

The Edge Between Apathy and Action: The Role and Creation of Active American Citizens in David Dorfman Communities

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Abstract

*Since its formation in 1985, David Dorfman Dance has become one of the leading American modern dance companies known for politically relevant and community based works. By analyzing the choreographies of *Disavowal* (2008) and *underground* (2006) through the lens of activist art and protest theories, Dorfman's work reveals a set of beliefs that are distinctly US, including democracy, individualism, and activism. Additionally, his works strive to encourage the audience to begin dialoguing, effectively employing democracy within the concert stage environment. Consequently, David Dorfman's work aims to create active American citizens who are more critical of their actions in the world, perhaps even inspired to act after leaving the theater.*

Since its formation in 1985, David Dorfman Dance has become one of the leading American¹ modern dance companies known for politically relevant and community based works. Dorfman's work is rooted deeply in his personal identity within the United States cultural landscape, which is evidenced by the subjects and metaphors that surface in his works. In addition to his choreographed texts, his pedagogy and creation process also incorporate a set of beliefs and values that are distinctly American, including democracy, individualism, and activism.

The importance of Dorfman's work and process lies in its applicability to protest theories. According to Professor of Sociology at the City University of New York, James Jasper, protests give people venues in which to articulate and define their moralities. "We are symbol-making creatures, who spin webs of meaning around ourselves" and protest when our "systems of meaning are at stake" (Jasper 10). Jasper claims that protests are diverse, satisfying, and beneficial to society, because anyone can be provoked into protest and protest movements have the ability to disseminate multiple perspectives and moral visions.

Similarly, Dorfman's works strive to present multiple opinions and perspectives in order to encourage the audience to begin dialoguing about the questions at stake, effectively employing democracy within the concert stage environment. Thus, his works aim to create active American citizens who are more critical of their actions in the world, perhaps even inspired to act after leaving the theater. To illustrate these points, I will present close readings of two of Dorfman's latest works, *Disavowal* (2008) and *underground* (2006). These works in particular have an activist agenda to mobilize the audience to at least question status quo as well as broaden the audience's political consciousness.

Poignantly called *Disavowal*, the work creates a collage of scenarios and interactions that comments on race relations and the construction of social behavior by

¹ The use of American in this paper is strictly in reference to the United States of America.

revealing to the audience the mechanisms and structures that generate and perpetuate racism. The audience is then witness to the bold staging of a multi-racial “family” under a white patriarch in which both subtle and blatant racism is ignored and unacknowledged by the cast. One creative political tactic the piece uses as described by David Schlossman is the construction of community between the audience and the performers. Typically the construction of community is a powerful tool of empowerment that forges unity and commitment around a common purpose, goal, or idea (Schlossman 117, 219). While the creation of community in *Disavowal* does create a sense of belonging and commitment, the emotional entanglement has the effect of implicating the audience, making them responsible in part for the racial dynamics played out before them. As a result, *Disavowal* engages the audience in both social and moral “crimes” and questions, and transmits at a more personal level a call for action.

The initial seeds of community are generated when the audience first enters the theater. In the 2009 production at Danspace, Raja Kelly, the host of the evening who is elegantly dressed in a rich red suit, lets in the audience by twos and threes. Parties are immediately split up and directed where to sit. I had attended the performance with my Chinese- American friend who was told to sit with Kyle Abraham whereas I was asked to sit with Whitney Tucker. For that brief time before the show, Tucker strikes up conversation, asking us where we come from. Whenever someone joins the group she hands them a segment of her roll of black yarn, so that soon the entire group is connected by a messy web of black yarn that crisscrosses around our little gathering. The alcove at the base of the church window in which we sit has various personal items: a ukulele, songbook, diary, and family photos (presumably Tucker’s personal possessions) (Dorfman, *Disavowal*).

Tucker also asks us if we know why we were put here. It finally dawns on me that the other audience members sitting with me are all white women with brunette hair, which reflect Tucker’s looks. I then notice my friend’s group, sitting across the space with Abraham who is African American, is primarily male and of color. All of a sudden, all the little personal relics and Tucker’s stories fit into a larger picture of identity and the categorization of human beings. And I realize that every single audience member had been judged by Raja Kelly and within seconds, Kelly made a conclusion about their identity dictating with whom the audience was to sit and from which angle they were to see the show, thus impacting their entire experience for the evening.

