

# Review: Wise choices make 'Light: The Holocaust' compelling dance

By Mark Kanny, TRIBUNE-REVIEW CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

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'Light: The Holocaust & Humanity Project'

**Presented by:** Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre

**When:** 2 and 8 p.m. today, and 2 p.m. Sunday

**Admission:** \$10.50 to \$88.50

**Where:** Byham Theater, Downtown

**Details:** 412-456-6666

About the writer



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Choreographer Stephen Mills attempts the impossible, to deal with the incomprehensible, in his "Light: The Holocaust & Humanity Project" that Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre presented Thursday night. Performances continue through Sunday.

Mills is a smart artist. He took advantage of the opportunity to speak with Holocaust survivors to create a manageable perspective -- from, but not limited to, the experience of a single survivor -- for his 90-minute ballet.

In fact, Mill's formal decisions all are well-conceived. The seven-section structure is clear, well-balanced and effective. He avoids the distraction of Nazi symbols and uses ensembles for most of his dance, because the Holocaust was a tragedy repeated more than 6 million times.

The testimony of survivors is an invaluable starting point for trying to understand the Holocaust. Yet, starting from one person, with family and individual dreams, only makes the 6 million deaths a truly mind-numbing number.

The production wasn't limited to the stage. The outer lobby of the Byham Theater, Downtown, was filled with panels featuring comments, many quite remarkable, by people who recently visited Nazi death camps in Poland. In the inner lobby, a collection of diaries re-created by students of the Winchester-Thurston School tugged at the heart in a different way.

The ballet begins with "Adam and Eve," performed with a sense of natural, healthy physicality by Robert Moore and Alexandra Kochis. Yet, Eden's tree was ominously barren.

Mills was discerning in the music he chose for "Light." Steve Reich's lively "Tefillim," Hebrew for Psalms, helps animate the "Family" section. Here, we first encounter Julia Erickson, eloquent in a role inspired by Naomi Warren -- a Holocaust survivor with whom Mills spoke.

The middle four sections of "Light" provide a semi-abstracted journey to the death camps, beginning with "Targets Behind Doors" and "Isolation and Degradation."

Mills' "Boxcar" section creates powerful visual images of people jammed together in a small rectangle, to be hauled to the death camps.

The penultimate section, "Ashes," features quietly harrowing dance as bodies are discovered, leavened emotionally by composer Arvo Part's "Tabula rasa."

Mills' heart was in the right place for his final section, called "Hush" and expressing renewal and hope. It is a tasteful treatment, with nothing of Hollywood finales and their crescendos of triumphant music. But the dance needed more variety to sustain its length.

The Holocaust is a topic that most people rarely think about. It's too unsettling. Mills' "Light," by omitting references to Nazis, removes the villains from his story. He was right to do so. Mills knows that the Nazis were a specific, if uniquely horrible, expression of a part of human nature. Genocide occurred before the Nazis. Darfur is an affront to humanity today.

"Light" is a powerfully emotional theatrical experience that doesn't let go when you leave the theater. It is an inspiring work. I'm glad I saw it.