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## Dance company brings in the funk

By Vicki Smith Paluch  
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Choreographer David Dorfman is a man on a mission - but he isn't afraid of having fun on the journey.



David Dorfman Dance re-creates the vitality of the '70s through the music of Sly and the Family Stone, in "Prophets of Funk." Photo courtesy of Adam Campos

His latest work, "Prophets of Funk," uses the music of Sly and the Family Stone to celebrate the struggles and dreams of everyday people.

He and his eight dancers will present the West Coast premiere of "Prophets of Funk" Saturday at the Carpenter Performing Arts Center in Long Beach.

Set to the irresistible funk of Sly and the Family Stone's "Turn Me Loose," "I Want to Take You Higher," "Dance to the Music" and nine other songs, the full-evening work is performed with humor and heart.

With the performance, Dorfman and his company set out to make the audience feel part of the vitality of the 1970s.

"This is the third (full-length work) in a trilogy. I've been looking backward to find links to relate to what is happening now and how to get people engaged," Dorfman said from his office at Connecticut College, where he is a professor of dance and chairman of the dance department.

The other two works centered on specific political movements - namely the social activism of the 1960s in "underground" (2006), which Los Angeles audiences saw last spring at the Luckman Theatre; and the legacy of radical abolitionist John Brown in "Disavowal" (2008).

Making social activism personal, Dorfman's "Prophets of Funk" blends popular dances of the 1970s and virtuosic movement to inspire the audience to "dance to the music"

and remain hopeful while struggling through the funk of life.

"We are in an era of more difficulties and more hope," said Dorfman. "When Sly created funk in '68-'69, it was a new musical form. The word has both the negative connotation of a bad mood or smell and the positive meaning of being groovy and cool. Funk gets us moving."

Dorfman, 55, started listening to the music of Sly and the Family Stone on his 8-track tape player while he was working out in his basement with friends from high school.

"I had the 'Greatest Hits' and I was struck by the song 'Stand Up for What You Believe,'" he recalled, saying he

hopes to reinvigorate interest in the genius of Sly's music and its call for freedom.

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"We think of the evening as a dynamic engagement of movement driven by the popular and populist funk sounds of Sly and the Family Stone," Dorfman said. "Sly was one of the first racially and gender-integrated bands in American music and purveyors of social consciousness."

Dorfman starts the piece decked out in vintage 1970s style with bell-bottoms and high platform shoes, which he wears throughout the piece.

"I don't look like a dancer, but I've got some moves," he said.

He is joined by his dancers - Kyle Abraham, Meghan Bowden, Luke Gutsell, Renuka Hines, Raja Kelly, Kendra Portier, Karl Rogers and Whitney Tucker - who portray characters who are in line with, and against, stereotypes. The company's eight dancers are equally divided between men and women, and white and black.

Dorfman said his choreography grows out of a collaboration with his dancers.

In 1985, he founded David Dorfman Dance. He received a Guggenheim fellowship in 2005 to continue his research and choreography on the topics of power and powerlessness, including activism, dissidence and democratic engagement.

Dorfman has been awarded four fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, three New York Foundation for the Arts fellowships, and the first Paul Taylor Fellowship from the Yard Dance Colony. He is the recipient of eight New York Dance and Performance ("Bessie") Awards.

He developed the concepts for "Prophets of Funk" and "Disavowal" in collaboration with fellow Connecticut College professor David Kyuman Kim, a religious studies scholar and political theorist.

Their collaboration extends into the classroom, where the two team-teach a course, Religious Expression of Everyday Life, in which students must articulate in movement and words.

Their collaboration in dance began with the conceptualization of "Disavowal," which asked the audience to reconsider their thoughts on racism and racial stereotypes in a "post-racial" age.

In "Prophets of Funk," they inspire the audience to think about democratic engagement.

"As an essayist and critic, I am experimenting with ideas and assessing judgments on society, and David does it in his dances," said Kim, author of "Melancholic Freedom: Agency and the Spirit of Politics" (Oxford University Press, 2008).

"The music (used in 'Prophets of Funk') is radically familiar but not the most familiar," said Kim. "David's choreography hews closely to the popular dances of the time and then becomes radically virtuosic. The work swings from the ordinary and everyday to the extraordinary and virtuosic."

And by the end of the evening, Dorfman said, he hopes audience members will get out of their seats and "dance to the music."

"The piece is very accessible in an intelligent way," he said. "It is a joyous celebration and 15 percent of it is reflective."

Vicki Smith Paluch is an Altadena freelance writer.

## David Dorfman Dance

What: Dance company presents "Prophets of Funk."

When: 8 p.m. Saturday.

Where: Carpenter Performing Arts Center, 6200 Atherton St., Long Beach.

Tickets: \$45, \$40 seniors.

Information: 562-985-7000 or [www.carpenterarts.org](http://www.carpenterarts.org).

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