As the piece progresses, the dancers move between informally interacting with their pod of audience members and highly theatrical scenarios that take place on stage. Dorfman’s character unfolds as the white patriarch who is both a loving father figure to the cast and a power figure who polices the cast’s comportment, dictating correct behavior and sometimes ignoring racial dynamics. Dorfman’s corrective practices and the reminder that he will create tolerance by any means necessary is evident in the powerful confrontation between Karl Rogers and Kyle Abraham. The cast has broken away from the stage to interact with their respective audience groups with whom they began the evening. Eventually, everyone’s attention is captivated by what appears to be a simplistic fight between Rogers and Abraham (and if you weren’t a part of their pod, like myself, you easily miss what simple bickering started the fight), but the underlining tension that surfaces is a white male apologizing to a black male for the entire history of black oppression by whites.

KR: *I'm sorry! I think everybody hears me, I'm not the only one. There's plenty of people here who would gladly stand up and tell you that we're sorry.*

KA: *Well why won't she stand up?*

KR: *Because I'm standing up for them, I'm taking a big step by standing up, it's a little uncomfortable here telling you that I'm sorry.*

KA: *That's very big of you Karl, but that's not enough.*

The discussion digresses as Karl Rogers reveals feelings of white guilt generated by the “stuck” feeling of unable to correct a gigantic past through the verbiage of an apology.

KR: *I don't know what else to do. I'm stuck, I'm either going to be this [depressed/oppresed] white guy–*

KA: *So you're the victim here?!*

KR: *Yes, I'm the victim right now...because David put me here.*

After observing the dialogue, Dorfman steps in to control and direct the situation.

DD: *Why don't you lower your voice. It's not my fault. Why don't you touch him?*

KR: *Because that doesn't feel right.*

KA: *I don't want him to touch me*

(Dorfman, *Disavowal by David Dorfman Dance*)

The whole episode is poignant, frustrating, offensive, and simplistic, which, I think, is the specific intent. The complexity of the episode is in the conflicting layers of information. There are Dorfman's corrective authority mediating race relations, the introduction of white guilt (a package of issues such as affirmative action, white privilege, and the responsibility of carrying historical memory), the simplistic, yet moving notion that people just need to touch each other to gain tolerance and understanding, and the relationship of the audience to this entire confrontation.

As stated earlier, the power of this episode lies in the audience's location as part of the community of which Abraham and Rogers are part. Since the dialogue takes place in the audience seating area with the house lights up, there is no escape from the awkward tension and charged emotions. Additionally, the initiation of the audience into the cast's eclectic family culture through a sense of belonging to your dancer and your pod gives the situation an intimacy because we are part of the cultural fabric and the “we” to which Rogers refers, responsible for the social issues at stake. This choreographic staging falls under integration, one of the five categories Jan Cohen-Cruz uses to describe radical street performances.

Integration employs the tactic of inserting a scenario into everyday life to create an emotional experience for the spectators in which the spectators don't realize they become part of the performance (Cohen- Cruz 5, 119). Rogers and Abraham's dialogue is very similar to Augusto Boal's Invisible Theater in which a pre-written script is performed in a setting where spectators don't realize they are watching theater and can

become participants (121). Integration is perceived to have a more powerful and longer lasting impact on the spectator, because without the wall separating the spectator and actor and theater's institutional patterns and rituals the message resonates at a more personal level (Boal 124). While Rogers and Abraham are known as professional dancers by the audience and are clearly part of the theatrical piece, the line between reality and theater is blurred, because the situation takes place off-stage, Rogers looks to choreographer Dorfman for support as if the situation spiraled away from the pre-scripted text, and both the nature and delivery of the information appears auto-biographical rather than character driven. As a result, I would argue that this episode has a similar affect as Invisible Theater by creating an uncomfortable emotional experience rather than a distanced theatrical staging.

Inspired by the release of the 2002 documentary *The Weather Underground*, *underground* tackles Dorfman's mixed feelings towards this domestic terrorist organization (Green and Siegel). When violence is committed in your name, how will you react? Will you do nothing or will you make a difference? Will that difference be violent? By refusing to answer these questions directly, Dorfman's *underground* stages both the Weather Underground's choice of violence and today's choice of apathy which allows the audience to reflect on where their choices fit within the spectrum. Consequently, *underground* establishes more than just a social awareness, the piece's activist agenda also energizes the audience, empowering them to act on their choice for a solution.

