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BY JOAN ACOCELLA

IF YOU LANDED ON MARS AND FOUND that there was indeed life there, but life that was related to ours only as, for example, Chinese is related to Swahili—then you would have found something like the world of Tere O'Connor's dances. In his work, the dancers do extremely strange things. They line up in little formations; they march toward one another, wagging their hands furiously; they swim in the air, then eat each other's chests. One does something while the others watch; then the others do the same incomprehensible thing. In between, as a kind of leitmotif, they all have grand mal seizures. Everything is done with extreme precision, with a kind of stretch and definition that is almost balletic. And everything is done with utter, bug-eyed concentration, as if the fate of nations were being decided. At the same time, it has almost no direct relation to human action. "The dances I make are completely unnatural," O'Connor says. "There's not an organic movement in them."

What they have to do with, he explains, is pain—or, more generally, "a kind of psychotic mystery that is inside all of us and that fortunately I can't really identify, or I would probably stop making dances." But whatever that mystery is inside us, it is related to the same universal plan. There is a law in nature, O'Connor believes, and not a nice one: "a huge, unfeeling, slapping hand that just decides—completely illogically, to us—to slap us down." Is he thinking of AIDS? Not really, he says, or not just AIDS, but a huge, comprehensive trend toward destruction. "Think of an earthquake. I would be almost honored to die in an earthquake, because there's an order in it, something that *needs* to occur."

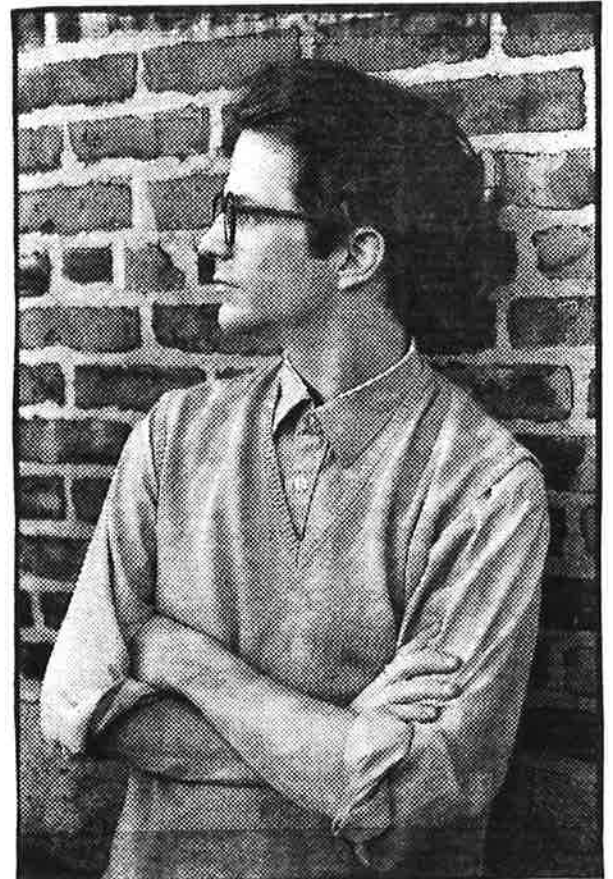
And dance seems to him a perfect art for expressing this, because it crumbles as it's built. "Choreography is a perfect metaphor for the way everything is: like, you're trying to manipulate the situation so that it equals something when instead it's constantly crumbling beneath you."

At the same time, the formalism of dance, its inherent abstraction, seems to him the natural mode of expression for the mind's pain in response to this impossible situation. "I have this half-theory about formalism, that what it is—throughout art history, in all the different forms it has taken—is an attempt to

correct what is not possible to correct within us. Think of a rose window or any of the other medieval order systems. Even though they purported to be about religious numerology or something, they have more to do with the individual mind trying to order things that are impossible to order. And from that effort comes a kind of release. Formalism is what is pressed out of impossibility."

Dance also appeals to him because it does not use language. Like so many choreographers before him, O'Connor believes that in bypassing language, dance gets at a truth deeper than language. "Dance is really a subversive form, or it can be." This truth came to him in part from watching New York City Ballet during his early years in New York, the early '80s. "I would watch those ballets, and I would say to myself, 'I get absolutely nothing in terms of meaning here—I don't know what this dance is about—and it's absolutely bowling me over.' There were things in it, I guess, that I should have seen, like when she touches his hand they're in love. But I didn't see that. I was just watching the whole network of things going on onstage, all the synapses, connections. The sign system was totally impenetrable to me, and I was so drawn to that—dancing without signs. When I saw that, it gave me a sense of centeredness. I thought: This is where I am capable."

