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Happy to Be Alive... and Dancing

For the Choreographer David Dorfman, It's Now Personal



David Dorfman and his company's dancers in "Come, and Back Again," which will have its New York premiere on Oct. 16 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Photo Credit: Adam Campos.

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The choreographer David Dorfman drives a Saab convertible, which he bought in his early 50s. But don't call it a midlife crisis car.

"To me it's my midlife celebration car," Mr. Dorfman, 57, said recently at a cafe near the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater, where his latest work, "Come, and Back Again," will have its New York premiere on Oct. 16. "It's like, I'm here — and I'm so happy to be alive."

In 2007, Mr. Dorfman weathered a serious car accident near New London, Conn., where he leads the dance department at Connecticut College and lives with his wife, the dancer and choreographer Lisa Race, and their 12-year-old son, Sam. It was the end of a long day (and, at around 1:30 a.m., the beginning of another); about 15

minutes from home, Mr. Dorfman fell asleep at the wheel. “I was so unbelievably lucky,” he said. “So I’ve just had, as trite as this may seem, I’ve had this appreciation for every heartbeat, every moment.”

“The wreck,” as Mr. Dorfman calls it, got him thinking about mortality, mess and how to deal with both. “Come, and Back Again” opens with a monologue about his fixation with plastic bags — his inability to part with them — before confronting less tangible kinds of chaos and loss. Musically, the work honors the singer-songwriter and occasional drag queen known simply as Benjamin (born Robert Dickerson), who fronted the Atlanta band Smoke in the 1990s and led a life of epically messy proportions until his death in 1999 at 39. For Mr. Dorfman, Smoke’s music embodies “that idea of finding beauty and dignity in a rough world.”

“I love the fact that we all have our own messes,” he said, “and how do we live with that? And then what messes might we choose to clean up, and get out of, and not leave for generations to come?” An exuberant talker, Mr. Dorfman converses in run-on sentences, nested clauses, tangents begetting tangents. After some verbal rummaging, he added, “How, in our crazy lives, can we live with less, and live with more quality?”

Since founding his company, David Dorfman Dance, almost 30 years ago, he has never shied away from openhearted explorations of self and society, channeling big ideas into raw, hyper-athletic movement that calls for daring, go-for-broke dancers. His last three productions — “underground” (2006), “Disavowal” (2009) and “Prophets of Funk” (2011) — have wrestled with politically charged themes, from the 1960s activism of the Weather Underground to the radical abolitionism of John Brown. He works hard (too hard, some critics have said) to invite the audience in. As he puts it, “Our pieces are made to be shown to the outside.”

“David has this marvelous gift for addressing really difficult issues, in a way that people can get their arms around and get their hearts invested in, that isn’t confrontational in a negative way,” said Laura Faure, director of the Bates Dance Festival in Lewiston, Me., a frequent summer destination for Mr. Dorfman’s company since 1995. She sees his dances as “driven by a sense of responsibility as a citizen, a deep curiosity about our culture and what makes it tick.”

“He always has a quality of celebration in his work,” she added, noting that structurally, his choreography can be “a bit wild, a bit untamed.”

The dancer Karl Rogers, who has performed with Mr. Dorfman since 2005, described the choreographer’s process in a recent phone interview. “David’s not a detailed, detailed choreographer like some people,” Mr. Rogers said. “He’s much more modularly based, like he wants to see a whole section at a time. He’s never going to look at 14 seconds of a phrase. That’s just not where his eye goes.”

While “Come, and Back Again,” as seen during a late-summer rehearsal in Manhattan, remains Dorfman-esque in those ways, it also departs from his work of the past seven years: more personal than political, more introspective than issue driven, closer to family and home. At various points, Ms. Race and Sam make brief appearances onstage.

Mr. Dorfman, who grew up in Chicago, likens the work to earlier pieces like his acclaimed “Lightbulb Theory” (2004), a reflection on his father’s death, and “Dayenu” (1991), about his mother’s struggle with multiple sclerosis.

Referring to his recent social-issues trilogy, Mr. Dorfman said: “Mostly those pieces were about the times. I wanted this piece to be almost out of time.”

For anyone familiar with Smoke, one decade might come to mind: the 1990s, when that blues-punk band made its mark on Atlanta’s underground rock scene. Mr. Dorfman, who first encountered the group while working in Atlanta in the ’90s, rediscovered it when his sound designer, Sam Crawford, recommended the documentary “Benjamin Smoke,” by Jem Cohen and Peter Sillen, about the band’s tragic, eccentric, magnetic frontman.

“It was so gut wrenching and earnest and a little bit sad and in disarray,” Mr. Dorfman said of the film. “The more I listened and watched, the more I was sucked into this sound and story and environment.” In “Come, and Back Again,” a seven-member band, directed by Mr. Crawford, provides the propulsive Smoke score, sharing the stage with Mr. Dorfman, his four inexhaustible dancers (Raja Kelly, Kendra Portier, Whitney Lynn Tucker and Mr. Rogers) and Jonah Emerson-Bell’s looming set, a kind of sculptural junkyard. Mr. Dorfman, himself a multi-instrumentalist, occasionally helps out on alto sax and accordion.

It’s almost hard to imagine Mr. Dorfman, something of a social butterfly, identifying with the reclusive character that “Benjamin Smoke” captures. “We tease David and call him the mayor of dance,” Ms. Faure said. “If you know him, you get that. He is so gregarious, just absolutely in his element in a crowd of people, schmoozing. He’s the ultimate schmoozer.”

Mr. Dorfman admits that as much as he loves people, he’s also been known to complain about them. Lately, though, that’s been changing. “You know, when I start to get mad about this or that, or complain about a co-worker or colleague or — it’s like, whatever. You get to take a few more breaths.”