

Rainbow and Cyclone: David Dorfman's *Aroundtown*

By Debra Cash

The village evoked by choreographer David Dorfman in his newest full-length work, *Aroundtown*, doesn't have a mayor. It doesn't have a bank or a grocery store. It doesn't even have sidewalks.

But the town envisioned in this imaginary place for dancing is, he explains, a "minisociety": a place where people of different backgrounds come together and share their lives and their perspectives.

Aroundtown is a dance about love: love of creative work, love of family, love of the rich variety of possible identities and life paths. In a time where violence, harassment, and disparagement can seem taken for granted, Dorfman and his company want to make space for people to connect through tender mutual regard.

Tenderness has been a theme running through Dorfman's oeuvre for most of his career. Whether he was sharing memories of his father, thrilling at the audacity of *Sly and the Family Stone*, or considering the moral legacy of American abolitionism, he has consistently resisted the contemporary reflex to escape into cynicism or snark. He likes to laugh -- and his raucous solos routinely feature clownish pratfalls -- but he wants people to come together to share both sorrows and joys.

"We need to take the stand for love, compassion, and empathy," he said recently. "We have to have constant vigilance, and search for a more tender way forward."

Dorfman found an unexpected launching pad for *Aroundtown* in Jacques Demy's 1964 film *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*. That kaleidoscopic musical depicted the romance between two young people, the incandescent young Catherine Deneuve as the daughter of a widowed umbrella seller, and Nino Castelnuovo as her handsome garage mechanic boyfriend. Their affair is thwarted by both social conventions and the young man's conscription into France's colonial war in Algeria. With an award-winning theme by composer Michel Legrand, Dorfman compares *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* to a rainbow appearing simultaneously with a cyclone.

Those extremes are echoed in the work's movement vocabulary. Dorfman's rainbow of attentive, tactile partnering is juxtaposed by explosive dancing with unpredictable changes of direction. Elements of folk music, including the klezmer of his Eastern European Jewish heritage, anchor the life of this contingent community in tradition.

Many of the members of *Aroundtown*'s six-person cast have connections to the Bates Dance Festival community. Kendra Portier, Nik Owens, Jasmine Hearn, and company apprentice Sara Gibbons have all danced at Bates as faculty or students. Collaborating videographer Shawn Hove, whose projections of toy soldiers and dioramas gesture to the conflict happening outside the protected stage space, has been a Bates videographer, taught a class on Dance for Camera, and is designing the site specific installations for Stephen Koplowitz' *Mill Town* that will be presented later this season. Dorfman and Lisa Race, who appear as guest artists for special cameo moments in the work, are longtime members of the Bates Dance Festival faculty.

"Things can happen in life when a dear person can be taken away from you" Dorfman says, "whether that is by romantic disappointment or by something like war or cancer. You have to negotiate the peaks and valleys."

The original music for *Aroundtown* created by Samuel Crawford, Liz de Lise, and Zeb Gould will be performed live by the co-composers and instrumentalist Jeff Hudgins at these world premiere performances. Yet somehow, without borrowing the film's melodies, the wistfulness of the *Umbrellas of Cherbourg* lyrics still runs through *Aroundtown*

*Je ne comprends plus rien parce que je ne suis rien sans toi
J'ai renoncé à tout parce que je n'ai plus d'illusions
De notre amour écoute la chanson*

I don't understand anything because I'm nothing without you
I gave up everything because I have no illusions
Listen to the song of our love.

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