

The Edge Between Apathy and Action
The different shades of violence and personal choice presented in David Dorfman's *underground*.

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Only 13 years old at the time the Weathermen formed in 1969, David Dorfman remembers watching the Students for a Democratic Society convention on TV, but not completely understanding the political landscape at the time (Dorfman, *underground: Q&A*, 21 July 2007). Dorfman's fascination with the Weathermen, labeled as a domestic terrorist organization by the US government, is revealed in a short monologue that Dorfman delivers in his piece *underground*. Addressed in similar fashion as the Weather Underground's communications, Dorfman titles his fan letter as a first communiqué. He admits he's a huge fan of the Weather Underground, "I idolized you," but Dorfman also expresses his mixed feelings: he believes in their cause, yet does not have the courage to join their forces; he believes they made a difference, yet he is unsure if the violence they unleashed was necessary or even right. Dorfman signs his letter with "your comrade-not-in-arms, David" which demonstrates his support of the Weather Underground, but also his hesitance to follow their example (Dorfman, *underground*).

The concept for *underground* was inspired by the release of the 2002 documentary of the Weather Underground. The film awakens much of the fervor that was felt in the '60s and '70s counterculture and anti-war demonstrations (Carbonneau 11). As is portrayed by Dorfman's communiqué, *underground* tackles some of the same questions raised by the documentary. 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? (Carbonneau 13) These and more questions are introduced in a stripped down dialogue between dancers, Karl Rogers and Jennifer Nugent during the initial moments of *underground*. Caught in a spotlight, Nugent hangs restrained in Rogers' tight grasp, like a detainee being tortured to reveal the truth.

KR (accusatory): *Does what you do make a difference?*

JN (bewildered and hopeless): *What should I do?*

KR: *Does what you do make a difference?*

JN: *I don't know how to be.*

KR: *Does what you do make a difference?*

JN (defiant): *What would you do?* (Dorfman, *underground*)

By refusing to answer the question, 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. The Weathermen's response to the Vietnam War was to attempt to initiate a violent overthrow of the United States Government. Frustrated by the ineffectiveness of the Students for a Democratic Society's (SDS) peaceful demonstrations, the Weathermen formed as a faction of SDS during the chaos of the 1969 SDS national convention. Named after a line in Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues" ("You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows"), the Weathermen went underground in 1970 when their organization became a target of the FBI. Renamed the Weather Underground, the organization was responsible for some thirty bombings of Federal and State institutions in response to various human rights violations such as the Kent State killings, the Vietnam War, and injustices committed in the American prison system (Green and Siegel).

Weather Underground member, Brian Flanagan admits the scary reality inside which the organization was caught: "When you feel you have right on your side, you can do some horrific

things” (Green and Siegel). The Weather Underground believed the US government had to be stopped from committing these crimes. According to Naomi Jaffe, a member of Weather Underground, sitting there, just enjoying her white life, was violence (Green and Siegel). Upon reflection, Mark Rudd, a Weather Underground leader, says it’s difficult to tease apart right from wrong, but he is convinced of the Weather Underground’s stance against the United States’ position in the world. He concludes, “We [Weather Underground] couldn’t handle the knowledge. It was too big – we didn’t know what to do. In a way, I still don’t know what to do. It is still eating away at me, just as it did thirty years ago” (Green and Siegel). It is precisely this knowledge and the question, what should be done with this knowledge, that fuels Dorfman’s *underground*.

