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DANCE REVIEW | 'BABY'

Tere O'Connor's 'Baby' Is a Structured Drive to Distraction

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO

Early on in "Baby," Matthew Rogers tells the audience in a put-on twang that sometimes "my mind goes on a trip all over the place, just thinking about this or that." The drawl escalates into hysterics, and Mr. Rogers, a fetching cowboy in boots, hat and little skirt, is off, rushing unsuccessfully to calm his invisible horse, "Whatever."

So goes Tere O'Connor's newest dance, which opened Wednesday at Dance Theater Workshop, marking his 20th anniversary season. It is, indeed, all over the place, a theatrical representation of distraction — structured distraction, as filtered through Mr. O'Connor's rigorously choreographic sensibility. It's no mean trick to throw (often simultaneously) such disparate moods, movements and words at people for 70 minutes without alienating or overwhelming them. As in a John Ashbery poem, what seems carelessly arranged is anything but.

The set, designed by Brian MacDevitt and Mr. O'Connor, features a giant pink bow suspended in front of panels of sheer white fabric, evoking a wrapped present. This and the layered lighting design represent a shift from the stripped stage of "Frozen Mommy," Mr. O'Connor's previous work, which unfolded without lighting cues and presented the dancers in street clothes. But "Baby," performed by the same five individuals, entails the same choreographic splicing, perhaps at an even more fevered pitch. Phrases and emotions do not develop; they are juxtaposed, looped or abandoned as quickly as they bloom. James Baker's restless sound collage and Mr. MacDevitt's and Michael O'Connor's choppy lighting function almost as interruptions, jarring the dancers from one course of action to the next.

Despite the pink and black party dresses worn by the three women, these actions are rarely civil. "You, you, you, you're sc-scaring me!" the group screeches at one another, or perhaps themselves. Hilary Clark, Erin Gerken and Christopher Williams scream, feet planted and arms out, as Heather Olson and Mr. Rogers traverse the back wall, denuding it of its fabric wrapping panel by panel.

At other times they execute rich skeins of movement, opening brief windows onto the more poetic aspects of our daily, distracted lives. These are quickly slammed shut, as Tere O'Connor's relentless "Baby" casts its attention elsewhere.

"Baby" continues through April 1 at Dance Theater Workshop, 219 West 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 924-0077.