

INSIDE *Arts*

A man in a red vest and white shirt is playing a red and white accordion. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a plain, light color.

A World of Change

The Arts Partners Program
1989-2003

on the cover
David Dorfman



Familiar Movements

Flynn Theatre for the Performing Arts David Dorfman Dance

“Long-term relationships”



The Flynn Theatre selected choreographer David Dorfman for an Arts Partners project intended to increase interest in the performing arts in Northern Vermont communities which had had limited involvement with the arts and the theater. In addition, the Flynn sought to involve people from a cross-section of the community in an exploration of family issues through movement.

Dorfman had been in Burlington several years before with his Athlete's Project, which was a great success in involving ordinary Vermonters in working with the artist to create a new work, "Out of Season." Given that, it seemed a natural extension of that relationship to bring him back for a similar kind of project.

According to Philip Bither, the Flynn invested significant time and energy in planning for the project. As Bither said in his final report, "Because of its scope, this project demanded more planning than any project ever taken on by the Flynn. Many meetings with each community partner group were essential to work out scheduling and logistics and to continue to explain the project."

A variety of community partners signed on, including social service agencies; community and youth centers; a synagogue; and a school district. The project was set up in four phases, each involving a different group.

The long planning process had its benefits but also its drawbacks. One primary partner agency lost much of its funding and was unable to support the project when it finally got underway. A high school performing arts program that was to have been a partner was eliminated. And, as Bither noted, "a year or two in the lives of young people is a very long time and some participants were lost who we initially thought would be involved."

Explaining to partners with less experience exactly what impact the residency could have on participants was sometimes difficult.

"Because of the earlier successes of the Athlete's Project... the Flynn staff knew how powerful the sessions with Dorfman would be but it was difficult to convey this in words or in print,"

Bither said in his final report.

In fact, some of the partnerships ended up playing themselves out differently than originally envisioned. For example, the two-week residency of Phase I, which involved "at-risk" Burlington young people and their parents, was followed by weekly movement sessions that were not part of the original plan. These sessions were added at the request of the group.

In Phase II, which targeted semi-rural cities, two "sample workshops" were scheduled to help explain the residency to potential participants when it became clear that it was difficult to fully explain the project through flyers and phone calls.

Phase III was originally set up to take place equally in two different synagogues, but ultimately no one from the second synagogue chose to participate.

The final phase of the project was a three-week rehearsal to develop the new work "Familiar Movements." Five family groups—and a single person—were selected from the community residencies, and an additional five pairings were selected from open auditions of dancers. As Bither reported, "This cross-section of the community included families in every income bracket, of very varied physical types (including a woman in a wheelchair undergoing chemotherapy), and with differing dance experience. ... the culminating performance of the entire project was a resounding artistic success and emotionally satisfying event."

The Flynn felt that a number of relationships developed during the project were worth pursuing after the project was over, including those with three social service agencies, both synagogues, and many of the participants in the residency project.

As Philip Bither said in his final report, "Because the Flynn has been committed to extended residencies with artists, community outreach and non-traditional arts projects, the Family Project did not significantly change how we approach presenting. What it did provide was the funding to build the residency of our dreams that we felt would have a significant impact on many people new to us who are part of our community." ■