

Bulgarian Tour Energizes Dance Ensemble Opener

To Feature Highlights of Recent European Performance

By Susan L. Garber
Staff Writer

The Judy Dworin Performance Ensemble will bring some extra energy, from a recent whirlwind trip to Bulgaria, to

performances this weekend at Charter Oak Cultural Center in Hartford.

The trip, which the group undertook from Oct. 13 through 20, was a great success, according to artistic director Judy Dworin. But, like many plans involving eastern European nations, it was very much up in the air until the last minute.

"We had been invited to represent the United States at an international festival, Theater in a Suitcase, which is a bi-annual festival in Sofia," according to Ms. Dworin.

"The invitation came from one of the people who was organizing the festival, who got our name from the Baltimore Theater Project, where I have performed some of my work. The director of the Project is Philip Amault, and he recommended me.

"The (festival) organizer, Damian Popchristov, looked at a video and he chose us, along with companies from many places in

the world. Then, because of the challenges Bulgaria is facing as it tries to make (political and economic) transitions...the festival was canceled."

Though an initial disappointment, the change in plans resulted in an even greater honor for Ms. Dworin's ensemble.

"What they decided to do was to have individual companies come to perform on a monthly basis, if they can handle that financially. So the offer came for us to go and perform at the National Theater in Sofia, and be the first company to start this cycle."

Seven members, including five dancers, set designer and lighting designer, went on the trip.

"We landed the day after the first election they had had since the change of government. There was a huge rally outside the theater where we were performing... really with the kind of fervor I hadn't seen since the '60s.

"They really weren't quite sure how it would work out. We ended up being asked to do three extra performances because the response was so strong."

According to Ms. Dworin, the group found the setting in Bulgaria conducive to positive interaction with audiences. "The theater where we performed was a very intimate space....It lent itself to a very interactive relationship.



Members of the Judy Dworin Performance Ensemble prepare to leave Sofia on their JesAir flight, one of two planes operated by the new airline. From left, dancers Kelly James, Lisa Matias Serrambana, lighting designer Blu, dancers Kathy Bortek Gersten, Judy Dworin, Orion Duckstein.
Photo by Angus Moss

And I think people understood this, and were drawn in.

"We started to have discussions after each performance to enable the audience to ask questions. People were very warm and responsive. We were invited to a lot of theater companies to see what they were doing. It felt like there was the beginning of a real exchange."

The ensemble returned from Bulgaria having gained new artistic and personal perspectives.

"Everybody left with a strong feeling of connection to that place and the people that we met there," Ms. Dworin said.

"They were interested in having us come back, and I hope we'll be able to. I feel interested in seeing all of eastern Europe. We had been invited to Moscow, and financial constraints kept us from going on to Moscow. But I hope to do that in the future.

"I think one thing that interested me a lot, one audience reaction that came up a lot, was that the music in the piece reminded them of very old Bulgarian music. I've been interested in Bulgarian music, and it occurred to me that I would be interested in working on a piece based on my experiences there.

"One thing that interested Bulgarian audiences most was the way we work. I work very collaboratively with the people in the company. We explore a lot of different ideas through improvisation, and the piece is

built on many of those ideas."

Another, more general, idea that interested audiences was the position of artists in American society, Ms. Dworin said.

"The audience was curious as to how one survives as an artist in this country. What I had to do to keep the company surviving." What did she say? "I told them it's tough."

The Judy Dworin Performance Ensemble will inaugurate its fall season with performances of "Darkland/Dawn," an evening of "almost all new work," according to Ms. Dworin, at 8 p.m. Nov. 15 and 16, and at 4 p.m. Nov. 17, at Charter Oak Cultural Center, 21 Charter Oak Ave., Hartford.

A Bulgarian Bash fund raiser for the company will take place on Friday, featuring an auction of items from Bulgaria, including a tape made for Bulgarian television during the tour.

The program for "Darkland/Dawn" also will include a portion of the work toured in Bulgaria, "Mother and Child," a solo piece from "Distant Voices Coming Near." Kathy Bortek Gersten of West Hartford will be the featured artist.

"Darkland," the first half of the program, "explores some of the darkest questions we face in life. It was inspired by thoughts I had about the war."

Tickets for "Darkland/Dawn" are \$12, \$8 for students and senior citizens. For reservations, call 232-5525 or 527-8885.



Judy Dworin (left) will present selections from 'Distant Voices Coming Near,' a work that her ensemble toured in Bulgaria, as part of 'Darkland/Dawn' Nov. 15 through 17 at Charter Oak Cultural Center. Also included is 'Lulu and the Moon' (right).