

Tere O'Connor Dance

By **Deborah Jowitz**

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Hilary Clark, Matthew Rogers, Daniel Clifton, Heather Olson, and Erin Gerken in Tere O'Connor's "Wrought Iron Fog."

Tere O'Connor doesn't make dances about his life or anybody else's life. Like the late Merce Cunningham, he makes dances about dancing. However, since human beings are what we're watching onstage, we spectators inevitably see meaning in his work and impute meanings to it. I think O'Connor is OK with that; one of the essays that's included in his company's press packet puts forward his belief that "meaning in dance is arrived at in collaboration with the audience's endlessly expanding referential world."

Since every individual interprets O'Connor's dance through a personal lens, and cultural differences also influence that vision, you, the reader of this, are going to have to understand—if you didn't already know—that this is me thinking, conceptualizing, and writing about O'Connor's pungently titled new *Wrought Iron Fog*. Adjectives like "imaginative," "beautiful," "stirring," "witty," and "enigmatic" in relation to this work are mine (but not exclusively—you may use them if you want to). Feel free to reject my metaphors.

Wrought Iron Fog is set in a world that initially, under Michael O'Connor's lights, looks like a glittering, blue, polar landscape (or a fantasy of one). A densely gathered white curtain with a ragged bottom extends across the back wall of the black-box theater, and the designers (Walter Dundervill and O'Connor) have also hung several clusters of slender white strings at the sides (they look a little like streams of water from very big showerheads).

I find James Baker's aural landscape less calming. It chimes and clangs and thunders. Once, I imagine a collision of myriad windup toys running amok and crashing into one another. The words that occasionally rise foggily from the depths of the score are excerpted from Samuel Becket's novel *How It Is*. Amid the clamor, a dissected phantom choir calls out briefly. I thought I heard the first word of "Agnus Dei," its "s" prolonged into a hiss. Periods of silence feel like a relief, as if worldwide traffic had suddenly come to a halt.

And this is where five extremely interesting, vibrantly physical, mentally acute people live. The costumes, by Jennifer Goggins and Erin Gerken, underscore their individuality. Heather Olson wears a long-sleeved, transparent, blue-violet tunic (over a leotard) that emphasizes her long bare legs. Sturdy Hilary Clark, with her unruly blond mane, is clad in a brown fitted dress that has the air of a uniform. Small Erin Gerkin, with her movie-star face and ballerina hairdo, is garbed in a sort of elegant gym suit in brilliant red. The two men, Daniel Clifton and Matthew Rogers, wear similar tights and sleeveless, untucked shirts in deep jewel tones.

O'Connor is a master of structure—of designing patterns in space and breaking them up, of making rhythms expand and contract. These days, we often see movement that wrenches askew,

deconstructs, or debilitates the body. Most of the time, O'Connor's dancers are in control, although I don't mean to imply that they're buttoned-up, only that they launch themselves into his bold, arduous, inventive steps as if they were tackling their daily work and had to engage in it as fully as possible—encompassing a lot of space, managing time with bravura efficiency. Joining with one another in counterpoint or unison doesn't seem an arbitrary act, but one willed by consensus or individual decision.

However, O'Connor also makes use of curious gestures, fleeting images of emotion, or patterns that trigger associations in our minds. The five may suddenly wilt or stagger, fling themselves around or thrash on the floor, or—in the piece's opening—bend slightly, meltingly, and make inscrutable soft, tentative movements with their hands. After a duet for two that seems like an intense movement dialogue (or maybe twin soliloquies), Clifton and Rogers recline like odalisques and stare at one another; they also at some point put their hands on their hips and tiptoe—runway models, but without attitude. Suddenly my eye is drawn to a corner: Gerken has fallen on top of the supine Rogers, and he starts scrabbling on his back toward center, with her still lying on him. Twice the dancers form a chain close to the first row of spectators and, holding hands, support Clark, who's attempting to balance on the ball of one foot. When she backs away after a while, the others stare at her; she gestures wanly (apologetically?).

Images like this stick in my mind. They're like conversations overheard on the street, whose cause or conclusion you never discover. We're allowed to watch the fascinating performers (O'Connor thanks them in the program for their contributions to the movement material) for an hour; they don't mind. But although they're matter-of-fact, there's nothing prosaic about this richly textured dancing. It's more like some of today's elusive poetry of the mundane; a line like this one by John Ashbery, "Leaves around the door are penciled losses," ignites meanings you pin down at your peril. So do O'Connor's dances. The title of this one, *Wrought Iron Fog*, like the piece itself, melds what only *seem* like contradictions.