



Ballet Austin dancers in the 2005 production of *Light*

## Light/The Holocaust & Humanity Project Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre takes on the heavy stuff.

A far cry from fluffy fairytales, Stephen Mills' *Light/The Holocaust & Humanity Project* challenges ballet to take on big issues. Ballet Austin's 2005 production is performed this month by Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre as the centerpiece of PBT's 40th anniversary season.

As it did for many artists, the events of September 11, 2001, left BA artistic director Mills looking to dance in order to work through his shock and grief. It was at this time that he met Naomi Warren, a Holocaust survivor living in Houston. Warren had been a prisoner in three camps, including Auschwitz. Most of her family was killed.

Could ballet aptly represent such tragic and enormous loss? For Mills, it could, if he narrowed his focus to a single female survivor, incorporating the many accounts he had heard. "You can't tell the whole story," he says, "but you can tell one story." While *Light* deals directly with the Holocaust, there won't be a swastika onstage. "The entire ballet is from the perspective of the victims," says Mills. "I didn't give the aggressors a presence or a voice."

Extending beyond the platform of ballet, the project in Austin included art exhibits in public spaces, seminars for

teachers on Holocaust education, public lectures, and a televised town hall meeting. "They couldn't avoid contact with this project in our community," says Mills.

PBT artistic director Terrence S. Orr hopes to have as far reaching an effect in the Pittsburgh community. "In art," says Orr, "we must inspire and educate." In addition to the performances of *Light* at the Byham Theater Nov. 12-15, organizations including the Opera Theater of Pittsburgh, Chatham University, the Carnegie Mellon University Philharmonic, and the Holocaust Center of the United Jewish Federation of Pittsburgh will be hosting performances, readings, lectures, and classes for the public.

"To do this, respect and reverence are required," says Mills. Like those in Austin before them, PBT's dancers are expected to read up on the subject, meet with survivors, and visit the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC.

The dancers at PBT are fully aware of the challenge that awaits them. At first, PBT principal Erin Halloran felt daunted by the responsibility of representing such a huge atrocity. "I was nervous about trying to do a ballet about so much death," she says. "But I think the focus on the individual makes it possible." Despite her

nerve, Halloran is eager to address weighty subject matter. "Ballet needs to talk about serious issues to keep up with other art forms," she says.

Mills, who is not Jewish, had his own apprehensions about creating *Light*. "My biggest concern was that I would be accused of co-opting someone else's story and doing it badly," he says. In order to come closer to an understanding of the Holocaust, Mills went to Europe, where he visited seven camps and met more than 20 survivors.

For Mills there is an urgency associated with this project, because in a few years there won't be any more survivors with firsthand accounts. "Then it all just goes into a history book," he says. The lessons from the Holocaust are global and extend far beyond its victims. "Genocide is not something that ended in 1946. It still exists today," says Mills. "I want people to understand that we say 'Never again,' but it happens again and again."

It seems Mills has found careful guardians of his mission in Pittsburgh. "The project tries to make people feel responsible for their actions," says Halloran. "Doing nothing can be criminal." —Kathleen McGuire