

## Daniel Pearl inspired choreographer's work

*'Alchemy' at U. of Md. Clarice Smith Center*

by Lisa Traiger, Arts Correspondent

Can horror inspire beauty? For New York-based choreographer Doug Varone, the act of creating a dance based on the 2002 murder of Jewish American journalist Daniel Pearl was both a way to honor the life and work of the slain writer and to offer healing to those who knew the writer and to strangers pained by the horrifying, and very public, events surrounding his death.

In the course of a wrenching journey through grief and pain, beauty can arise, and in that realization Varone found solace and hope. Making its Washington-area premiere Friday and Saturday at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland, *Alchemy* was inspired by avant garde minimalist composer/musician Steve Reich's "Daniel's Variations." The music recalls Pearl's own musical talent as a trained violinist who preferred to call himself a fiddler.

*Alchemy* makes physical the bleak and hopeless expressions seen in a quartet of men, before, in its final moments, the music and the choreography somehow overcome the harsh pall to soar. A reverie awash in violins, it focuses on four sky blue-clad women who dance like angels in arching sweeps and outstretched reaches.

Reich's score, co-commissioned by the Daniel Pearl Foundation set up by the journalist's parents to recall their son, is both darker and more melodic than his usual compositions, which canter and meander in imperceptibly shifting loops. "Daniel's Variations" uses a libretto, with passages drawn from the Bible, specifically the Book of Daniel, and from Pearl's own words, including his final declaration of faith and identity, captured on video just before his decapitation: "My father is a Jew. My mother is a Jew. I am a Jew."

Varone acknowledges the revulsion, dismay and disgust that reverberated around the world when the horrifying execution video was released by a Pakistani terrorist group. "The act itself worldwide was so demeaning that everyone had a visceral response," he said. And still, the choreographer, like the Pearl family, including the writer's wife, Mariane, sought wholeness amid despair.

Varone acknowledged, "There's also healing in the work. It's very much about a spiritual release, so I feel like in the end, *Alchemy* actually does have a great deal of hope."

A contemporary choreographer, Varone has created close to 50 works for his own troupe of eight, Doug Varone and Dancers, which he founded in 1986. He's also choreographed for other companies including the Jose Limon Company, Batsheva Dance Company of Israel, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago and Ballet Rambert of London. He has been commissioned by major performing companies and venues like Wolf Trap, and the Metropolitan, Washington and New York City opera companies.

His dancers are known and lauded for their ability to appear wholly human while performing with rigorous technical prowess.

"I feel as an artist that I'm able to find a way to take the literalness out of the dramatic work that we do. I look for the essence of an idea or the essence of an emotion, and I try to find a way to share it, almost as a poem, to visualize that for a viewer," said Varone, who is not Jewish. "I knew that creating this would be a great challenge because of the baggage it brought, and I mean that in the best possible way, but I was concerned that people would come with preconceived ideas of what they thought the work would be."

The work's title, Varone noted, came from a statement made by Pearl's sister, Tamara, when the family began to plan ways to commemorate Daniel Pearl's life and work. Aside from the critically acclaimed book and movie, *A Mighty Heart*, written by Pearl's wife, Pearl's father, Judah, compiled and edited another book, *I Am Jewish*, collecting statements from Jews around the world pledging fealty to their religion, faith, culture and history.

Pearl's sister called the various acts of commemoration and memorializing an "alchemy transmuting something horrible or crude into something precious."

That's where Varone finds beauty amid pain and horror. *Alchemy*, the dance, Varone said, "is very much about a spiritual release. I feel like the end actually transmits a great deal of hope through all of the horror something good can actually come of it, something good that's come out of something so horrendous."

"It's such an important story," he continued, "and it's a story that has affected so many. I felt an onus to the family that was sometimes overwhelming in creating the work, but, ultimately, I needed to go there in order to bring forward a work that had weight and depth, beauty and healing."

*Alchemy* and other repertoire with Doug Varone & Dancers will be onstage Feb. 5-6 at the University of Maryland's Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, College Park. Tickets, \$37, are available by calling 301-405-ARTS or at [www.claricesmithcenter.umd.edu](http://www.claricesmithcenter.umd.edu).