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By Robert Heisler

Doug Varone and Dancers dance

Netta Yerushalmy walks onto the bare floor as Doug Varone puts on his glasses and opens the Bible.

"I saw in my vision by night, and, behold, the Four Winds of Heaven broke forth upon the Great Sea."

The dancer breaks down against the wind, pushing against the water.

"And four great beasts came up from the sea, diverse as one from another."

Now she is possessed, controlled by the beasts and a beast herself, struggling, unable to flee, threatened and threatening. She is transformed and the audience is stunned.

In the Dance Theater Lab at his alma mater, Purchase College, master choreographer Varone reads, and Yerushalmy, one of the eight dancers in his company, makes the vocabulary of movement respond.

"So I look at the Book of Daniel," Varone says in a quiet description of creation, "and now we build gestures from that. I capture sentences that jump out at me, that can later be used for creative imagery."

And those gestures become "Alchemy" - a powerful, compelling dance based on Steve Reich's "Daniel Variations," a score drawn from Daniel and the words of Daniel Pearl, the American reporter kidnapped and murdered by Islamic extremists in Pakistan in 2002.

The free, public workshop is part of Varone's three-week residency at Purchase. Tonight, he'll break down "Castles," a 2004 work set to the waltz music of Prokofiev. Thursday, in a don't miss evening, the "text" is a work-in-progress, "Chapters from a Broken Novel."

Varone rarely works with such recognizable source material, he says. The Daniel Pearl story is only recent history. The company read the books. Varone talked with members of the Pearl family. The link between the two Daniels is clear: Jews, held hostage, who never denied their identity until the day they died. The alchemy: forging and finding that from tragedy, some good does emerge.

The four male dancers, Varone explains, are a composite of the Daniel characters. The four women, angellike, offer protection and comfort, seeking and reacting.

The dance is swift, athletic and complex. Two or three times, the first woman onstage, danced by Erin Owen, moves her lips but makes no sound. Is she praying? Is her vision a dream in which she cannot bring herself to scream? She has seen something horrific.

Dancers move, often by the touch of others. The stage is filled with strong, sharp gestures. Varone's language includes strong feet, long arms and much floor work - fall, slide, stretch. There is tension, the movements now almost fettered, working against a force.

Now the men lie on the ground, the women over them. Everything is stopped. Owen rises, eyes heavenward, quaking, wracked. Is she receiving, or unable to give? Arms rising up over her head, she stands flat-footed - not reaching, just outstretched. Time stops.

Now the men lie in Muslim prayer, head on the floor, arms out. As the women approach from behind, they rise to their knees, all eight with arms in various positions.

Each man rises, it seems, over the others, only to fall back to the ground. The women clearly comfort them, moving their limbs. They are in repose.

Finally, the men stand at the apron, looking at hands, praying silently, when they seem to be forced down from above. Their heads fall back. The women join hands. Their faces turned to the future.

Seeing "Alchemy" with such intimacy puts you inside the creative circle. Varone takes questions as the dancers splay across the floor, stretching in post-game cool-down.

"I want to create works that lack a certain specificity (in order) to be universal," he says. "When I talked with Daniel Pearl's father, I stepped across that line.

"Often, I don't tell the dancers what the work is about. ... so they're not trying to give me what they think I'm looking for. Here, from the first day, we began sharing ideas."

That sharing made the story personal for Eddie Taketa. "There's a freedom to be yourself in (the dance)," he says. "To find the essence of what the Daniel Pearl story is and to play in it. There is a reverence and a great responsibility to it, but the dancing out there is a freedom."

Creating a Doug Varone dance has its "a-ha" moments, the choreographer says.

"You come upon something that you know has magic to it - and you keep it. You hope that always occurs in the process and everything proceeds from it."

Which brings him to his new dance, "Chapters," the Thursday subject.

It's a major work, built from Varone's collection of pieces from novels he has collected over the years, "books whose sentences I've passionately underlined and scratched through beyond recognition."

He is building 40 "chapters" - some 10 minutes, some 15 seconds - with the sentences as jumping off points, trying to make sense of life, "every neurosis and every strategy for making sense of it."

It is a large undertaking, that changes the way Doug Varone and Dancers will spend their next year.

"For the creation of 'Chapters,' " he says, "we're not doing a New York performance season. We're just going to have open studio showings, once a month.

"Because this" - he moves his arm around the dance lab - "is thrilling. This is art. The other thing is presenting art."