

The New York Times

September 29, 2007

ARTS | DANCE REVIEW

Ticketholders, Please Take Your Seats. Now Move.

By ROSLYN SULCAS



Julietta Cervantes for The New York Times

Heather Olson and Christopher Williams in “Rammed Earth” at the Chocolate Factory. The dance requires the audience members to move their chairs in each of the work’s four sections.

PERFORMANCE anxiety kicked in immediately. As the audience walked into the rectangular, whitewashed room at the Chocolate Factory on Wednesday night, each person was handed a floor plan, with chair-moving directions for each of the four sections of Tere O’Connor’s “Rammed Earth,” a new work that had its premiere two weeks ago in Philadelphia.

As it turned out, two ushers were on hand to guide the audience. But whether or not Mr. O’Connor intended the floor plan, with its three neat diagrams (“Dancing Here”) to be taken seriously, it is a neat little trick. It echoes the preoccupation with architectural construction that is reflected in the title (a reference to a building technique using compacted earth) and in the choreography. And by overtly requiring the audience to participate in the flow of the work and respond to the dancers’ commands to change position, Mr. O’Connor subtly confuses expectations about performance and audience passivity.

And that was all before the piece had even started. When it did, “Rammed Earth” showed almost immediately why Mr. O’Connor is an important artist. His work, like that of the English choreographer

Jonathan Burrows, is full of dry, rigorous, almost mathematical movement detail, with apparently little emphasis on theatrical projection or context.

After an opening section in which his four dancers — Hilary Clark, Heather Olson, Matthew Rogers and Christopher Williams — walk and run at varying tempos among chairs scattered about the room, they begin a synchronized sequence that is full of little limps and dips, crouches and freezes.

When they start, it looks simple; by the end of the 60-minute piece, Mr. O'Connor has drawn endless variations and rhythmic complexities from these small, minimal movements and gestures.

Even more astonishingly, he has allowed emotion to bloom from the affectless, abstract movement by seeding tiny encounters and confrontations throughout a work in which the dancers have little direct physical contact. Their blank, expressionless miens never change, but the intentness of their purpose gradually brings a weight of meaning to their actions that is both powerful and, at the end — when Ms. Olson and Mr. Rogers quietly embrace — moving.

At moments like these, dance, like poetry, can give evanescent form to what is inexplicable and indefinable. And “Rammed Earth” is indeed a kind of poem in which all the elements — a fine electronic score by James Baker; remarkably evocative lighting using fairly basic means by Brian MacDevitt and Michael O'Connor; and the focus and individuality of the dancers — seem just right.

Like much poetry, it's an intimate affair, and its smallness of scale may keep Mr. O'Connor's career more tethered to the experimental arena than he deserves. (One of the pleasures of “Rammed Earth” is the way it is both tough and accessible.) But for those who can find a seat (and remember where to move it) at the Chocolate Factory, it's an austere testament to the remarkable possibilities of dance.

“Rammed Earth” continues through Oct. 7 at the Chocolate Factory, 5-49 49th Avenue, Long Island City, Queens; (212) 352-3101 or chocolatefactorytheater.org.