



David Dorfman and Lisa Race in *(A) Way Out of My Body*. Photo by Cat Evans, courtesy David Dorfman Dance.

## Choreographer David Dorfman on Magical Risk and Radical Empathy

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July 24, 2024

For 40 years, David Dorfman has made capacious work full of heart. His 2020 piece [\*\(A\) Way Out of My Body\*](#) features original text, songs by Lizzy de Lise, and the rousing music of a live “house band” led by composer Sam Crawford. In a performance of the work last month in New York City’s Bryant Park, Dorfman and his wife and colleague

Lisa Race danced alongside the newest generation of company members. I had a unique view of Dorfman as he waited offstage for his entrance cue. A coil of electricity, he vibrated with small pulses as he held the railings on each side of the steps, ready to burst from the chute.

He's a little like that in an interview, as well. We spoke on Zoom recently in the leadup to his company's performances of *(A) Way Out of My Body* [at Jacob's Pillow \(August 3–4\)](#).

**Jacob's Pillow bills you as “being on a mission ‘to get the whole world dancing.’ ”**

**Why is that important to you?**

When you're dancing, you've decided that you're going to interact peacefully, and, for the most part, you're going to enjoy it. When you're dancing with another person, or folk-dancing in a big group circle, or country line-dance, or disco dance—that's how I started—you're concentrating on being with other people, and realizing what your body is doing. You're not scheming power trips.

**The description for a workshop based on *(A) Way Out of My Body* states: “In our unpredictable world, filled with daily obstacles of all kinds, how do we navigate toward positive change, resilience, and empathic behavior? Our answer is to dance through life with each other: safely and with magical risk appropriate for the occasion.” I like that phrase, “magical risk.”**

Sometimes I talk about opposites being the same. Sometimes I say to choreography students, “Why don't you now do the exact opposite approach to this idea?” One of the first things I showed my mentor, [Daniel Nagrin](#), he said, “What a great idea! That doesn't work right now. Go back and make it work.” He was excited about what I was working on, but it wasn't yet communicating. How could I release something that I thought was very important in order to get to something else that was more

communicative?

I think about this a lot. Also that opposites attract. It's kind of like when something really, really, ticks us off. Many times that's because we're really interested in it, or we see it as a side of ourselves that maybe we don't want to recognize. I feel that if we would recognize all of ourselves, we'd be so much more empathetic, and so much more ready to see those sides in others, instead of saying, "I don't like that" or "I don't want to be near that." But really, what that means is that you don't want to be near yourself, and that leads to a lot of violence. It's our discomfort with ourselves. What if instead of going into relationships with one-upmanship, or the need to dominate—what if we came as a listener and a witness and a facilitator?



DORFFMAN AND RACE IN *(A) WAY OUT OF MY BODY*. PHOTO BY MARIA BARANOVA, COURTESY DAVID DORFFMAN DANCE.

**That would be an extraordinary thing to learn in the dance studio—or in social dancing.**

I think surrender gets a really bad name because it feels like you've lost. But what about yielding and surrendering and being vulnerable? In social dancing, leading and following can be really gender-specific. I think there are reasons that the man shouldn't lead all the time. I also think that the notion of following gets a bad rap. If you think of tango, it's not about a macho dominant male and a submissive female. Tango comes from two male-identifying people dancing on the docks of Buenos Aires. It is so complex and technically challenging, the follower almost needs to be ahead of the leader. They need to be ready for anything.

**What about those who feel intimidated by dancing with other people? What do you say to get them involved?**

You can just be present, and to me that's a beautiful dance. Steve Paxton, who sadly died in February, would call that the small dance: the dance your body does when you're doing nothing. It's like: Look at all the effort we do to relax, or the effort we do to be present, and to be still and quiet and listening.

**You work with people with differing ability levels—high school and college students, professional dancers, your company, community members. Do you approach these groups differently?**

I almost teach the same to anybody. Each time I do a workshop or a class, it's like the only class that I'll ever teach. It has to be the best hour and 15 minutes, or hour and a half, or two hours, because that's all that exists right now.

I learn every student's name in every class. Some people might say, "Why does he spend so much time repeating names? We could be doing dancing stuff." I think that's

just as important as the dancing stuff. That's where I feel that this idea of empathy, joy, and community come together. I think that it is kind of radical to make those priorities like learning names, doing a little bit of a chat, and spending time with safe touch—those can be real priorities.

### **What can the audience expect at Jacob's Pillow?**

The last time we did *(A) Way Out of My Body* at Connecticut College, it was very cathartic. One of the things I did was to have everyone in the audience introduce themselves to someone they hadn't met and also to say "I see you." This was after the show, after, hopefully, a lot of what we had done washed over everyone.

I really enjoyed that moment. Sometimes I wonder, is it too much? Should I do that? But usually I do it. I was in our backyard the very next day and our neighbor was outside with his young baby, and he said, "David, I see you." I said, "What?" I knew he wasn't at the show. He said, "You were the subject of the sermon at church this morning." Then it made sense. Because there's this wonderful pastor who is a total arts supporter, and we've had many conversations over the years. But I didn't know my neighbor went to her church.

I'm always saying it's great to convene in the theater—that it's like a church, or a temple, or a mosque. And it's even greater when that spreads out beyond those walls.

**(A) WAY OUT OF MY BODY | DAVID DORFMAN | JACOB'S PILLOW | LISA RACE**

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