

Loves and lessons from World War II



ARCOS DANCE

Rob DeWalt | The New Mexican

In the 1959 book *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*, author, philosopher, and former U.S. Army intelligence officer J. Glenn Gray writes, "Modern wars are notorious for the destruction of nonparticipants. ... Add to this the unnumbered acts of injustice so omnipresent in war, which may not result in death but inevitably bring pain and grief, and the impartial observer may wonder how the participants in such deeds could ever smile again and be free of care."

"I never knew my grandfather," Eliot Gray Fisher — Gray's grandson and a Santa Fe-based multimedia artist and composer — told *Pasatiempo*. "All I had were stories about him from my aunt, my mother, and my grandmother, before she died." On Friday, Feb. 8, Fisher, who serves as multimedia director for local company Arcos Dance, presents the first performance of his production *The Warriors: A Love Story* at the Center for Contemporary Arts. The piece was inspired by the lives of Fisher's maternal grandparents and touched by the horrors and complexities of modern war; Fisher and Arcos choreographers Curtis Uhlemann and Erica Gionfriddo set out, in part, to create a theatrical production that honored Fisher's grandparents and the lessons they took away from World War II.

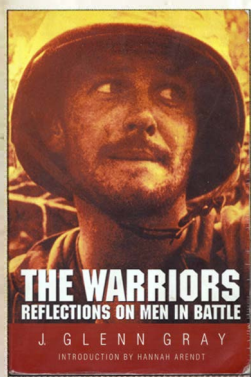
"My grandmother left me books that my grandfather had written," Fisher said, "and the best known was no doubt *The Warriors*. I was fascinated by it. Not only did J. Glenn Gray have this soldier experience, which I could

barely fathom, but he was also very thoughtful in his written recollections about it. He was a lot older than many of the men who went off to fight overseas. He had just gotten his doctorate in philosophy, was called up to serve immediately after that, and kept a very extensive journal, which he incorporated into the book."

Gray's *The Warriors* is a collection of broad reflections on warfare that are as relevant today as they were when he committed them to paper during the war. "I discovered in the book his ruminations on technology, and the alienation that the industrial military machine brings to humanity — how it allows societies to continue to wage war in increasingly anonymous ways," Fisher said. "I thought it was an important story to tell, as was the rest of my grandfather's and grandmother's lives."

Gray's wife, Ursula, who grew up in Germany, appears only once in *The Warriors*. In the book's dedication, Gray writes, "To Ursula: my wife, formerly one of the enemy."

During high school, Fisher was assigned an oral-history project, and he chose Ursula, his grandmother, as his subject. He interviewed her about surviving the bombing of Dresden by the Allied forces, and in so doing he began to put the pieces together of his grandparents' shared experience during and after the war. "The intersection of my grandfather and grandmother many years ago was intriguing on so many levels," Fisher said,



“both philosophically and personally: a Pennsylvania farm boy goes to Columbia University, gets a doctorate in philosophy, heads off to war to fight for the Americans, and writes about the horrific things he and many other soldiers saw and did. After the war, and after some reflection, no doubt, my grandfather returns to Germany to help with the reconstruction. While there, he meets Ursula, his future wife — a survivor of the bombing of Dresden.”

Before the bombing, Ursula was immersed in athletics and modern dance. While in Dresden she studied

under expressionist dance pioneers Mary Wigman and Gret Palucca. She also served as an alternate athlete during the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin. “My grandfather was this man of words and ideas, and my grandmother was all about the body, the joy of movement, as well as being very emotionally expressive,” Fisher said. “It’s an interesting challenge for me, to try to merge dance and philosophy.”

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Erica Gionfriddo and Curtis Uhlemann rehearsing *The Warriors: A Love Story*; top, Justin Golding as J. Glenn Gray; opposite page, Karen Leigh as Ursula; photos courtesy Rick Fisher



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Over the past year, Fisher has increasingly incorporated multimedia elements into Arcos performances, and he thought that approach would be an appropriate way to tell this story.

