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By Chris Dohse

Speaking physically: expressionist choreographer Tere O'Connor returns to the meaning of movement.

TERE O'CONNOR'S DANCES HAVE THRILLED and infuriated audiences since 1983. While some people have found his work "simply maddening," as Joan Acocella wrote in *Art in America*, the New York Dance and Performance (Bessie) Award Committee declared it a "gloriously, uproariously sustained achievement." O'Connor's movement alphabet is filled with recognizable steps like *pas de deux* as well as idiosyncratic gestures that suggest the "loony bin" material of Yvonne Rainer's 1960s experiments or the surreal totems of German expressionist Mary Wigman. In O'Connor's danced world, random, forbidding outbursts alternate with scenes of inexplicable emotional fragility. In the past decade, he has also relied on spoken text, but for his premiere at the Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church in May 2002, he allowed the movement to speak for itself.

After growing up in Webster in upstate New York Upstate New York is the region of New York State north of the core of the New York metropolitan area. It has a population of 7,121,911 out of New York State's total 18,976,457. Were it an independent state, it would be ranked 13th by population. , O'Connor attended State University of New York at Purchase as an acting major. As soon as he discovered the dance department, however, he transferred into it. He came to New York City in 1980 (without graduating) to dance in the work of Matthew Diamond, who later became known as the creator of *Dancemaker*, the award-winning documentary about Paul Taylor. After only one year with Diamond and two years dancing for Rosalind Newman, O'Connor began making his own work. He formed Tere O'Connor Dance in 1985 and quickly developed a reputation as a magical performer, a quirky choreographer, and an artist who would try anything. In 1988, he won a Bessie Award for *Heaven Up North*. He has taught modern and ballet technique and composition at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, Movement Research in New York, and Ohio State University. O'Connor has created works for White Oak Dance Project, Rotterdamse Dansgroep, and Norway's *Carte Blanche*.

In 1996, with a piece called *Mother*, O'Connor began a series of works combining movement with densely written, somewhat autobiographical scripts. Two more text/dance hybrids followed, *The World Is a Missing Girl* in 1998 and *Hi Everybody* in 1999, the year he won a Bessie for sustained achievement. *Choke*, which premiered at Minneapolis's Walker Art Center in January 2001, was originally intended to continue in this vein. In rehearsal, however, O'Connor abandoned the idea of using text and chose instead to return to "pure" dance. He made a companion piece to be performed with *Choke* for his New York season at Danspace Project in May 2002.

After a full afternoon of rehearsal, O'Connor was boisterous and enthusiastic to discuss his ideas about dance. About the process of making *Choke*, he explained, "I had the dancers go out and memorize actions that they saw anyone do anywhere, and then I used the found material as film clips. I edited them together and created this abstract language that was resonant relative to those fragments."

The five dancers in *Choke*--Caitlin Cook, Justin Jones, Heather Olson, Chrysa Parkinson, and Greg Zuccolo--often appeared to be in the throes of some ambiguous anguish, tears, or of harsh, creel laughter. They rarely connected, and when they did, they engaged in odd, waltzing duets or talked on invisible telephones. There was constant tension between two kinds of activities: people behaving strangely within a voiceless, stylized theatricality and dancers performing a rarefied kind of dancing.

When asked how she felt about the new material, Olson said that she missed the "moments of clarity with the audience" that talking allowed, but that she was still satisfied to be "speaking Tere's language physically instead

of verbally." Olson, who has danced with the company since 1998, added, "A codified language develops in each piece. I respect that Tere follows where his process told him to go."

Four dancers who were new to O'Connor's work--Cook, Jones, Erin Gerkin, and Luis De Robles Tentindo--were in the companion piece, joined by veterans Olson and Parkinson. In rehearsal in October 2001, the dancers shared an easy camaraderie, enjoying each other and O'Connor's direction.

O'Connor, 43, stopped performing about five years ago to concentrate on choreography. But the new work has brought him back into the performing arena. "I'm trying to make a dance that comes from an imagined world where I never had any dance training or studied any dance thought," O'Connor said. "I thought I wasn't going to dance again, but now because of this 'no training' idea, I just felt like I needed to get back in there."

O'Connor likes choreography that reflects the commotion of everyday life. "I wasn't interested in the kind of dances that were about physical, kinetic explosions. There is no kind of crescendo like that in life; there are a thousand crescendos. So I've always tried to include everything that's going on at once in my work. There's too much stimuli in the world and I want to use it all--create a hyperbolic theatrical version of it."

The worldview expressed in his work is often bleak, yet peppered with humor. At an early showing of Choke, cast member Kenison briefly adopted a bent, cantankerous posture and made hooting sounds. This strange and disturbing behavior brought ripples of laughter.

O'Connor later said, "All of my dances are like that. Some people laugh, some people don't. There are places that are on the edge that way. The most beautiful thing about this form is that there is no sanctity. Everything is up for grabs and it's all relative to the individual viewer. If you create a solid network, the audience will attach some network that's pre-existing in their brain and watch it from that point of view. That's when dance can become resonant. I put unrelated items together in a context that poeticizes them. Any movement can be meaningful." He described how casual moments in life become inspiration for his work. "On the subway sometimes everyone looks so dire, and that's like a dance moment right there. To just look at a group of people doing errand, different things--it's a dance all of a sudden, and you are reading it, and you are creating meaning out of it."

In the new work, details of fisted and clawed hands, jerked heads, odd smiles, and rolled eyes accented phrases of gamboling and preening. The dancers' gazes told a story. Amid the apparent chaos, however, ran a current of poignant humanism. Tender sections of partnering suggested water-rescue techniques, and there was even a moment that looked like a ballet pas de deux, although an awkward one.

O'Connor's work raises many questions and offers little succor. O'Connor is comfortable with this jarring experience, seeing it as analogous to life. He calls his style expressionist. "I feel like theater is a place to exorcise things. There's a lot of fear around right now, and to speak about it and make people not forget about it, it needs to be exaggerated. In the American culture, where people can be very concerned with niceties and things like material goods, there is something else going on underneath."

During one moment in the new work, the dancers stood transfixed, as if under a warm spring rain, their fingers fluttering above their heads. The fleeting tranquility of this action became the sum of the many incongruous elements in O'Connor's dance language and reflected a vision of the world where all movement, all states of being, are mysteriously important, and mysteriously beautiful.

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