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## Lessons from the Road

*DISAVOWAL*, A DANCE BY DAVID DORFMAN that was inspired by the life of abolitionist John Brown, begins with a friendly welcome. As the audience enters, Dorfman introduces each dancer, revealing their little quirks as well as their best qualities. They, meanwhile, are drifting among us, chatting and handing us pieces of colored yarn, and suggesting where to sit. Dorfman invites them into the dancing space, and they strip to their underwear, dance an extended warmup phrase, then put on their costumes, crossing over from being civilians to performers.

The audience's usual entrée to a dance performance consists of handing your ticket to someone at the door, getting a program, and making your way to a prearranged seat. You pray the person in front of you isn't tall enough to block your view of the stage. If you have time, you open the program and scan the titles, credits, program notes. You stuff your scarf into your coat sleeve, stow your bag under the seat, snatch a moment to close your eyes and clear your mind. The lights go down. Your anticipation goes up. The dance begins.

This hectic, abrupt rollover from life into theater occurs in most traditional performance situations. It establishes a clear separation between the performers and those who've come to enjoy them. Despite the audience's expectations and the performers' eagerness to please, there's always a certain edge, a distinction, between them. Philosophically as well as physically, they inhabit different worlds. The postmodern dance revolutionaries who redefined dance in the 1960s tried to destroy this we-they dichotomy in the performance transaction, and for a while dancers who shared the reformist spirit wouldn't be caught dead in a proscenium theater. It was a fascinating time when ordinary-looking people could perform anything from the bizarre to the mundane. Dances sprouted up in parking lots, galleries, swimming pools, and indoor spaces so transformed you couldn't be sure where you were or how you got there. Downtown dance gradually regained its virtuosic remoteness and re-occupied the theater or treated loft spaces as if they were theaters—the seats lined up, the pristine dance space, the darkened moment before we tumble into the world of they. But like many of the current generation of dancers and choreographers, David Dorfman retains some of the revolution's sensibilities and strategies.

With *Disavowal* he tries to dissolve the audience-performer split again, but more than that. He and the dancers employ the tactics of the

counterculture to get the audience involved in a larger discourse, about the deceptive absolutism of black-and-white categorizing. Slipping by inference among the immediate images of the dance is the ambiguous John Brown, a white man who lived with blacks, a fanatic, a martyr, instigator of the murderous slave uprising at Harper's Ferry that helped ignite the Civil War and got him executed for treason. This troubled figure gives Dorfman a springboard into the politics of difference in American history, and in the lives of everyday people. *Disavowal* dwells on how we see others, and how we deny parts of ourselves while owning up to other parts. It seemed at first to be a sprawling, noisy and self-conscious piece. Perhaps my initial discomfort with it is a sign of my own assertions and disavowals.

I reviewed *Disavowal* for the *Boston Phoenix* early in 2009, when it was performed in a barnlike auditorium at Salem State College. After an icy twenty-mile drive and a race to find the parking slot the college had assigned me, I was in no mood to engage with chatty greeters and a piece of yarn that I was obviously going to have to use in some way before they'd let me out of the building again. I flashed back to uneasy nights in the '60s when I learned to dread the idea of audience-participation. Being asked to stumble through blacked-out rooms, or get up in front of the rest of the audience to join some touchy-feely experiment, this was not my style. I resisted these overtures whenever I could, even though it might mean hurting the dancers' feelings or getting in the way of some scheme they had that included me.

At Salem State, they left me alone after I made it clear I just wanted to be a spectator. The piece unfolded as a series of sketches and images. A long, unison sequence, with the dancers wheeling and falling and lashing through space, served as a kind of rallying device. After a dramatic scene had built to the point of hostilities, they'd return to this phrase, with slight variations, as a way of reconnecting with the group. There were other recurring themes—gestures and verbal mantras that tied together what seemed like a miscellany of movement, props, spoken texts, music, and the elusive John Brown. Silhouettes of the dancers were projected on an upstage curtain, simulating those individual personalities Dorfman had presented at the beginning. Each of the eight dancers plus Dorfman had a moment of exposure, to dance or act out his or her feelings of anger, envy, isolation, resignation. When they returned to the familiar group pattern, they sometimes banded together to harass someone or split up into opposing teams, adapting the dance phrase so it could implement violence or solidarity, discipline or anarchy.

