

The New York Times

ARTS | DANCE

Giving Birth to 'Baby,' in Front of Everyone

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Published: March 19, 2006



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

Tere O'Connor, foreground, with dancers from his "Baby," a new, evening-length work exploring the passage of time.

TERE O'CONNOR is more than just another choreographer. He is deeply invested in the work of younger artists, whom he has come to know through his classes in dance composition. He is a fiery addition to most panel discussions, even when he is in the audience. His writing, like his talking, can waver between frustratingly opaque and incredibly lucid. When it's good, it reflects the same qualities found in the best of his dances: a cogent balance of logic and poetry.

In a field in which there aren't many willing to put in the time, Mr. O'Connor is also viewed as an unofficial mentor for many experimental choreographers, including Luciana Achugar. "As choreographers, we question ourselves so much because it's so hard," she said. "Why should we continue? But Tere, in both his career and choices, is an example of having accepted that this is his life. His class was amazing because it made the reasons why I'm in dance more clear to me. It was not just about exercises; you wanted to remember his notes. He speaks about dance so beautifully."

Beginning Wednesday at Dance Theater Workshop, Mr. O'Connor, 48, unveils a new dance, "Baby," that explores the passage of time. In the evening-length work, Mr. O'Connor rejects a narrative line in favor of a constant flow of images that bear no relation to one another. Five performers — Hilary Clark, Erin Gerken, Heather Olson, Matthew Rogers and Christopher Williams, wearing costumes that include prairie skirts and black dresses with pink trim — move in front of a backdrop of cheesecloth decorated with a large pink bow. The idea is that it will look a bit like the back of a dress.

"I love bows," Mr. O'Connor said. "Sometimes I just stick them up on my wall. Maybe it's one little piece of string attached to childhood, from my mother and sisters. The idea of women to me is very important in my dances. Basically, everyone's a woman in my work. They become men and women, but in the beginning they're all women."

The work unfolds as a series of suggestive scenarios that share no plausible relationship. To preserve the audience's surprise, Mr. O'Connor is reluctant to expose the dance's visual secrets, but he likens every moment in the piece to a baby. "The way that time moving forward is more important than how you can arrange it became my process," he said. "As a choreographer, am I controlling and choosing the best things, or allowing a dance to find itself? A dance is something you help into existence."

"I can make something crystalline very quickly," he added.

In "Baby," he worked hard not to let that tendency be the ruling order. "While you watch it, you may start to feel like you're spacing out, but that's because the dance is spacing out also," he said. "I like that."

Even though Mr. O'Connor's works are kinetically charged, he sees dance as a way to emphasize deeper philosophical issues. In his composition class, which he began in 1991, Mr. O'Connor instructs his students to embrace their imaginations and to follow their own paths, which is more rare than it seems. "While he has his own particular aesthetic, he is capable of not imposing it on you," Ms. Achugar said. "He pushes you to find your own."

About a decade ago, Mr. O'Connor discovered that teaching composition was as rewarding as creating his own work. "I realized that I could unearth something in people just by telling them that there is nothing true about dance-making," he said. "A lot of questions are pointed back to me by young great minds. I just see that these choreographers are more important than me. You've got to help that; it's so important in terms of the future of the form. At the same time, I'm putting myself through my own class. If I'm telling people to be open and poetically rigorous, then I'd better do it, too."

Mr. O'Connor, who lives in Greenwich Village, is as passionate about cooking as he is about dance; while he may seem militant, he is also darkly funny — especially when talking about his abhorrence of the sun — and full of vulnerability. He grew up near Lake Ontario just outside Rochester, where he aspired to be an actor but discovered dance while a student at Purchase College.

He became a controversial figure (among critics) and a hero (among dancers) for having written an impassioned, angry and unpublished but widely circulated letter to *The New Yorker* last August in response to a fairly positive review of one of his dances by Joan Acocella in which she labeled four choreographers — Lucy Guerin, Sarah Michelson, Mr. Williams and him — "downtown surrealists." Mr. O'Connor, finding the comparison "intellectually porous," referred to Ms. Acocella and other dance critics as "literalists."

Taking on a critic of Ms. Acocella's stature was, if nothing else, a bold move. "I was very afraid," he said. "I hope that if an artist wants to say something to critics in the future that it won't have such a big effect. I just feel like we should be able to respond without such a ruffling of the king's feathers."

In September, Mr. O'Connor will present a new work for the Lyon Opera Ballet in France, and next March he will oversee the two-week Nothing Festival at Dance Theater Workshop. For that project, he plans to commission dances by eight choreographers with the stipulation that their creative process not involve any specific theme or source.

But Mr. O'Connor isn't stopping with artists. Another idea, still in its early stages, focuses on stimulating the imagination of dance critics. "What would happen to the writing if you brought nothing to it?" he asked. "No pencil, no paper. It would have to be about a second sensation that arises in the critic. Or not. Who knows? I'm just saying, let's try this together."

Yet another of Mr. O'Connor's goals is demystifying dance for audiences. "I feel it's unfortunate that people feel that there's a hidden intellectualism in dance, but it's one of those places where marginalization looks elitist and it's not," he said. "Lace-making is not a popular thing, and in a way it's the same thing with dance. We're small, not because we don't want more people, but because this is a different way of looking at the world that isn't born out of capitalism or religion."