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She's Come A Long Way, Baby

Choreographer Judy Dworin puts her past and future lives on the floor

By Jayne Keedle

Thursday, Oct. 17 marked a turning point for the Judy Dworin Performance Ensemble. That was the day the Hartford-based choreographer and her dance company were first reviewed by *The New York Times*. After sitting in the audience at the Dia Center for the Arts in Manhattan, dance critic Jack Anderson wrote "Ms. Dworin both castigated folly and comforted the afflicted." In short, Dworin's company was a hit.

"It's not easy to get a *Times* review," says Dworin. "It is a recognition, I think. We've come to a place where we're at that stage, and that's nice. I'm glad to be there. Even though the work's just the same as before, it gives that extra stamp of credibility," she adds. "It helps in terms of bookings and getting grants as well."

Not that Dworin is shy of bookings at the moment. This week *Her Past and Future Lives* debuts at the Wadsworth Atheneum's Aetna Theater in Hartford. Since founding her dance company in 1989, Dworin has always chosen her home base of Hartford—she teaches dance at Trinity College—for her premieres. The inspiration for her choreography, however, comes from all over the world.

Her dances explore the feminine, the natural and the shaman, and this spiritual exploration has taken her as far afield as Taiwan, where she studied with the Peking Opera from 1979 to 1980, to Sofia, Bulgaria, where she was artist-in-residence at the Dance Theater Workshop's

special Suitcase Fund for Eastern Europe in 1993. One of her newest pieces, in fact, is based on her stay in Bulgaria.

Called *When the Rains Came*, it retells a story she heard from a woman who acted as translator during her stay in Bulgaria. "She talked about the aftermath of Chernobyl," says Dworin. "There were these rains that carried with them gases. [These rains] came during a day honoring officials in government. All the people were supposed to walk, without covering their heads, in a parade. The rains were filled with poison. The government was aware of what was in the rains, but none of the people were. They later ate all the vegetables thinking they had been cleaned by the rains. It was a very moving story to me."

Dworin decided to use umbrellas to help her tell it. As she saw it, umbrellas could

become the symbol for the people who knew the truth about the rains and the people who didn't. She tried all sorts, settling finally on one large black golf umbrella and a host of black tote umbrellas that the dancers use to express themselves.

For the program in Hartford, she paired *Rains* with another new piece titled *Ascending*. This was inspired by an Algonquin song that women sing when their children or lovers have been killed in some kind of disaster. It seemed appropriate to Dworin, but optimistic, too, as the song is sung to send the dearly departed onto the spirit world. Because few people would understand the meaning of the Algonquin chant, she considered putting an explanation in the program. Ultimately, she decided against it.

"We decided it could mean a lot of things as well, so we left the piece open to interpreta-

tion," says Dworin. "The images stir a lot of feelings. The music is incredibly beautiful in and of itself and there's a feeling in the music and the dance that is about support and separation. That seems like that's enough. People can project what they will without necessarily knowing what the words are about."

"The work focuses on expressing a woman's voice, because I am a woman first of all."

Although Dworin believes in letting her audience decide the meaning of her dances, she does have a fairly consistent message. Most of her dances are female-centered, dealing with issues of motherhood or mother nature. "I think the work focuses on expressing a woman's voice because I am a woman first of all and the ideas come from my own experience," says Dworin. "I think there's a journey that one takes, first seeing a woman from the position that she's been in and trying to free her from that position."

The earlier work is about women in relation to the way men have viewed women and I think this later work is much more about women on their own."

Perhaps the most personal piece in this performance for Dworin is *Bessie*, a dance she choreographed based on her grandmother's life. Bessie was born Jan. 1, 1901 and spent five years of her childhood in an orphanage. She was married twice, remarrying after the death of her first husband when she was in her 60s. "It's her story, which she never felt was important," says Dworin. "She was a very vibrant and very feisty woman. In some ways, her life was coming to terms with being alone."

The dance seems to strike a chord with more than just Dworin. *Bessie* is one of her most requested works. Being in a position where the audience not only knows her work, but makes requests, is almost as satisfying for Dworin as having *The New York Times* write about it. Now if she can just get *The New York Times* to make requests...

Her Past and Future Lives will premiere Nov. 10 at noon and 8 p.m. and Nov. 11 at 4 p.m. and 8 p.m. at the Wadsworth Atheneum's Aetna Theater, Hartford. Call 527-9800.



Bessie: KC Chun, Sarah Franklin and Lisa Matias Serrambana tell a grandmother's tale

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