

danceviewwest

writers on dancing

The Heartbreaking Strangeness of Tere O'Connor

Tere O'Connor Dance
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts
Thursday, Sept 4 and Saturday Sept 6

reviewed by Ann Murphy

Last Thursday night, in the new International Arts Festival's opening dance salvo, Tere O'Connor Dance made its first Bay Area appearance. The company showed San Francisco what we've long been missing. Plenty of choreographers are dramatists, a few are essayists, and monologists are legion. The rarest are the poets, and New York's O'Connor is one of them. This bard of dance has a fairy tale take on modern, classical and vernacular movement that encapsulates a world of magic and darkness and shows us the heartbreaking strangeness of being human.

Winter Belly and *Choke*, the two works on Thursday's program established O'Connor up front as a choreographer of undiluted curiosity, wit, delicacy and a deep, almost woeful bitter sweetness. His dances have a beautiful, animal aliveness; they often make us laugh the way the physicality of Chaplin or Keaton does.

Saturday's world premiere, *Lawn*, a 70-minute tale of a Hun-like witch (O'Connor in a long platinum wig), woods, lawns, garbage, houses, freeways and the bizarre underpinnings of human impulse, with filmic décor by Ben Speth and sound by James Baker, displayed O'Connor's daring invention.



Winter Belly was a gem, and of the three works, the one I found most satisfying and complete. Upstage in a short half-circle were 12 bare-branched, tear-shaped trees, like the spindly London plane trees that grow in many New York's sidewalks. Stage right, dancers stood transfixed in a warmly lighted circle. A man (O'Connor), lying on his side, bicycled his legs in a beautiful frenzy to the sounds of halting, melancholic prepared piano (James Baker with excerpts of Sofia Gubaidulina's work). When the emotionally detached circle broke the crowd stood facing the audience and felt the air between its upraised fingers, like winter residents rubbing at the snow falling. They skated across the stage in beautifully clunky gliding motions as they looked skyward, woodenly transfixed but hopeful. They rubbed their wrists together, nervously, tenderly. People exited then entered again with ghostly discretion. They jerked their arms in post-modern angst then flopped to the ground.

Scenes alternated between dream and reality, loneliness and often cruel playground-esque engagement, as the time two dancers mechanically volleyed the head of a third dancer between

their hands like a basketball. The downstage dancer smiled a dislocated smile at us as though to say: look! It doesn't break! In one of his many masterful alternations between frenetic movement and poignantly simple action, O'Connor sent a dancer in a relentless circle like Giselle, her desperate but elegant rounds growing slightly smaller with every rotation until she collapsed in the center. That led to a defiantly limp rag doll dance followed by a sextet tiptoeing in like brittle Willis looking for deadly company. Winter in O'Connor's world is an existential state of translucent beauty, unpredictable encounters of animal intensity and inevitable aloneness.

Choke was more decidedly focused on cultural critique and more pointed but narrowly specific as a result. Imagine the operatic schema of body language from "Sex and the City" combined with the mad gesticulations of folks on an urban street screaming into their cell phones, hailing cabs, smoking, chewing one another out, munching on their own flesh, barking, and licking. Beneath the often shrill physical language people share and the individual idiosyncrasies that are weird as well as hilarious, O'Connor seems to finger a deep bafflement and a wanton though child-like blindness in what we do without either glorifying or loathing it. *Choke* may have felt less mysterious than *Winter Belly*, but it mirrored human mechanicalness and artifice with such deft compassion that it had lots of us laughing out loud.

Lawn combined the dreamscape of *Winter Belly* and the cultural skewering of *Choke*. The dance started with a video loop on a screen framed by a thicket of leaves in which members of the company were beautifully captured alone in mundane activity, from chopping vegetables to working on a computer, to holding a remote in a slightly fidgety hand. The archetypal was also comically present in the darting figure of a hag in the film who peered out from behind trees, ran in double time across majestic expanses of lawn, captured a stray paper napkin from two picnickers and eventually adorned a tree in napkins.

With rare skill, O'Connor used the visuals as another layer of the dance so that the images didn't seduce us over the live performers but conversed with them and pushed the vague narrative along. *Lawn* rambled, although none of the action was without craft. The arc was long and meandered between the different spaces (stage and video), and different times (past filmed time which becomes everpresent time and the fleeting now of danced time). While much about *Lawn* seemed magical, the dance felt around for the poetic more than it found it. Part of the problem was the specificity of the film images containing buildings and street scenes and roadways. These didn't really transcend the banal except vaguely. When they did, it was largely through juxtaposition with the magical goings-on in the dance or the wonderful interface of filmed and danced narrative. It can't be easy to match the depth and weight of O'Connor's highly faceted, concrete but richly symbolic dance language. The more abstract frames of sky or sea or long shots of parkland did this best. But as dense and inventive as *Lawn* was, it was also less nimble than the other two dances in revealing what O'Connor really feels about fields and trees, garbage, housing starts, lovers, or hidden forces darting behind trees.

But even when the ends are not quite seamless, O'Connor never gives up his seemingly casual brilliance and unobtrusive virtuosity. At every turn he cloaks his movers in milky distillations of ballet and modern dance, as if the real soul of dance now lies in the memory and facsimile of established forms, not their exact replication. Coupés, bourrées, sautés and triplets, African undulations and Cunningham- or Graham-style contractions all have a wacky bleached-out look, as though after so many years of exposure they've begun to fade and even fall apart. Was that a decomposed bit of *Swan Lake* one wonders? Was that a nod to Martha? On top of these enervated steps he adds gestures of such inexplicable relevance that his dances start to feel like the danced equivalent of silent films but from your dreams. Plenty of choreographers use sign language or other gestural codes but the gestures remain decorative and don't translate. By contrast, O'Connor has his dancers rub their wrists together frenetically and they resemble teenage suicides or blood brothers; they make cat's cradles with their fingers, play hand games like eight-year-olds, and suddenly we're plunged into an enchanted distillation of ordinary life.

O'Connor also has a musicality that is deep and knowing. (His own dancing has a faun-like elegance that he effortlessly enshrouds with music.) Consequently, his choreography is truly dancey even though the actual steps are full of enervated geometries and hypnogogic detachment. He also finds no transition or pattern too insignificant to ignore. Phrases are crafted with a shining but melancholic intelligence. Movements are performed with a precision drained of romantic style and classical elegance then refilled with a quirky, vernacular grace. It's like the haunting simulacrum of ballet your friends might perform in a dream.

But O'Connor doesn't stop there. He colors these dreamy goings-on with sexy fibrillations, tops them with weird and funny facial expressions, or unravels them through the application of child-like literalisms, as when dancers head downstage in *Winter Belly* with their arms held in earnestly hyperextended second positions, the way beginning ballerinas so often do.

Unlike other postmodernists who have tamed modern dance and ballet for edgy ends, O'Connor isn't tainted by the nihilism that bleeds on so many dancemakers through a thousand different exit wounds in the culture. Without getting shrill or snarky he shows us the wounds, the gorgeous red blood, and the unfathomable oddities we engage in. He's a cultural critic who has a long view of the human condition and finds it both comically and sadly terminal.

copyright Ann Murphy 2003