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Ballet Austin Holocaust and Humanity Project

Sunday, 01 January 2012

By Tonya Cone

The beauty and strength Ballet Austin's Artistic Director Stephen Mills found when talking with Holocaust survivors led, not only to a full-length contemporary ballet, but to a Holocaust education project with more than 30 community partners.



Light/The Holocaust & Humanity Project promotes the protection of human rights against bigotry and hate through arts, education and public dialogue.

The community project, which premiered in Austin in 2005, returns to Austin in 2012 from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day on January 16 through Yom HaShoah Holocaust Remembrance Day on April 19.

Although Mills had been working on a ballet about 9/11, he decided to embark on a quest to find deeper meaning in what had happened.

His search led to Naomi Warren, a Holocaust survivor living in Houston.

After talking with Warren, Mills felt he had a responsibility to take on the project.

After a week at the Holocaust Museum Houston, he traveled to Eastern Europe for three weeks. He studied with scholars, interviewed survivors and toured the death camps.

Before heading home, Mills went to Israel and visited Yad Vashem, the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum and the Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company.

On his way back to Austin, Mills felt overwhelmed until he read about the idea that some things are too large to talk about, but nothing is too small.

That was when he decided that the story he would tell was Warren's.

"It is impossible to tell the story of the Holocaust in a dance work. So vast and complex is the history, to try to do so would, in fact, re-inscribe the horror and do a great injustice to those whose lives were profoundly affected," Mills said.

"More accurately, Light / The Holocaust & Humanity Project tells the story of one survivor, a woman whose family was lost in the Holocaust. Through her courage, tenacity and great good fortune she endured the darkest period of history and now bravely tells her story to the world."

Mills also realized that since not everyone likes ballet, dance alone would be an insufficient vehicle for all that needed to be discussed, and Ballet Austin as a result asked other organizations to contribute what they do best, from art installations to film screenings to school education projects.

In 2006, Light/The Holocaust & Humanity Project was awarded the Austin Anti-Defamation League's Audrey & Raymond Maislin Humanitarian Award.

The City of Pittsburgh and The Pittsburgh Ballet Theater mounted the community project in 2009.

"Our goal from the outset was to show that an arts organization can act as a catalyst towards deep conversations and create relevance in our conflicted time. The 2012 iteration of Light/ The Holocaust & Humanity Project allows us to continue an important conversation about the Holocaust, genocide and human rights at a critical period in history," Mills said.

Ballet Austin's lead partners in this year's community project are the Austin Anti-Defamation League, KLRU-TV, the Austin Independent School District and the City of Austin.

Along with colleague Mary Lee Webeck, Brent Hasty, who teaches social studies methods in the College of Education at the University of Texas at Austin, was part of the inception of the community project.

Hasty explained that Ballet Austin has provided a model for how a large organization can lead a conversation in their community.

"Light starts with the Holocaust, but conversations quickly move to include other topics of concern to the community. In this way, a historical conversation can provide the bridge to addressing contemporary challenges," he said.

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Kirk Rudy, CEO of Endeavor Real Estate and a Jewish and civic leader, who along with his wife Amy, was involved with the community project early on, said, "This partnership executed a project which led to a five month community wide discussion about the value of respecting others, despite their race, religion or sexual preference."

"Light also accelerated the idea of teaching students in Texas about the Holocaust and how consequences of hatred and indifference to hatred are the same," he added.

Ballet Austin board member and past-ADL chair Steve Adler said, "My proudest moment as a board member of both Ballet Austin and the ADL was when both organizations fulfilled their core missions by joining to support the creation of the Light/ The Holocaust & Humanities Project."

ADL Chair Sherrie Frachtman said, "ADL is developing a plan to deliver a call to action to the broader community so once Light goes dark the work will continue to have impact."

Betsy Gerdeman, senior vice president at KLRU-TV, explained that some of the elements KLRU will present for the project include the production of a TV special, a lecture, and the airing of relevant documentaries.

The Jewish Community Relations Council will coordinate the annual Yom HaShoah Holocaust Remembrance Day Observances in conjunction with the community project.

JCRC Yom HaShoah and Genocide Awareness Committee Chair Mike O'Krent said that Ballet Austin wants to commemorate the Holocaust in a way respectful to the sensitivities of the Jewish community.

Because of the diversity of organizations involved in the community project, he expects Light / The Holocaust & Humanity Project to draw more of the broader Austin community than usual to Yom HaShoah commemorations.

Mills explained that he considers the testimony of survivors a blessed gift.

"My great fear was that I would, through this work, hurt a survivor in any way. Memory is an interesting thing and survivors are continually remembering events long buried. My hope is that through this project, survivors can find some small thing that might help as they continue to come to terms with what happened. My other hope is that those of us who did not endure the events of the Holocaust learn the lessons of resilience, courage and tolerance shown by victims," he said.

For a full list of community partners and their related events, visit www.balletaustin.org/light.