I was never quite sure these characters were enacting their real stories, their real selves; they might have been crafting these personas for public display. Dorfman's persona was the most disconcerting of all. As director-choreographer, at least twenty years older than his dancers, he played their teacher, boss, coach, and father-figure, who had his own frangible public face. In an extended solo dance-monologue, he remi-

nised about his own father, or maybe became his own father, a stern, benevolent, flawed preceptor. He became this character, and the remembered child, running with quick, small steps like an old man, and rolling on the floor like a gleeful toddler. But with the dancers he could be dictatorial, his fond paternalism sometimes giving way to impatience and even fury. They followed his exhortations, not always willingly. Things they had to do together which began cooperatively might escalate from disagreement to fighting. Two of the men, walking through the audience to tell people where to sit, argued over one patron. The tiff got hotter and more serious and more hurtful. It got to be about race: an apology demanded, grudgingly offered, then rejected. Dorfman intervened before they came to blows, insisting they calm down and look each other in the eye. Gradually, prodded by his teacherly psychotherapeutic instructions, they put aside the argument and embraced.

This, like the other encounters in the piece, came on subtly. As a scene shaded from benign coexistence to explosive aggression, the dancers seemed so natural they could have been improvising, and then couldn't stop themselves from dropping all their protective social graces. Less literally, multivalent gestures could convey shades of relationships. One person would lean over and slowly, repeatedly touch the abdomen of someone lying on the ground. The gesture, at first a sign of concern or tenderness, got faster and more forceful, until it could have been a symbolic stabbing or beating. Rather than use the codified language of dance technique, Dorfman makes dance and gesture material out of everyday behavior, like the choreographer Susan Marshall, with whom he danced in the 1980s. The pedestrian action expands and modulates into dancelike movement, but it doesn't entirely lose its original character, purpose, or feeling. The finished work carries this subliminal meaning even when it looks abstract.

The dance ended in a grand reconciliation of all the dissonant forces and personalities. Twice, the audience was invited onstage, first to join one of the dancers and then to become one of the whole group. It all seemed artificial to me. A performance, skillful and thoughtful, but not something that could draw me across the footlights.

In October, I saw the dance again, in a very different context. I'd been invited to the Lied Center at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, to introduce performances of *Disavowal* and the Paul Taylor Dance Company over the space of a week, and to lead a post-performance discussion with David Dorfman. I wasn't reviewing anything, so I could step out of my usual role, relinquish my critical standoffishness. Dorfman and the company arrived on campus after I'd given my public lecture about the two performances. Three of the dancers were giving master classes, but I couldn't attend them since I was teaching myself that morning in the journalism school. But I'd asked if I could sit in on rehearsals. This was Wednesday, the day before the performance of *Disavowal*.

Instead of the 2,100-seat main hall, the dance would be done in the Lied Center's Johnny Carson Theater, a black-box space. Because *Disavowal* requires a fairly elaborate setup—the white retractable curtain panels must be hung, projectors and lights focused, sound cues given to the house computers—the dancers couldn't get into the space until evening. Petra Wahlqvist, the Lied Center's visitor liaison, guide, and lifeline, had booked them into a hall in a community center, and when they straggled in after lunch, they discovered the room had a floor too hard for full-out dancing. As they began practicing sections at a walking pace, we learned there was a major problem. Kyle Abraham had injured his back during the master class and wasn't sure he'd be able to dance. Amy Lamphere, a local teacher who'd come back to Lincoln to raise her kids after an active dance life in New York, offered to find an acupuncturist and take Kyle for a treatment. Meanwhile, apprentice Rashaad (Raja) Kelly was learning Kyle's part.

Thursday, after giving another class to journalism students, I arrived at the theater to find a technical rehearsal in progress. Dans Sheehan, the company stage manager, was seated at a console in the audience, calmly giving instructions to techies in the lighting booth. Dancers would get in place and go through a cue, adjusting their moves to the space. Kyle, feeling better but not ready to dance, was taking notes. Patrick Ferreri was rehearsing the other dancers. Whenever there was a tech pause, they'd practice passages. Raja was still learning Kyle's part. The sound cues weren't working right. The music was too loud. Whitney Tucker was dancing and telling her story about a great-grandmother who'd been pregnant when her husband was killed in a massacre, and who'd passed down a fraction of black blood to Whitney. You couldn't hear her over the soundtrack. She went over her spoken dance again and again while the techies worked at their computers to get the right balance.

