

Dance Review

Tere O'Connor's 'Rammed Earth' hits with emotional force



Heather Olson rehearses "Rammed Earth" with Tere O'Connor Dance. (erik jacobs for the boston globe)

By Thea Singer, Globe Correspondent / July 12, 2008

Tere O'Connor Dance
"Rammed Earth," presented by Summer Stages Dance
At: Concord Academy, Thursday night

CONCORD - In "Rammed Earth," choreographer Tere O'Connor wrings desolation out of tating fingertips and centrifugally spun runs, obsessive mincing walks, and muttered instructions. "Elbow, hip, chin, head," breathes Heather Olson at one point, as she juts out the body part in question. That the hourlong quartet has such emotional punch is almost alarming, because "Rammed Earth" is, at heart, a study in abstraction - an investigation, in real time, of how our perception of place (the room, vehicle, or building we're in) and performance (the shapes, dynamics, and traffic that make a dance) change as we ourselves move from point A to point B - and, in O'Connor's hands, from point C to point D as well.

The shifts are not just theoretical in "Rammed Earth," the first of Summer Stages Dance's "Meet-the-Artist Performance Series," at Concord Academy. The four-part piece, to a score by James Baker that veers from wind rushes to clanks and clicks to what could be raw rice shushing down a tube, requires viewers - numbering 43 at Thursday night's first show - to move their metal chairs three times on command. We begin scattered through the SSD studio, as the dancers enter walking,

and escalate to runs and squiggly triplets. As each section ends, the dancers intone "You can move your chairs now," and we scramble to cart our seats, first along the outside wall, then, split into two groups, to the far edges of the space facing one another - each half is the other's backdrop, with the dancers crafting the stage space in between.

O'Connor's subthemes emerge like water through tissue: Control, the behavior of crowds, the price of obedience (and its opposite), the need, simultaneously, for self-determination and intimate connection. They seep into consciousness not only through our being ordered about but also through his awkward-but-supremely-balanced movement vocabulary and the way his dancers relate - fabulous, idiosyncratic performers all (Olson, Hilary Clark, Matthew Rogers, and Christopher Williams). For example, one man pulls another up by the hair, taps his shoulder, then slams his cheek. A woman repeatedly positions a man's arms, head, fingers. A caress carried out once too often becomes a flung whip. Perception here begets interpretation - once it tunnels down to the individual frame of reference each of us holds in our head.

O'Connor excels at upper-body movement, much of which seems built from everyday - almost "found" - gestures: arms pumping on a treadmill at the gym; wrists flapping in despair; hands lifting a cup to lips; fingers holding a cigarette. He takes the details of these actions - shavings, really - and permits them to accumulate, to coalesce, into meaning.

Rammed earth is, literally, an age-old building technique that's finding renewed popularity because of its sustainability. The process is just what it sounds like: stone, sand, and clay are compacted, layer by layer, by hand or machine. O'Connor has said that this dance, like a rammed-earth house, sprang from its place of origin: an open space populated by these four dancers at a particular moment in time. Yet the concept is a bit contrived, given that the piece was originally created in one space (it premiered, in 2007, at Philadelphia's National Building and played in Long Island City at the Chocolate Factory), and has traveled now to Concord.

Still, that doesn't lessen its impact. As the last light fades - a single bulb in a cage - two dancers freeze, almost in silhouette, while two others, a man and a woman, hold each other close. The music recalls a kind of ringing in the ears. The image conjures up 9/11. Desolation. Loss. A coming from the earth and returning to the earth. A clinging to a lifeline. ■