What he wants to be capable of is expressing the meanings that go on *behind* language, which he thinks are critical to our lives, and also readable. "You know, if you take a trip to Japan and sit on the street and watch people go by and one man says to another, 'blah, blah, blah,'



in Japanese, you don't understand them, but, you know, I'm sure, that either they like each other or they they're having a fight or they're running a counterfeit ring. You can read a lot, and that's what I'm talking about. In my dances I present these universes that land on earth before you for 40 minutes, and you observe them from that place where you are. There's no language there, but there's a lot to be taken from what goes on. It's something very, very mysterious: connections to another time and thought-place—things that we just don't have any doctors about. But that mystery, to me, is absolutely essential—it's been around forever—and I dedicate myself to attaching to it."

This quasi-mysticism, and also his deep skepticism: how much do they have to do with an Irish Catholic upbringing? "I try to reach for that subject in myself," he says, "and every time I go for it it's like the soap that's already wet. I can't get ahold of it." O'Connor grew up in upstate New York in a tiny little town—"a speck," he says—called Webster, near Rochester. His father worked for Kodak ("He drove away in the morning and came home at five, that's what he did") and his mother kept house. O'Connor went to the local parochial school as long as he and the school could stand one another. Then, in ninth grade, after a climactic meeting with the guidance counselor, he left, and moved over to the public school.

By this time he had a sense of estrangement that had to do with more than school. "I was gay, and I knew it. Or I started to know that I was kind of fighting something. Like, something's going on, and if you tell someone, you probably won't live that long, or not in the town I was in." After graduating from high school, he went to SUNY-Purchase, with its fine arts program, intent on being an actor. But soon acting came to feel to him like an additional estrangement. "My whole existence had been about not being myself. If I wanted to get anything, like love, from another person, I had to be something else. So the idea of being something else, which is inherent in acting, became odious to me." Yet he loved working with his body, and he had things he wanted to communicate—just not by taking on roles. "My life had been about internalizing what I really felt, and that made my insides very communicative, and not my outsides." In dance, he thought, his insides could communicate, so he transferred to the dance department, and that's where he stayed.

After leaving Purchase in 1980, he came to New York where he danced briefly for Matthew Diamond and Rosalind Newman and then went off on his own. His first works were solos, but by 1985 he assembled a company of sorts and presented a duet, *Boy, Boy, Giant, Baby* at St. Mark's Church. Since then he has had a group concert every year, always with about five or six dancers, including the excellent Nancy Coenen (she's been with him since *Boy, Boy, Giant, Baby*) and always in a completely consistent style. The dancers wear little unisex outfits that look like school uniforms; they move in neat, careful spatial patterns; their dancing too is neat, highly stretched and articulate; and they do very strange things in a way that seems to say that this is what everyone does—this is what you *should* do—and that their doing it at this moment is the most urgent thing in the world.

Between concerts, O'Connor survives by teaching ballet at NYU. He has also been fairly lucky with grants, and now receives support from both NYSCA and the NEA. "I piece it together," he says. "Most of the time, I'm making a dance, and other than that I don't seem to need that much." He wishes he could pay his dancers better. They too piece it together, one teaching aerobics, one doing carpentry, but as he has made a commitment to choreography, so have they to dancing. "They are big adults, who have made a decision to be there." "I just lean forward," he says philosophically, "and see what happens. I haven't fallen yet. I'm still leaning."

"I've started thinking, though, about what's going to happen if we get to a point where there's no NYSCA left, no money for art. It will be awful, but I say to myself, 'What was going on when the Surrealists came into being? What was going on that made Futurism happen?' These things are responses to conditions. I think that no matter what happens—look, it'll be really hard, life is very hard when you have no money—but once you have that under your belt, it will be interesting to see how people respond.

"America is a country that has no respect for the arts. As a culture, we're like a 13-year-old: we just listen to our 45s and go out and smoke pot. Maybe if art is really taken away from us, we'll learn something. Maybe if we don't have the Met for a while, we'll notice that. We may gain some sense of how important it is in our lives. I think of a concert Susan Rethorst just gave at the Kitchen, a phenomenal concert. Not that many people were there, but a concert like that is the beginning of something that becomes something else, then becomes something else, then grows into something else, and then becomes something at the Gap. That is how ideas begin—way, way out on the edge—and then they move to the center. If we cut it out at the edge, we will just stop."

And he—what will he do if there's no money left? "Well, what would it be like for me to do a dance in the street? Because I'm absolutely going to continue doing this." ■



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