

6 The itinerant David Dorfman pays a visit to Brooklyn.

By Iris Fanger

Light of Foot, They Perform And Move On

By IRIS FANGER

ON a late November day, David Dorfman walked down Broadway in SoHo on his way to a rehearsal. The dance bag hanging from his shoulders, and the suitcase on wheels he trailed behind him, appeared to be packed with enough gear to rival the peddlers who had set up tables along the sidewalk where he passed.

As choreographer, director and performer for the itinerant company David Dorfman Dance, Mr. Dorfman always carries the needs of the day with him. Some days this even includes the saxophone and accordion he will play in the band accompanying "To Lie Tenderly," one of the works he will present for four performances starting on Wednesday at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater as part of the Next Wave Festival. (The company will also present a special performance for schoolchildren on Friday.) Mr. Dorfman will dance in "Subverse," the other work on the program. Indeed, it is hard to see how he

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Members of David Dorfman Dance performing Mr. Dorfman's "Subverse."

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could balance anything more, on his back or in his schedule.

Like performers of the past who went from town to town in search of audiences, traveling with his gear is a fact of life for Mr. Dorfman, despite the considerable reputation of the troupe he founded 15 years

ago. Without a home of its own, the group must work its rehearsals around the needs of others in rented studio spaces while schlepping its props, music, costumes and water bottles with them.

The Next Wave booking, the only New York showing for David Dorfman Dance, is

greatly desired by dance troupes because of the Brooklyn Academy's prestige and because of its audiences, which are drawn from a wider population than that of the downtown venues where the small companies generally perform. "I've hoped for this gig for a really long time," Mr. Dorfman

said. "It's gratifying to work for this festival. I first saw Pina Bausch there. I have so many memories and influences from seeing previous festivals."

Although he has been based in New York since 1981, and the six members of his company also live in the city, they are sustained by residences scattered throughout the country. Mr. Dorfman was able to provide his dancers with a total of 33 weeks of work this year (a little better than average, he thinks, for small companies), in a combination of rehearsals, performances and teaching. Mr. Dorfman, as a teacher

With no home of its own, David Dorfman's troupe travels with costumes, props and music in tow.

and choreographer, is "on the road more than seven months a year," he said. "Part of the reason is to make all this happen."

At 43, Mr. Dorfman is best known for a physically demanding, introspective and highly musical brand of contemporary dances that attracts men and women as equal partners in tasks to be performed onstage. Lifts are shared and exchanged; risk moves are assigned in democratic fashion, created through improvisations. Mr. Dorfman is quick to credit the dancers' contribution to the choreography.

"I make up the first few phrases of a dance and almost immediately I ask company members to make up variations," he said. "Sometimes I give them adjectives to guide them, but sometimes it's carte blanche. I revel in watching the choices the dancers make and how they are expressing themselves."

Curt Haworth, Lisa Race and Tom

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Thayer have been with Mr. Dorfman for more than a decade. Both Ms. Race and Mr. Thayer have won New York Dance and Performance Awards (the Bessies) for their work with him. The other members are Jeanine Durning, who has danced with him since 1993, Paul Mattson and Jennifer Nugent.

Born in Chicago, Mr. Dorfman had childhood interests that ranged from music (lessons on the accordion, piano and saxophone and playing in bands) to school and college athletics and the local Little League baseball team. The works he creates reflect his own open, accessible personality. A Midwesterner who often refers to his roots, he also has a psyche that probes his experiences and distills them into his choreography.

He did not start dancing until his junior year in college, when he transferred from Washington University in St. Louis to the University of Illinois as a business major. One of his friends was the captain of the baseball team and also played the lead roles in many of the college theatricals. "I thought, Wow. This guy can do both," Mr. Dorfman said. "He gave me the little bit of permission that seeped importantly into my mind and my heart.

"In the meantime, I was frequenting the discos at night. My true passion was turning from athletics and classes to dancing every night." When he returned to Washington University for his senior year, he signed up for some modern-dance courses. After graduation, he worked for a year in retailing before enrolling at Connecticut College in New London to pursue a master's degree dance.

Mr. Dorfman calls himself "post-postmodern," and his works weave spoken phrases, images of contemporary culture and memories into a sophisticated sweep of musical colorations. In a segment of "To Lie Tenderly," for example, the dancers utter bird sounds and preen their feathers to suggest pop stars who hunt themselves for their fans.

"There are words in both the dances on the program for BAM," he said. "It's a feed-back system: words to movement, movement to words. They inform each other. I'm connecting the two: the words

make the movement more literal; the movement makes the words more kinetic."

"To Lie Tenderly" consists of two separate dances, presented in their New York premieres. The program had its world premiere in Durham, N.C., last month, after a work-in-progress showing at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, in October. The first version of "Subverse" was shown at the American Dance Festival in 1999.

"We talk in terms of stories a lot," Mr. Dorfman said. "There are story phrases in 'To Lie Tenderly.' I asked the question, 'What would it be like to make up a phrase where people were lying?' Can movement lie? I think it

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was Martha Graham who said 'no.' Each person speaks a sentence of what the dance is about. It's like a lie-meter to the audience, challenging the audience to stop and think, 'Do I believe what the dancer is saying?' A lie spoken is still there."

Another query that served as a stimulus was asking the dancers to think back to a different period in their lives and say where they expected to be now. "For example, I thought I'd be an accountant, living on Lake Shore Drive in Chicago," Mr. Dorfman said. "After college, I thought I'd be the owner of a men's clothing store in St. Louis. Their first responses to that question were so poetic that they ended up in the piece."

In Mr. Dorfman's mind, the title of "Subverse" refers to a merging of the words, "subvert" and "subtext." Its theme is struck from the beginning in Mr. Dorfman's solo about being suckered into believing a tailor who advertises "suits for nothing." As he tells the story about his encounter and gestures in counterpoint to his words, it's clear that he was caught by the difference between a surface perception and the reality beneath it. When the curtain rises,



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David Dorfman performing in his work "Subverse." He'll also dance in the piece at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.

the company is seen gyrating to drum-and-bass music composed by Hahn Rowe. At the BAM performances, Mr. Rowe will be positioned on a platform high above the stage where he will be playing his electric violin and mixing the score.

Amy Denio composed the score for "To Lie Tenderly." She will perform the vocals, play the guitar and an accordion in the band along with Mr. Dorfman, Mr. Rowe, Jesse Manno on keyboard, bass guitar and baglama, a Turkish stringed instrument, and Tobias Ralph on drums.

For "Subverse," Paul Clay has designed a setting of three red fabric pillars, one anchored to the ground, the other two suspended. Mr. Clay will stretch white fabric around the three sides of the stage to make the setting for "To Lie Tenderly." A large sign will hang overhead, on

which video images of the dance will be projected. A structure that looks like an abstract carport-loom at the rear "like a remote place where a rock 'n' roll band has broken down and then must figure out what to do," Mr. Dorfman said.

At the end of "To Lie Tenderly" the six dancers exit the stage and Mr. Dorfman will put down his instruments to join them for "Subverse" when they return. "It's almost as if, at the last moment, they have finally found a way out and to their next chapter as a community and as individuals," he said. "My goal is that the audience leave knowing something about the performers as individuals. The environment is very different in this new world of 'Subverse.' I feel the pieces are related but not two halves of the same story."