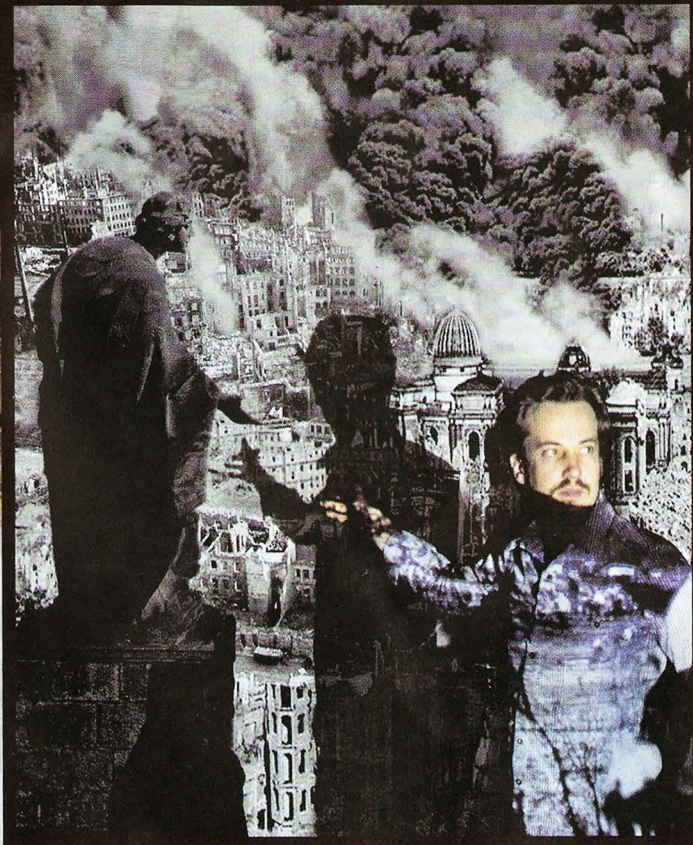
The music serves as a thread between past and present, a bridge between the same characters living in different times. “The frame of the story — the script — describes that it is the night before the commemoration, or memorial service, for my grandmother, and I’m trying to write this piece of music to honor her and my grandfather. So the climax of the story really is that I’ve finally begun to understand enough about my grandparents that I feel confident enough to write this piece of music celebrating them and the love they shared with each other and the rest of the world.”

At the end of the play, a piano piece composed by Fisher contains elements of all the characters’ individual musical themes, also composed by Fisher, which are heard throughout the production. “The dance during the climax is a duet that’s performed to the solo piano piece, and within it appear choreographed elements seen earlier that speak to each character. The themes work over a similar harmonic structure. At the end we finally hear them all together in a piece that is, essentially, an embodiment of me: a musical metaphor explaining that in some ways, I carry my grandparents’ legacy forward.”

Fisher, Uhlemann, and Gionfriddo were most concerned with the production’s many transitions and their fluidity and were determined not to have audience members feel like they were watching one medium and then another and then another. “The conception process was collaborative between the choreographers and me,” Fisher explained. “We talked about the transitions like knobs being turned up and down, so that there’s never one point in the production where an element — video, music, dance, dialogue — is glaringly there or glaringly absent; they are all just leveled out and blended in different ways.”

Fisher shot some video and worked on other projected elements for *The Warriors*. One scene, he said, was inspired by Kurt Vonnegut’s 1969 novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, in which Billy Pilgrim goes downstairs the night that he’s going to be abducted by aliens and watches a war film backward. “I found this 1944 documentary about the *Memphis Belle* and another film starring Gregory Peck,” he said. Fisher’s father, Rick, an artist and former College of Santa Fe instructor, contributed much of the still imagery that serves as the set’s projected backdrop.

The visual technology incorporated into the production required a relatively large budget, Fisher said, and he turned to crowd-funding on the internet to build capital. “We successfully completed our fundraising campaign. We were initially worried we weren’t going to get there, but we insisted on compensating the musicians, dancers, actors, designers ... everyone got paid. In retrospect we should have started fundraising earlier.



Eliot Gray Fisher with digital collage of Dresden created by Rick Fisher; left digital composite by Rick Fisher to be projected in *The Warriors: A Love Story*

But it has connected us to a new potential audience. We had donors giving us money from all over the place due to friends and social media, but we also had a number of strong Santa Fe connections, people who had perhaps never seen an Arcos production who, besides being involved as a funder, were simply excited about seeing it come to the stage.”

Fisher stressed that the work is more than a story about a family and its connections to war. Following his grandfather’s lead, he ponders the ongoing price paid for land, treasure, and ideals. And a part of him worries that, sometime in the near future, when technology keeps the whites of the enemy’s eyes at bay, from the distance of a drone’s cross hairs, the stories of war will be absent the humanity that once inhabited them.

“Really, right now, we’re losing the generation that experienced World War II, when war shifted to include the death of innocents as common practice,” Fisher said. “Simultaneously, there are all these stories popping up and haunting us now. Like the one after Hurricane Sandy when all of those wartime love letters washed up on the Jersey shore. Or the indecipherable coded message from World War II that was discovered next to the skeleton of a carrier pigeon in Surrey, England, recently and couldn’t be deciphered. It’s a cue from history. A circle that needs to be closed — the past poking the present in the back to prepare us for the future.” ◀

details

- ▼ Arcos Dance presents *The Warriors: A Love Story*
- ▼ 7:30 p.m. Friday & Saturday, Feb. 8 & 9, 2 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 10; continues Feb. 15-17
- ▼ Muñoz Waxman Gallery, Center for Contemporary Arts, 1050 Old Pecos Trail, 982-1338
- ▼ \$20, students \$15; call 473-7434 or email info@arcosdance.com for reservations