



David Dorfman Dance, *See Level* and *Lightbulb Theory*

December 12, 2005

By

ALLAN ULRICH

allan@voiceofdance.com



David Dorfman Dance in *See Level*. Video still by Star Reese.

Such are the vagaries of the dance business and so persistent the myopia of local dance presenters that it took 20 years for David Dorfman Dance to arrive in San Francisco. The city finally welcomed the New York-based choreographer Saturday evening (Dec. 10) at the Jewish Community Center's Kanbar Hall. Dorfman has appeared here solo in the past, but last weekend's show heralded his small but eminently gifted chamber company, while still allowing the choreographer a few splendid dancing minutes in the spotlight. A healthy crowd Saturday suggested that maybe, there is an audience here for modern dance beyond the performers' familiars. This, to be sure, was a major debut in San Francisco.

Although this is the 20th anniversary year for the troupe, Dorfman came to dance relatively late in his life, which may explain the maturity of concept and gesture that pervaded the two recent works on the program - *See Level* (2003) and *Lightbulb Theory* (2004). This is postmodernism that seems to create its conceptual basis as it goes along and it is also postmodernism imbued with intelligence, wit, a bit of zany humanity and uncommon respect for the allied theatrical arts. Dorfman leavens his choreography with speech, adorns it with alluring visual effects and accompanies it with superior, commissioned scores; yet, these elements remain, ultimately, subservient to the movement, not a substitute for it. Would there were more like him.

Some of the accompanying (and aging) press material suggests that Dorfman has adopted a pedestrian, Judson-era attitude toward movement. There was none of that stuff on display Saturday, when the dancing, though loaded with conventional walks, lifts, carries and descents, still spoke in an elevated language. The choreographer tells you what he's all about at the beginning of the 37-minute *Lightbulb Theory* (the hanging bulbs are clustered when the curtain rises, and later released to swing in the air). A pleasantly stubby man, Dorfman wears a long, black coat, thus virtually obliterating the lower half of his body. But the frantic gestures of his arms and the occasional twisting turn complement a monologue about mortality and an opportunity for communication lost and never regained.

Regret pervades the piece. Dorfman vanishes and, in front of a bare back wall, his four dancers (Paul Matteson, Heather McArdle, Jennifer Nugent and Joseph Poulson) seem to play out a memory piece, lined up across the stage, moving to Michael Wall's piano score, which sounds uncomfortably like Henry Mancini's "Moon River." The gestural vocabulary is limited, hands touch shoulders, bodies check each other and leap apart; and arrangements around a pool of light are continually shattered. The performers, who periodically utter groans, seem to confront each other and walk away from the potential conflict.



David Dorfman Dance in *Lightbulb Theory*. Photo courtesy of Encore Communications.

The barefoot dancers, who are wonderfully articulate, seem to be playing out a ritual from their past and reliving it. Dorfman almost sustains the process for a good half hour. If *Lightbulb Theory* did not totally enrapture this observer, individual sections thrilled with their directness and integrity. Josh Epstein designed the lighting.

From reading the press kit, one gathers that that *See Level* was originally a full-evening work and that Dorfman put in an appearance somewhere. The piece has now been halved and the choreographer is a no-show. What remains are Samuael Topiary's impressive visual design, Naoko Nagata's handsome white jump suits, Chris Peck's commissioned electronic score, performed on the spot and a quartet of dancers exploring the limits of community.

At the start, the proscenium is draped with a thick, plastic tarpaulin, through which supine, white-clad bodies are barely visible. The impediment is dismantled and Topiary's projected images, first of a serene, rippling sea and later of arresting textured material, offer mute comment on the action. The choreography conjures scenarios, no more so than when Nugent demands that Matteson imagine her in movement terms, which he does in a squiggly solo. It's funny, and her correction of his fantasy is even funnier.

See Level would appear to be about the mechanisms propelling our self-images and how we project ourselves on to our intimates. Early on, comes the invitation to "imagine that the edge of your body is the coastline of a nation." Projections of ancient maps prompt the performers. I don't mean to give the impression that the work is studied or precious. This quartet of performers can hurtle through space or flip its limbs with the best of them; and individual performers can shadow their colleagues' movement with insidious glee. But Dorfman structures the piece with such theatrical flair that it never succumbs to obsession or shtick. All in all, an evening of pure refreshment.