Dorfman paced at the edge of the dancing space, with one eye on the lighting and one on his phone. He was still tinkering with the piece, which had premiered a year before and had been performed less than a dozen times, and he was figuring out where things should happen in this new space. In between doing his own lines for the techies, he was chatting with me, greeting other visitors, writing something on a laptop, and texting with his colleagues at Connecticut College, where he chairs the dance department, about some decisions that had to be made before he returned. He'd come out to Nebraska just two days after his biweekly commute to Oakland, California, where he was making a new work for Axis, a company of dancers with and without disabilities. Barely off the plane in Lincoln on Tuesday, he'd conducted a seminar, getting twenty graduate students on their feet to improvise. Charismatic and indefatigable, Dorfman talks fast, makes immediate decisions, returns calls, learns the names of every student in a class he's visiting. Thursday afternoon he was still perfecting the performance he was to give in a few hours.

At some point in the afternoon, Dans announced a lunch break. The

dancers still hadn't had a run-through in their costumes. But these are troopers. When I started to write this essay, I looked at my notes from the Salem State College performance. During the Q and A afterwards, David Dorfman had explained that because of a big snowstorm the day before, there hadn't been time for a technical rehearsal at all.

When we return for the performance, David has decided to let the audience in ten at a time. We're led behind the white curtains, and David tells us about the dancer-silhouettes, which are projected between us and the rest of the theater. I've now heard his seemingly spontaneous snapshots of the dancers several times. It's scripted down to the last word and vocal inflection, except that he can break into his lines to greet people he knows. When we enter the dance space, Kyle is directing people where to sit. In the post-performance Q and A, Kyle explains how, taking Raja's place as the Host, he "sorts" the audience. Here in Lincoln there's not enough racial diversity to create a black/white separation, so Kyle has decided on some other way to categorize us. I ask if the audience was aware of this process, and a woman responds that she realized everyone around her had brown hair. Dorfman is making the point that "difference" is both a way of marginalizing people and bringing people with similarities together.

Seats have been reserved in the front row for me and Professor Rhonda Garelick, director of the Lied Center's Interdisciplinary Arts Symposium, which sponsored the performance and my residency. So we don't have to go through Kyle's screening process. I'm relieved. But now that I know the dancers and the dance better, I'm strangely drawn into the performance. I note how well Raja manages his first time dancing Kyle's part. I like the way Karl Rogers, who's older and taller than the rest, fits in with the others. After the performance, Karl and I will chat about mutual friends in the dance department at Ohio State, where he's getting a graduate degree. I remember that Renuka Hines, a small, urbane black woman, took Twyla Tharp's part wonderfully two years ago in a student revival of Tharp's *Eight Jelly Rolls* at Barnard.

I get furious at David when he bullies the dancers, and I'm delighted when they gang up to make him the underdog for once. At some point things seem to be going wrong, and he's gotten really angry. The dancers all disappear except Molly Poerstel, who gets blamed for the screwup. David yells at her until she cries, but the angrier he gets the more ridiculous it seems. Her sobs turn to helpless laughter. When the dancers approach the audience and ask us to come up and join the person each most identifies with, I resist, but now they know me, and they coax me. I go up to Molly, who's standing as if frozen with shame. I don't know why I do this. I don't feel I've been victimized in my life, but I need to comfort her. I touch her shoulder. Other people gather around us. Molly draws into herself, sorrowful. I can't believe she's actually going to cry. I put my arm around her waist. The others draw closer in a circle. We stand that way for a long time. Molly is sobbing. Then we're sent back to our seats and the dance continues.

At the end, after more dancing and divisiveness, the dancers begin to

collect on the floor in one corner of the space. Some of the earlier volunteers have remained with their identity group, and they join David and the dancers, beckoning now to the rest of the audience. Come on! Come on! This is so fake, I think. I'm not going to get sucked into somebody else's group. This is just a performance. People are leaving their seats and going up to sit with the group. Come on! Come on! They're pleading with me. I want to be with them. They want me to be with them. I get up and join them. Finally the entire audience has entered the dancing space. We sit on the floor together looking around, feeling satisfied.

The next morning Renuka sees me in the hotel lobby and urges me to get into the van to the airport. David Dorfman Dance is not a full-time company; dancers assemble from jobs in several cities to rehearse and perform. In fact, after the performance, and after drinks at a bar with Lied Center officials and friends, they'd returned to the hotel for a midnight meeting to coordinate their schedules leading up to their next work period. I was supposed to go to the airport a little later, but Come on, Renuka says. Dans and several of the dancers are in the van already, waiting for me. David and Karl have already left on the 6:30 plane. At the airport we begin to break up; we're going to different places. Packed into the commuter plane to Chicago, we don't have a chance to speak, and when we arrive at O'Hare we say goodbye. Molly and I embrace like dear friends.

**In Memorium  
Francis Mason  
(1921–2009)**

**Who enriched the early years of The Hudson Review  
with his dance criticism.**

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