Although evoking the 60-70s antiwar movement, *underground* has an eerie resonance to the current war in Iraq. However, instead of an empowered counterculture movement, today’s youth seems to be consumed by apathy. Audience member Arthur Fink describes the difference as feeling terrified and empowered to now feeling terrified and not empowered (Dorfman, *underground: Q&A*, 21 July 2007). Dance critic Suzanne Carbonneau expresses the litany of questions at which the documentary and *underground* hint:

What had happened to America, the country we thought had finally begun to live up to its Constitutional promises as a result of the liberation movements of the 1960s and the example of the Vietnam War? Hadn’t we learned our lessons? What could have led us so deeply astray? And what had happened to those young people in the ’60s and ’70s who had been driven to a form of madness in their quest to bring about justice? Moreover, just how had a generation that had lived through the tragedy and insanity of Vietnam blundered so amnesiacally into Iraq? And why were we today – hunkered down in a toxic stew of ignorance, ambition, narcissism, and frivolity – ignoring the illegal acts of our government, the blatant lies of our elected officials, the destruction of our civil liberties, and the hijacking of our government by corporate interests and religious fanatics? (11)

Like Fink and Carbonneau, Dorfman is struggling with the knowledge that the US democracy is not working, and democratic rights such as voting are not making a difference (Dorfman, *underground: Q&A*, 20 July 2007). So he presents *underground* in order to segue into discussing pertinent questions: what can be done to make a difference, what can we do with this knowledge, and where does violence exist in our choices? These issues he wishes to bring to the forefront as a form of activism. In the safety of the theatre, his dancers explore the limits of aggression and anger without anyone getting physically hurt. Dorfman hopes to generate an active audience who will react to his work whether in agreement or disagreement. He sees his role as asking audience members to be alert, see what’s going on, and to make informed decisions (Dorfman, *underground: Q&A*, 21 July 2007). *underground* completes these goals through physical movement that generates kinesthetic empathy, uncomfortable scenarios with which the audience disagrees, and provocative questions that the viewer starts to ask of themselves.

When the audience enters the theatre, David Dorfman is already on stage, working through a physical meditation. In a cyclic pattern, Dorfman first holds a defiant pose upstage right. His legs are in a deep lunge and his gaze is looking up at his strong, right fist in the air. Dorfman, then

runs the diagonal to downstage left where he propels something in his hand offstage into the audience in a series of full-body throws. Once he has exhausted his energy, he moves back upstage using phrase work typical of Dorfman's vocabulary, such as momentum based turns with the torso bent over at the waist and jumps that land on the shin and roll into the floor. 1960s music plays dimly in the background and the audience fades in and out of silence, unsure if the piece has started (Dorfman, *underground*).

These two movement motifs, the deep lunge pose with the fist in the air, and what I interpret as rock throwing are interspersed throughout the piece. I will call the deep lunge, the activist pose due to the last scene in the piece, where three dancers happen upon Joseph Poulson in the statuesque lunge. Debating about what this "thing" is, the dancers determine that it is an activist and decide to get it to do something. With their encouragement and physical pushes, the activist morphs into the protestor, slowly walking forward, and eventually evolving into a rock thrower due to the added energy of the growing crowd (Dorfman, *underground*).

The other motif of rock throwing is a heavily debatable image. Due to movement's elusive qualities, the throwing of invisible projectiles can have many connotations. When asked by an audience member about Dorfman's rock throwing, Dorfman reveals that he never pictures himself with a rock in hand. Instead he is excising anger, breaking through something as if in an active prayer. Dorfman points out that every time he is throwing "something" it is never at the audience. He is throwing into the aisle space to the right of the audience (Dorfman, *underground: Q&A*, 20 July 2007). However, I, as did much of the audience, which was revealed during post-show discussions, still perceive the dancers throwing "rocks," hard objects meant to cause harm. For me this is due to one image of Francis Stansky who throws towards the upstage wall at which point the video image shatters to the sound of breaking glass (Dorfman, *underground*).

The throwing image dances on the edge between violence and non-violence. Dorfman reminds us that rock throwing will continue to exist, but he asks how can we be angry and be loving without hurting each other (Dorfman, *underground: Q&A*, 20 July 2007). While some audience members have expressed fear that Dorfman is endorsing violence, Dorfman is interested in presenting the range of possibilities, incorporating many messages so that the audience can react to *underground* by asking the question, what is the solution? If Dorfman has made the audience uncomfortable by presenting violence, then he has succeeded in generating a reaction albeit one of disagreement.

