

Going Underground

Exploring the line between terrorism and activism

by Deborah Jowitt

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In the most cryptic moment of David Dorfman's overwhelming and challenging *underground*, Jennifer Nugent says to Karl Rogers, "I don't know how to be. Should I . . . ?" Here she lashes herself into a rage, hurtling to the floor and up again—body as incoherent weapon. "Or should I . . . ?" Now her fury is bottled up, seething through her tense, shaking body.

underground poses very large questions. What is the difference between a terrorist and an activist? When is violence justified, and to what extent? Dorfman's controversial remarks to the audience weigh his admiration for the daring and courage of the militant Weathermen (a '60s and '70s offshoot of Students for a Democratic Society) against the Weathermen's selective use of violence. True, in the 30 bombings they engineered, no one died except three of their own; on the other hand, killing wasn't an act they ruled out.

In the past, Dorfman's warmhearted dances have explored the light and dark places of the psyche, family, and community without reference to specific events in world history. *underground* expresses in words and movement his distress over American citizens' apathy in the face of political corruption and threats of terrorism. Patrick Ferreri recounts a journey from impotent anger to no longer caring. Nugent delivers a terrorist's scary justification: "If I kill one person," she says, "I could save three people." She multiplies this flawed ratio into billions of dead and, with a pointing finger, includes us among them.

Dorfman's collaborators have provided a drastic setting. In Bart Fasbender's sound design, tunes by the Wellwater Conspiracy and others are interrupted by sudden explosions, crashes, and the sound of shattering glass. Jane Cox's nightmarishly changeable lighting (fire, darkness, smoke, glare) charts the violence and pockets of calm. Cameron Anderson's backdrop splits in half diagonally to reveal a giant hand with a dark hole at its center, onto which people (Dorfman's company plus a horde of others) toss pretty missiles: little red and blue magnetic lights. Jacob Pinholster's media design includes small, simultaneously projected rectangles of black-and-white footage showing 1960s demonstrations.



To the barricades: *Underground*
Julieta Cervantes

David Dorfman Dance
BAM Harvey Theater
November 14 through 18

The choreography embodies struggle and responds to events. A cry of "Now!" makes everyone plunge to the floor. Several times, couples—one walking upright, one crumpled over and hanging on to his or her partner—circle in a gloomy folk dance. A deep lunge with one fist raised is not only a commitment to fighting; carried into motion, it becomes the throwing of a grenade. The stage is flooded at one point with people loosely kicking and turning and running in formations— well-organized armies disheveled by turbulence. Events can be as intimate as a slow rough-and-tumble duet for Joseph Poulson and Heather McArdle or as dogged as Lindsay Mackay Ashmun, Molly Poerstel, Karl Rogers, Francis Stansky, Whitney Tucker, Sarah Young, McArdle, Nugent, and Poulson forming trios in which one person becomes a bridge (or a dead body).

After almost 50 minutes, the dancing, questions, screams, crashes, and bursts of light die down to reveal Poulson frozen in the lunge-with-fist pose. Nugent, Poerstel, and Tucker try to figure out what he represents—a monument to what? Their conversation and some of what follows is a little heavy-handed, but these final moments build steam as more and more people push and yell life into this frozen activist until he's hurling those missiles with full force. At the very end, Dorfman joins him.

As one in favor of nonviolent demonstrations, I quail a bit at being left with this image to symbolize activism. But I understand the quandary Dorfman finds himself in, and I applaud the courage and artistic power with which he confronts it.