choreographer has developed at Drew University. Of course, it doesn't hurt when the dancers know they have a hit on their hands, which "Mayne Mentshn" most definitely is.

Even the new members of the troupe radiate assurance in this emotional tribute to the choreographer's parents, who survived the Holocaust in Poland, then immigrated to America. Last year, Dorfman plunged into a turbulent part of her psyche to create "Klezmer Sketch," the first of "Mayne Mentshn's" two segments. With "The American Dream" she has re-emerged, having found a measure of peace during the journey.

"The American Dream" picks up where "Klezmer Sketch" leaves off, after the Holocaust has blown away the cozy setting of pre-war Jewish life. Wendee Rogerson appears again, wearing the overcoat and gray fedora of Dorfman's father. Yet this time Rogerson is perched above the stage on a scaffold that suggests a prison fence. From her position, she observes the stylized suffering of the cast. Caught in frozen groups, then rounded up, their faces wear the haunting expressions of people who expect to die.

In a culminating moment, the dancers link hands, forming a line. Some fall dead, while three step forward, unaccountably spared. These are the survivors who will cross over to America.

The rest of the dance is considerably more cheerful, yet it bears the lingering imprint of tragedy. Suddenly, the

sounds of a Big Band orchestra emerge from the atmospheric mix of music and documentary recordings assembled by composer Greg Wall. People in street

clothes walk back and forth across the stage with a loose but purposeful gait. The three immigrants slink on, pointing and admiring, yet hanging close together in a sea of individuality. Before they know what has happened, they find themselves

part of a jumbled group.

Assimilation is not so easy, however, as Dorfman indicates in a series of skits. Nancy Shevitz, an immigrant, gets pulled back into the fold, when she finds herself attracted to a tall American. In a spoken duel, Deirdre Smith and Pamela Wagner trade Yiddish

expressions and their English equivalents. Matzoh balls become "dumplings" and chatchkes become "antiques," but a mensch is not so easy to define, and mention of this word prompts only a deep sigh.

Hands are extended in greeting, then sharply retracted, as Noel MacDuffie tries to join two other men, who shoulder him out of their society. MacDuffie performs a deeply felt solo, with fists clenched in anger, and he tussles with Rogerson, the father figure, as though to free himself from an unwanted identity. The struggle is painful, however, and saps his strength. Rogerson guides and comforts him, and soon MacDuffie's knees catch the rhythm of an old song, while traditional gestures fit him like a glove.

Finally the dancers progress across the stage, rising to perform a familiar, shuffling walk, with hands beseeching heavenly indulgence. The Holocaust is not "over," as one character declared

earlier, while the pain of memory cuts afresh. Yet by fashioning such memories into art, Dorfman gives them a special power to illuminate.

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