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Mighty Peace

No matter the theme, an evening with David Dorfman Dance is likely to uplift. The gregarious choreographer has a habit of engaging with the audience pre and/or post show with energy approaching that of a church revival gathering. For audiences of Brooklyn's the Space at Irondale last week, he signed a handwritten note on each program: "I have a proposal—Could we be compassionately tactile with our skin and fervently elastic with our minds." In his work and in person, Dorfman creates community with and for dance. The company's newest production, "truce songs," has a searing resonance, given real world circumstances of war and political vengeance. With eight dancers including Dorfman and Lisa Race, the longtime collaborator to whom he is married, and composers Sam Crawford and Lizzy de Lise, this work speaks to vulnerability and empathy, loss and displacement. What are we willing to risk for peace? What is the power of surrender?

Performance

David Dorfman Dance: "Truce Songs"

Place

The Space at Irondale, Brooklyn, New York, NY, January 12, 2025

Words

Karen Hildebrand



David Dorfman Dance in “Truce Songs.” Photograph by Haley Lowenthal

“Truce songs” appears in three chapters: the Battles; the Players; the Fantasy. As might be expected, The Battles comes out with dukes up, the dancers posturing a bring-it-on attitude. They arrive on stage carrying a colorful assortment of fabric as backpacks and shoulder slings designed by Naoko Nagata—literal and figurative baggage. With a surging tribal energy, they move with the natural ease of animals. Weighted and low to the ground, they seem to melt into lunges and somersaults. They spring like giant cats and toss their feet overhead in a handstand, propelled by Crawford’s pulsing punk rock score. The heart of the Battles is a duet between Lily Gelfand and Claudia-Lynn Rightmire, where the two women support and resist each other with full contact weight bearing partnering. Their conversation is both tense and tender, punctuated by de Lise’s live song lyrics, “you can’t escape me.”

The Players, spiced with smart humor, showcases the ensemble’s acting skills, as the performers one by one introduce themselves in character. Gelfand and Kashia Kancey impressively talk as they dance: “My name is the wind,” says Gelfand. “My friends call me, breathe in, breathe out.” A trio steps up to a makeshift podium of lighting equipment: Nik Owens is “the waiter, in the role of the one who waits;” Jack Blackmon, as “the interrupted,” never quite gets to finish his introduction; Michaela Ellingson is “the kissee, the kisser

trying to remember how to forget.” Dorfman takes a solo, kicking and flinging his arms in a clownish frenzy, while lip syncing to a recorded version of a fast-talking song he wrote titled, “Dragging:” “I don’t give a shit about my hair . . . I’m balding . . . It’s how we look, hey.”



David Dorfman Dance in “Truce Songs.” Photograph by Haley Lowenthal

Afterward, when Race enters for a solo of her own, she reaches out to Dorfman as if to say, Nice job. It’s the kind of exchange between performers that might happen in the wings or backstage. But in the open space of the Irondale, there is no backstage, only a square of marley covered floor, white backdrop, and canopy ceiling. All is visible. Whether intentional modeling of transparency to invite peace-making, or simply a response to the physical space, doesn’t matter. I’m seeing everything as metaphor. As the cast shifts from chapter to chapter, they break the fourth wall to reshuffle their spacing—the way they might in tech rehearsal. When one says, “I need to go back,” they collectively resume a pose I remember from the beginning of the work. “Not that far back,” elicits a chuckle from the audience.

Dorfman and Race bring long careers to the stage: Dorfman founded the company in 1987; Race, who makes her own creative work as RaceDance, joined in 1989. The two are lyrical

and elegant as they dance in duet. For “truce songs” they perform alongside, more than among, the younger generation of company dancers—often striking a kind of parental presence, like a trainer at the gym might spot you when lifting weights. They are also keepers of a long strip of shimmering cloth, which they move on and off the performing space. Does the cloth represent common ground? Or is it a river that divides? In a recurring motif, Race goes upside down and balances on the stable base of Dorfman’s crouched figure. It’s as if he’s saying, “I’ll support you while you dive in head first.”

For the finale, the canopy ceiling slowly descends over all eight of the cast. They crawl from beneath and hang “their burdens” from the metal rafters—those bundles of cloth from the opening. The dancers look at each other and disperse, leaving behind the white canopy cloth spread flat on the ground. A clean sweep? Or the blank slate of a fresh start? Dorfman will want to know what you think. After the show, I get an email inviting me to share my experience in one sentence, with a link to some songs from the show, now happy ear-worms in my head.

Karen Hildebrand

Karen Hildebrand is former editorial director for *Dance Magazine* and served as editor in chief for *Dance Teacher* for a decade. An advocate for dance education, she was honored with the Dance Teacher Award in 2020. She follows in the tradition of dance writers who are also poets (Edwin Denby, Jack Anderson), with poetry published in many literary journals and in her book, *Crossing Pleasure Avenue* (Indolent Books). She holds an MFA from the Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College. Originally from Colorado, she lives in Brooklyn.