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Not a Patriarch, but a Leader All the Same

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TERE O'CONNOR exists in that weird arts-world black hole called midcareer. He's been creating dance since 1982: too established for the sexy "emerging choreographer" label yet not august enough to be canonized and put away on a high shelf.



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times



The choreographer Tere O'Connor at work on his new piece, "Wrought Iron Fog," at Dance Theater Workshop.

But hang around the contemporary dance scene, and you'll hear him described as an essential figure, adored for his exquisitely constructed works, his mentoring and his fiercely articulated beliefs about all things related to dance. In contrast to the outsize personalities who dominate much of modern dance's history, he is a thoroughly 21st-century leader, with a belief that bigger is usually worse when it comes to dance (work on grand stages, he has said, "looks like a bunch of No. 2 pencils in an earthquake") and little interest in lending his name to a specific style or ideology.

Rather Mr. O'Connor, whose new work, "Wrought Iron Fog," opens on Tuesday at Dance Theater Workshop, sees himself and his art form as only now entering an exciting time of mature possibility.

"It's amazing to me how choreography keeps expanding in good ways and bad ways," Mr. O'Connor, 51, said during a recent interview. "I want to be a part of that, even though my work, I think, is a different exploration from a lot of what I see being done by younger choreographers."

The difference is striking. At a time when many choreographers are distancing themselves from dance as the central focus of their work and instead placing themselves in a broader context of conceptually driven live art and multimedia projects, Mr. O'Connor's work remains rigorously movement-focused. Rejecting set vocabularies and abstract trappings, he uses dance and the craft of making dances as a means of investigating the passage of time and the complex welter of thoughts and emotions we experience within it.

“Images surface and disappear without transitions or repercussions,” Deborah Jowitt wrote in a 2007 *Village Voice* review of his “Rammed Earth.” Yet, she continued, Mr. O’Connor’s formal skills “make us feel we’re experiencing something that, however enigmatic, mirrors the processes we live with from moment to moment.”

Sarah Michelson, herself a revered choreographer, has taken Mr. O’Connor’s much-loved composition courses and once auditioned, unsuccessfully, for his company, Tere O’Connor Dance. She described him as a rare father figure in contemporary dance, acknowledging with a laugh that he might hate the term. “He’s extremely impressive in terms of his generosity to new makers of work and about developing them critically,” she said. “He’s totally central to this community.”

A funny, low-key man with high-powered opinions, Mr. O’Connor would probably reject that father-figure mantle and all its accompanying politics. The age of master stylists is all but over, as starkly underlined by the deaths of two high-profile figures this summer, and contemporary choreographers aren’t eager to be similarly anointed.

“What we looked to with those artists, Pina Bausch or Merce Cunningham, was a complete sense of mastery and of a unique aesthetic and vision that was recognizable anywhere, anytime,” said Cathy Edwards, the former artistic director of Dance Theater Workshop who now has that role at the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art’s Time-Based Art Festival in Oregon. “I don’t think the generation of artists who are next up in terms of age and experience have that set of aspirations. And I don’t think the post-postmodern world that we live in now is set up to identify people that way.”

“But,” she added, “I do think that an artist like Tere is only going to keep growing in importance and in visibility over time.”

Mr. O’Connor, who grew up outside Rochester and came late to dance while an undergraduate at the State University of New York at Purchase, is now a tenured professor at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign and a coveted guest teacher. He has choreographed for Mikhail Baryshnikov, the Lyon Opera Ballet and (currently) Jean Butler of “Riverdance” fame. He also won three New York Dance and Performance Awards (known as Bessies) and was a 1993 Guggenheim Fellow. “Rammed Earth” garnered critical acclaim, touring for almost 80 performances at a time when contemporary dance almost never tours.

“I’ve argued with Tere many times about all the things he rejects,” Ms. Michelson said. “He’s a brilliant structuralist and a master of composition. He’s a choreographer in the true, traditional sense.”

“Wrought Iron Fog,” like his other dances, is a deeply collaborative work that hinges on the skill — intellectual and emotional as well as physical — of its five performers: Hilary Clark, Daniel Clifton, Erin

Gerken, Heather Olson and Matthew Rogers, who collaborated with Mr. O'Connor on the creation of the piece over an involved four-month process.

"There is something very human about Tere's dances," said Ms. Olson, who has been with the company since 1977. "Whereas something like ballet presses imperfections away, they say yes to everything."

At a recent rehearsal the company ran a large section of the piece. The movements ranged from enigmatic to pedestrian, with expansive phrases evoking various styles of dance. Mr. O'Connor sat quietly at a makeshift desk, watching intently and listening to the dance's score, itself still in process and created by his longtime friend and collaborator, James Baker.

"Tere allows me to take all these little obsessive moments and stitch them together," Mr. Baker said of his delicately layered scores. "He said the other day he looks at my pieces as these carefully handcrafted little works, almost like handmade shoes."

This aesthetic, Mr. Baker added, is one that he absorbed from Mr. O'Connor, whose fondness for artisanal work is indicated by this new dance's title. It also hints at his habit of studding diffuse passages with pockets of visual clarity.

"Abstraction is what we're experiencing if we take away the moments of knowability as time passes," Mr. O'Connor said after rehearsal. It is, in other words, like a fragment of wrought iron in the fog, a flash of "beauty you pass by quickly in the day."