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Paying Homage to Funk Icons

*By Lisa Traiger
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Choreographer David Dorfman's newest work, "Prophets of Funk," is a celebration of the collective struggles and triumphs of what 1960s and '70s icons Sly and the Family Stone called "everyday people" and, perhaps, everyday prophets. Dorfman sees some parallels to the populist activism of today.

"It's a hard time for prophets," Dorfman says, lamenting the divisiveness of recent years. "With all these protests - Arab spring, Occupy Wall Street - maybe we are all prophets."

"Prophets of Funk," with its electric, funky grooves, does more than pay homage to one of the great bands of the Woodstock generation. Dorfman calls the 60-minute piece an invitation to embrace that '60s experience and, he hopes, to leave the theater changed, or at least inspired to dance.

"What happened so wonderfully with Sly and the Family Stone's music is that they combined soul, rhythm and blues, a little bit of rock-and-roll . . . a little bit of gospel with some incredible guitar parts and rocking drums, and a horn section. It became this funk thing," Dorfman says.

Dorfman's eight dancers threw themselves into the hard-driving choreography. They spent hours watching the television dance party "Soul Train" to assimilate the moves and attitudes, and it shows, both in the choreography and in the delicious costumes by Amanda Bujak - psychedelic prints, foot-tall afro wigs, hip-hugging bell bottoms and, for Dorfman, who plays the older manager in this roaming band, a polyester checked sports coat and his own green leather zip-up platform boots. "I love dancing in platforms," he admits, "and these shoes are very special. I've had them so long they're about to give out."

After cutting his dance teeth during disco's heyday, Dorfman, 55, came of age as a post-modern choreographer, which makes it easy for him to borrow from an eclectic library of dance styles. "Our vocabulary reflects modern, postmodern, released-based technique. There's an Africanist perspective and a bit of James Brown in there," he says. "There's a dance that Sly would actually do in the audience when he'd get super excited, and there's the good old kick-ball-change, my favorite step from my disco days."

Dorfman says he loves that Sly and the Family Stone featured both black and white musicians and women playing trumpet and keyboard, not merely serving as backup singers. And from songs such as "Everyday People," Dorfman got an education in racial politics.

"I was coming of age at a time when the idea of identity was really important," he says. "I'm this white Jewish kid from suburban Chicago growing my hair big - we called it a Jew-fro - so when I saw Sly and the Family Stone with black and white folks onstage singing politics and every song made you want to make your body move, I was sold."