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## Backstage at 'Light' rehearsal

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*Chronicle photo by Christopher Rolinson  
 Stephen Mills coaches a dancer at a "Light" rehearsal.*

*(Editor's note: This is another in an ongoing series of stories about "Light" leading up to its opening on Nov. 12 at the Byham Theater.)*

Four men and four women stand in a line. One by one, they seem to be called out. They are each alone, but soon begin to define relationships with each other.

A circle is formed, growing in intensity. It may be the circle of life, or the 24 hours of a day, or the population of the camp growing.

One by one, the dancers step out of the circle, clearly connoting death, until one survivor remains.

As the dancers of the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre rehearse "Ashes," the penultimate section of "Light / The Holocaust and Humanity Project," choreographer Stephen Mills gently guides them in defining each movement as a deliberate representation of some experience of the Holocaust.

"It's interesting to work on this dance, because not one gesture is superfluous," said Mills, who visited seven concentration camps and spoke to 20 survivors before choreographing the ballet. "The audiences may not be able to discern it, but it is integral for me."

Mills, who was inspired to create a ballet of substance after the events of 9/11, took his task of depicting the horrors of genocide seriously, immersing himself in personal research, and incorporating both the devastation and hope inspired by survivors' stories into his piece.

Following 9/11, Mills said he was “emotionally depressed,” unable to understand “how there could be such hatred that someone would do something so violent.” He was rehearsing a production of the ballet “Romeo and Juliet” at the time, and lost his motivation for the project.

“It seemed so vapid,” Mills said. “It seemed like a ridiculous exercise. I was just searching for a way to make sense of [9/11]. I felt like there had to be a way to get this out and talk in a deeper way to my audience.”

It was around that time that Mills met Dr. Mary Lee Webeck, a professor at the University of Texas, and the head of the Warren Family Fellowship, a Holocaust education program for teachers at the Holocaust Museum Houston. It was Webeck that suggested Mills create a ballet based on the Holocaust.

Not Jewish, and having never even met a survivor at that time, Mills hesitated to take on the project. After meeting with survivor Naomi Warren, though, “there was no way I wasn't going to tell this story,” Mills said.

Warren, a Houston philanthropist and herself a Holocaust survivor, became the inspiration for the project.

The Ballet Austin in Austin, Tex., where Mills is artistic director, performed “Light” for the first time in 2005. It has not been performed since.

“I was reticent to perform it outside of Austin,” Mills said. “You have to step into it (the subject of the Holocaust) with great reverence.”

Along with the ballet, he insisted on communitywide educational components in Austin surrounding its production. He wanted the same kind of lead-up wherever else the ballet was performed.

“I was hesitant to allow other companies to do it,” he said. “I didn't want to just take the money and run. I wanted other companies to make that kind of commitment.”

So Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, in partnership with The Holocaust Center of the United Jewish Federation, made that commitment.

“They've done a tremendous job,” Mills said, “comparable to what we did in Austin.”

Indeed, a host of educational events have been scheduled, leading up to the Nov. 12-15 performances of the ballet, which coincides with the anniversary of Kristallnacht.

Those events include exhibits, various lectures on Holocaust-related topics, films depicting the horrors of genocide, and the Opera Theater of Pittsburgh's performances of “Brundibar,” an adaptation of an opera performed by the children of Theresienstadt concentration camp.

“Light” evokes the experiences of the victims of the Holocaust, Mills explained. It does not attempt to portray its narrative.

“You can't tell the story of the Holocaust,” Mills said. “I mean that's ridiculous. And there are no lessons to be learned from it.”

Instead, he garnered the commonalities he found among the survivors with whom he spoke, and put those shared experiences into art.

Mills said he heard five threads consistently from survivors: that they were living a “lovely existence” in Europe; that they slowly began to feel “politically, things were shifting for them, and began to sense they were being targeted;” that they became enemies of the state, and were rounded up; that they were transported and put into camps; and, finally, that “they either survived or did not survive.”

While these elements are all portrayed by the ballet, there are no blatant Holocaust symbols such as swastikas or Nazi uniforms. In fact, only a blinding light represents the aggression of the time.

“It was important for me to keep the focus on the victims,” Mills said, “and not to give any credence to the aggressors.”

The various scenes of the ballet — representing the houses of the victims, the boxcars, and the camps — also are intentionally not clearly defined.

“I wanted to tell the story of the Holocaust, but put it in context for contemporary audiences,” Mills explained, citing the genocides of Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur as events evoked by the ballet as well.

Warren, who Mills sees as the central character of the dance, told him the issues the ballet illuminated needed to reach beyond the Holocaust.

“Naomi said, ‘Yes, it’s about the Holocaust, but it’s more than that,’ he recounted. She said, “‘Genocide takes place today, and we have to be vigilant about pointing it out.’ ”

The final section of the dance, called “Hush,” depicts the young Naomi being united with her older self, and ends on an optimistic note.

“Life isn’t about violence,” Mills said. “Life is about beauty and love and enlightenment and knowledge. It was important for me to say that because each survivor I spoke to said you have to talk about moving forward.”

(Toby Tabachnick can be reached at [tobyt@thejewishchronicle.net](mailto:tobyt@thejewishchronicle.net).)

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