One narrative construct *underground* uses is two surveys to reveal the opinions of the dancers while giving time for the audience to ask themselves the same question. In the first survey, Karl Rogers stands downstage left of the cast, asking a series of questions that appear in the projection on the back wall as well as bar graphs dictating percentages of answers. With each question, the dancers choose either yes or no by either stepping or leaping forward or backward. Similar to Ishmael Huston-Jones' *Politics of Dancing*, awkwardness ensues when the questions become more personal and dancers are singled out because their answers are visibly different than the rest of the group.

Can you fight for peace? Have you ever killed anyone? Only one steps forward, distanced by the rest of the cast jumping back. *Have you ever wanted to kill?* A resounding "yes" demonstrated by a forward leap by everyone. *Are birds happy? Is violence ever justified? Would you die for your country?* Some "yes," some "no." *Would you die for your family?* Apparently, more dancers choose their family over their country (Dorfman, *underground*).

The second survey's answers are less clear. Yes and no do not seem to correspond to any of the side-steps or changes in facing towards or away from the audience. *Does what you do make a difference? Are birds still happy? Do demonstrations make a difference? Can we live without war? Will you stand up? Will you stand up?* A catchy jingle beat enters under the spoken questions and then swells as Rogers demands with increasing volume, "Will you stand up?" The entire cast, including the community participants fill the space with unison movement: arm circles head, release back hit, shimmy shimmy over, arm leg fling; arm, hit, shake 'n kick; arm, hit, shake 'n kick; arm, hit, shake 'n kick. During this repetition, Patrick Ferreri shares his change in opinion about demonstrations. He admits he used to be so angry. He went to protests and marches and even broke stuff, but then he realized it was cool to be apathetic and not to care.

Suddenly, Ferreri finds himself alone, surrounded by a sea of dancers in the activist pose, a deep lunge with the fist in the air. This staging creates a visual tension between Ferreri's active movement but passive statements and the charged potential of the activist pose (Dorfman, *underground*).

I read Ferreri's monologue as a reflection on the current trend in America's youth culture, the change from active young adult protestors in the sixties to the apathetic culture of today's young adults. However, Dorfman chooses to juxtapose this statement against a potential pose. The visual imagery negates Ferreri's apathetic comments, implying that there is a reserve of energy for change and action if we choose to seek it.

Thematically, these surveys fit brilliantly into the continuum of action/inaction. Often surveys are used to gather the general public opinion before going forth with an agenda, or their results are used to point out a trend. However, the actual connection between gathering this information and action that will result in change is often delayed or the momentum dissipates to result in the maintenance of status quo. Similarly, the audience remains inactive, stuck in the status quo of sitting in the dark theatre while we are aware of our answers to these provocative questions. When asked, "Will you stand up," the rest of the cast is stepping to an infectious beat, but the audience remains seated. For me, I am compelled to move, my answer is a resounding "yes, I will stand up," yet I am immobilized by the theatrical norm of being a spectator. Consequently, Dorfman has me leaving the theatre wanting to correct that discrepancy between my answers and my actions.

In conclusion, I want to address one question that plagues political art and activism, which is the efficacy debate – can one performance change people's minds and move an audience to action (Schlossman 28). While the debate asks interesting questions about the empirical evidence of performance's power to affect change, I believe, as does Schlossman, that the cause and effect relationship is more complex than a one to one ratio (29). As a result with these close readings of the choreographic texts of *Disavowal* and *underground*, I am laying the groundwork for my further inquiry into the social worlds that intersect within David Dorfman's artistic realm.

As political consciousness is an accumulation of experiences and thoughts, these two works are the accumulation of class work, repertory study, many collaborators (dancers, students, musicians, and others with which Dorfman's artistic life intersects), and touring (which introduces different spaces to stage the work, audiences, reviewers, critics, and production personnel). Thus, I believe the impact of these works may be subtle and may not directly form active American citizens. However, the dissemination of Dorfman's ideas, critiques, and dialogues that these works raise is vast due to the multiple communities that encounter his work, artistic process, and powerfully potent activist strategies he employs. David Dorfman's use of integration, the fostering of community, and the critically questioning of social values force the audience to be active citizens of his choreographic realm for that brief moment in the theater, creating one more experience to inform their political identity.

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