

DANCE REVIEW

Dorfman program for SPA is an engrossing one

By MOLLY GLENTZER
Houston Chronicle

Some modern dance choreographers revel in their ability to confound people. Not David Dorfman. His dancers often tell you what they're up to. But they don't say too much — just enough to leave a buzz in your head.

At his company's Houston debut Saturday in the Cullen Theater, Dorfman also provided movement that was accessible but not literal, plus sensational music, lighting and sets. The program, presented by Society for the Performing Arts, consisted of two recent works, *Subverse* (1999) and *To Lie Tenderly* (2000). If all contemporary dance were as engrossing, theaters might be full.

Subverse, the dancer of the two, was a marvel. First, the evocative atmospherics: Jane Cox's sharp white lights fell in patterned shafts. Paul Clay's set design featured a trio of red columns, lit from inside, that slowly descended. Hahn Rowe's multi-layered score was variously ponderous and penetrating.

Dorfman began and ended the dance in front of the curtain, moving around a patch of grass about six by three feet — cemetery-plot

size — a subtle but not too dark reference to mortality. Teetering on the turf, with good comic timing, he told a joke about a tailor named Fake whose store sign might have suggested he made suits for free. It became a verbal volley with himself, as he played both parts.

"Everything's funny. Some of it's just real," he said. Did he mean real as in real funny? Or as in reality? Either or both, probably. Ambiguous, yes — but refreshingly so.

The curtain opened on a surreal scene — variously glaring and shadowed — where Dorfman was a manipulative figure and his very fine dancers (Jeannie Durning, Curt Haworth, Paul Materson, Jennifer Nugent and Joseph Poulson) were searching for truth. There were moments of poignant clarity: A dancer repeatedly trounced across the stage losing his pants. A line of dancers, one by one, jumped for something invisible above Dorfman's raised hand.

Near the end, Dorfman had another exchange with himself. This time he played two guys asking, like jailbirds, "What are you in for?" Yet another loaded question, full of existential possibility. I have no idea how this connected to the rest of the dance, though.

It seemed like a skit that might be the start of another piece — maybe a play on "convict" and "conviction."

In larger ensemble movements, the dance had kinetic magic — fluid to the bone yet highly aerobic. It made me want to get up and dance, too.

Dorfman often positions his five dancers in groups of two, two and one — as opposed to two and three or all five in unison — the isolation is obvious.

To Lie Tenderly also had this quality, although movement-wise, it was a different flavor — deliberate, full of self-conscious stop-and-go walking, rough-housing, confrontation and retreat. Again, the peripherals were excellent: Amy Denio's score provided a mood roller coaster, with various sections emphasizing guitar, vocals, accordion, baritone sax, keyboard, bass, baglama, drums and electric violin.

Part of Clay's set looked like one of those techno-inspired Metro bus stops, with a metal frame and an angled roof. The roof, as well as a revolving marquee atop a high pole and a head-high white backdrop all served as projection screens for video that seemed to be shot live, then manipulated and played back — as at a rock concert. (The parts

showing the musicians weren't live, since the music was recorded.) Naoko Nagata's costumes suggested rock star attire, loudly creative and raggedly glitzy.

The title *To Lie Tenderly* said a lot, and so did the dancers. Again, Dorfman explored the edges of truth and used the act of performing as a metaphor. The dancers talked the audience through the piece — not quite play-by-play — beginning each section with explanations like, "This dance is about never knowing who you really are" or "This dance is about me moving closer to you." Only I was never quite sure if they were speaking to the audience, to each other or to some imaginary character. Or whether they were telling the truth. Every comment, echoed in nuanced movement, had layers.

Most of *To Lie Tenderly* was anything but tender. The dancers cawed like crows, then the caws erupted into whoops like drunks watching a football game — screaming about life, about winning, about love, about who knows what. Who would have ever thought such an action could seem profound?