One narrative construct *underground* uses is two surveys to reveal the opinions of the dancers and give space 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*).*

Eventually the participants reach Rogers, but it is unclear whether this means victory or embarrassment for the first to reach downstage left. When Whitney Tucker reaches the edge of the stage, she breaks into convulsions before singing out, “I would do anything for love, but I won’t do that” (Dorfman, *underground*). As if in response to one of the questions posed, Tucker sets her limits in this vague sentence, a mantra for *underground*: what will you do for peace?

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 (Dorfman, *underground*). This staging creates a visual tension between Ferreri’s active movement but passive statements and the charged potential of the activist pose. 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.

Another powerful segment is Jennifer Nugent’s monologue. She presents the logic that if she could kill a few people, she could save even more. *I could kill three and save ten. I could kill ten and save thirty. I could kill fifteen and save forty-five.* The numbers start to rise as she calculates

how many individuals she could save by killing a smaller percent. The lights come up slightly on the audience, so that Nugent can pick out specific individuals to add to those she could kill to make a total of 117 in order to save 1,023. Eventually the logic unravels with her final statement, “I could kill 3 billion and save 10 trillion.” Her arms are up in the air in a sign of surrender, a release of responsibility (Dorfman, *underground*). To complicate the image, Dorfman has Nugent and the dancers moving through a series of cooperative and supportive movement tableaux. Against Nugent’s destructive proposal, the dancers form bridges between their bodies. As with Ferreri’s dialogue, the staging of both destruction and cooperation continues to offer the audience two choices and to ask what the solution should be.

When *underground* was performed at Bates Dance Festival in 2007, the audience reactions varied widely. One individual was appalled by what he perceived as the message endorsing violence and Dorfman’s anti-violent perceptions of his own work. This audience member charged Dorfman to reflect on the final message of *underground*, which the audience member felt that Dorfman’s staging equates apathy with violence and leaves the audience with the solution being violence, even though Dorfman, himself, states he is not a rock thrower and is against violence (Dorfman, *underground: Q&A*, 20 July 2007). However, another individual enthusiastically stated, “I wanted to get off my ass and do something” after seeing the performance (Dorfman, *underground: Q&A*, 21 July 2007).

Even the dancers revealed their mixed feelings towards the piece they had been touring for over a year. Both Heather McArdle and Karl Rogers admitted that they do not agree with the piece. Rogers described some of the fights he has had with Dorfman, because he believed there are other peaceful ways to protest. Jennifer Nugent also struggled with how she was going to find herself in the piece. However, all the dancers committed themselves to Dorfman’s vision and negotiated these sentiments in order to present the piece and to maintain their own integrity (Dorfman, *underground: Q&A*, 20 July 2007). The fact that Dorfman chooses dancers who not only generate movement and text material but also actively disagreeing with his vision, demonstrates Dorfman’s value in dissenting viewpoints in a collaborative-style creative process.

While all these segments of *underground* make me contemplate my own thoughts and actions, it is the infectious dancing, the explosive movement that charges me with the potential to enact change. The dancers explode onto the stage after a momentary blackout following Nugent and Rogers’ initial dialogue. The music is sonorous, an edgy rock mix that fills the theatre and propels the movement across the stage. The cast of eight dives and swirls through the space, utilizing the weight of the head to provide momentum for the sequential movement. Although performed in unison, it is easy to see the idiosyncrasies of each individual’s execution. Kinetically I empathize with the arcs and pathways made by the momentum of their jumps into turns. I am on the edge of my seat, my muscles tense with the possibility for movement. This infectious energy is a gift from David Dorfman. Dorfman’s choreography overrides the inertia of my seated body, filling me with potentiality from the kinetic energy expelled by the dancers. 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.

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