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## Looking Backward, Dancing Forward: *Art That Fills Senses and Crosses Borders*

By Gwen Orel



**Telling Stories:** The Carolyn Dorfman Dance Company performs *Silent Echoes*.

They slap shoes on the stage with gusto, pirouette around them, share them. They roll balls of yarn, play with them, grow tangled in them. They interact with an onstage singer; they respond to live music that in turn responds to them; they form a counterpoint to the abstract paintings projected behind them. Perhaps most surprisingly for dance purists, they sometimes speak. Dancers in the Carolyn Dorfman Dance Company tell stories — with gesture, song and even words.

Synaesthesia? No, dance that tells stories, for the Forward-sponsored Festival of Jewish Theater & Ideas, which started on May 20. Dorfman's multi-generic approach invites everyone in, whether or not a Jew or a dance lover. "It's the mission of my work to speak about the human story," said Dorfman, who claims she would be a psychologist if she weren't a choreographer. "I am fascinated by people."

On May 29, the 11-strong dancers of CDDC will perform "Silent Echoes" from the two-year body of work *The Legacy Project*, and premiere a new work, *Tikkun*. The latter integrates some of Dorfman's "Cat's Cradle" with Bente Kahan's one-woman theater piece, "Voices of Theresienstadt," in a movement that looks to the future. Other dances, appearing from the former, reflect on Jewish history.

The Norwegian Kahan also serves as a kind of song-weaving mistress of ceremonies, singing in Ladino, Yiddish and German to a score that includes original music and improvisation by jazz/klezmer musician Greg Wall. To round out the collaboration, *Tikkun* features projections of abstract painter Arthur Yanoff's commissioned works as backdrops.

Dorfman likes to tell stories during her rehearsals, so she leaned over to tell me what each dance is about. Her father, a Holocaust survivor, inspired "First Look" with the answer to her question, "What did you first notice about America?" "Everybody was so relaxed," he said. For Dorfman, that answer translated into swing music of the 1940s, jazz movements and an upbeat piece about assimilation. "First Look" is a movement from "*Mayne Mentshn*" ("My Family"), one of the full-length dances included in *The Legacy Project*.

The Jewish themes “percolate from inside,” Dorfman said. “Earlier in my career, I would make a work that seemingly had nothing Jewish about it. Then I would realize that Judaism infuses all of my work.”



**Sisters in art:**

Carolyn Dorfman and Bente Kahan

Her Jewish identity is rooted more in community than in religious observance. For her parents, who lived in Southfield, Mich., in a community with many other survivors, connection to community was key. But it wasn't a connection rooted in grief. “My parents chose life,” she said. “They came here, they built a family, they had optimism.”

Her collaborator, Kahan — who founded Teater Dybbuk-Oslo and trained at both Habima (Israel's national theater) and the Norwegian Nationaltheatret — also investigates the legacy of her Jewish past to look at humanity's future. She is, like Dorfman, the child of Holocaust survivors. “Meeting Carolyn was like meeting a twin soul on the other side of the world,” Kahan said by telephone from Poland.

Restoring the 800-year-old White Stork Synagogue in Wrocław (formerly known as Breslau) to serve as a museum, performance venue and Jewish center brings Kahan face to face with the world's growing interest in Jewish culture. Most European klezmer musicians are not even Jewish, she observes, and Poles are interested “because so many of their main writers and composers were Jewish before the war.”

Where “Echoes” looks backward into the legacy of Jewish history, *Tikkun* (“To Repair”) uses the Jewish concept of healing the world to investigate the future. Its Jewish identity lies only in its title; universality is the point. A student at a Holocaust memorial event performance once asked Dorfman, “What about Darfur?” For Dorfman, they're the same: “The Holocaust happened, Darfur is happening now. What are we going to do about it?” Dorfman had begun to wonder about the value of memory, especially when it hurts. “Then I realized, the value depends on the use,” she said.

*Tikkun* is a bridge going from memory to hope in an uncertain future, so Dorfman wanted the dance to evoke The Legacy Project. The use of string in *Tikkun* suggests the yarn from The Legacy Project's “Cat's Cradle.” In that earlier dance (also included in the festival performances), Dorfman tells the story of her relatives who survived the war through knitting, but the string also has a magical quality that suggests the intimacy of an *eruv*.

The movement through a defined space appeals to Yanoff, whose abstract paintings overshadow the dancers. He met the choreographer last year, at the Kaatsbaan International Dance Center in the Berkshires, and like Kahan, was struck by Dorfman's abstract yet metaphorical approach to exploring Jewish themes.



**Studio Eruv:** Arthur Yanoff's studio is set up to paint the series 'tying the knot: tikkun and the eruv.' Projections of his abstract images provide the back-drop for the Dorfman dance performance.

I particularly liked the spaces between things, in terms of the movement of the dancers, their relationship to each other, the pauses," Yanoff explained. "To save a life, one can leave the *eruv*. There's something transcendent in saving a life, and there's something transcendent in trying to restore the world.

To help inspire his abstract work, Yanoff set up his own *eruv* in his studio, taking advice from his rabbi. "In effect, I set up my own Shabbos... with strings, a bottle of vodka, some wine, fake kneidlach, chicken... what was before my eyes was a reference, something concrete in relation to the paints," the artist said.

The final component that binds together *Tikkun* is Wall's music, which will link the old and the new, tradition and innovation. Live acoustic music will be recorded, looped and used as part of an electronic score, as the audience watches. Wall describes himself as "the hardest-working rabbi in show business – probably the only working jazz musician with an Orthodox *smicha* [ordination]. I'm not able to attend my own premiere, because it's a Jewish holiday." Although he's a longtime collaborator with Dorfman, this is the first time the two will work improvisationally – a development made possible with the use of live looping technology. That excites him: "'Tikkun' highlights the tension between technology and the natural world. There's an inquiry there. The audience will have the opportunity to see how it resolves."

"It's about starting in a fragmented place and moving to a place of interdependence and release," Dorfman said. "I am interested in finding common threads, in building bridges." Even the word *tikun* is becoming universal: Barack Obama used it in his presidential campaign this past fall.

*Gwen Orel is a freelance writer on theater, music and film. She has a doctorate in theater arts from the University of Pittsburgh.*

*The Carolyn Dorfman Dance Company presents "The Legacy Project: Echoes," May 29 and 30 at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.*