



WORKS OF NECESSITY

Carolyn Dorfman's choreography is grounded in humanity, legacy, community...and a belief that art can change the world

As a freshman at the University of Michigan, Carolyn Dorfman was focused on becoming a teacher. "I wanted to be an educated teacher—to understand the body and teach dance not only from an artistic place but, on some level, from a scientific place; to train dancers in a healthy way."

Dorfman (BFA '77) has achieved that goal. Along the way, however, she's also become a multi-award-winning choreographer whose 11-member Carolyn Dorfman Dance Company (CDDC), based in New Jersey and

New York, performs at major dance venues—including NJPAC, the Joyce Theater, and Dance Theater Workshop—as well as at universities, performing arts centers, and dance festivals throughout the country and around the world. The CDDC, known for its bold athleticism and dramatic nuance, features technically demanding repertory that reflects Dorfman's deep concern for the human condition.

"My work is about the human experience," said Dorfman. "I'm fascinated by people, from the intimacy

of a duet to global issues. And in my heart of hearts, I'm a person who—through my art, my teaching, my connections—honestly wants to change the world. I recognize that's a tall order, but if we do it one person at a time, it feels do-able on some level."

When dance professor Bill DeYoung introduced SMTD students to Dorfman at a master class last January, he said that her choreography "shines a light on humanity" and creates "works of necessity." Dorfman was delighted with that description of her Legacy Project, which honored her Eastern European roots, but points out that it was not work she ever intended to make. However, as she discovered early in her career, her passion for justice, respect, and humanism was always percolating within; her art became the means by which it was expressed and shared, and it was inextricably linked to her heritage as the child of Holocaust survivors.

Dorfman describes this as "the most defining element" of who she is as a human being. "It has shaped every facet of who I am," she said. After creating *Cries of the Children*, the first of her works to explore her feelings about her family's tragic history, Dorfman's mother questioned why she chose to explore such a dark theme, to which Dorfman responded: "There isn't a day that goes by that I don't think about your experiences." It has not only inspired her work, but has also influenced the way she teaches and works with her dancers.

"I wanted a creative environment where I could take risks and the dancers were respected," she said. "And because it's a dialogue, you actually create a sense of community in the creative process. I felt that people could really give you something when they feel free and open."

Dorfman's approach to her work is rooted in the idea that the process needs to equal the product. "There's this very circular connection between who I am as a person, my goals as a choreographer, my goals as a teacher, and my goals as a member of the human race. If the performance is great but the process is terrible, I'm not happy. It's *how* I get somewhere, not just *where* I go that matters."

It's a thoughtful and almost spiritual approach to the creative process that stresses the importance of the individual in relation to the whole, and the balancing of the two. Today, Dorfman shares her effective training techniques with dancers around the world as a guest teacher, choreographer, and lecturer at pre-professional, university, and professional training programs.

Dorfman's journey to becoming a sought-after teacher and choreographer began at age seven at the Julie Adler School of Dance in Oak Park, Michigan.



CAROLYN DORFMAN

A resident of Southfield, she saw a performance at U-M of Doris Humphrey's *Passacaglia & Fugue in C Minor* by Bach while still in high school, which confirmed her commitment to dance. "I knew that was what I wanted to do," she said.

After graduating from Michigan, she moved to New York and earned her MFA in dance at New York University's Tisch School for the Arts. She began teaching at Centenary College immediately, but also started working choreographically. By 1982 she had formed her company, which had its first performances the following year.

For a while, her teaching and company work overlapped, but by 1986 Dorfman made the choice to give up formal teaching, as she had made a discovery: "In a company structure I could do both," she said. "I could teach, I could perform, I could choreograph, I could impact." She also soon added the roles of wife and mother, marrying fellow U-M alum

Gregory Gallick, with whom she has two daughters.

With the debut of *Cries of the Children* in 1983, Dorfman quickly drew accolades and soon became known for being a consummate storyteller. While she has continued to create works that highlight her Jewish legacy—including *Mayne Mentshn (My People)* (2001), set to klezmer music and celebrating the interconnectedness of generations—they are but one part of a vast repertoire of more than 60 dances that explore the human condition from many perspectives. The common thread is a passion for life, people, truth, survival, renewal, and, most importantly, universal connections. The combination of inspiration and technical excellence has created a thriving modern dance company of rare longevity: CDDC celebrated its 30th anniversary last year.

Throughout this time, Dorfman has maintained her ties to U-M and last year joined SMTD's Victors for Michigan Campaign Advisory Committee, whose goal is to help the School raise \$90 million for scholarships, faculty support, programs, technology, and capital projects, including a new dance building.

She frequently returns to campus to teach master classes and hopes to one day set a piece on SMTD dance majors. "Their intelligence, commitment, and the way they are raised in the department is a beautiful thing," she said. "They understand respect and processing; they understand the things you need as a professional dancer. At Michigan, and a few other select schools, you're dealing with a different level of student." She is also excited by the work being done by the School's graduate students. "They are so inspiring," she said. "They have vision, mission, and this huge commitment to impacting the world."

It's a commitment that Dorfman shares, and has been at the heart of her career and her art. "The idea of being transformed by the process and performance, both as a creator and observer, is inherent in my work," she said. "I truly believe that art has the ability to transform lives." 🎭