

VOICE

By Deborah Jowitt

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Doug Johnson, Tere O'Connor, and Sarah Perron in O'Connor's *Nursing the Newborn Pig*

"'If it had grown up,' Alice said to herself, 'it would have made a very ugly child: but it makes rather a handsome pig.'"

Tere O'Connor's *Nursing the Newborn Pig* may or may not be full-grown, but it's so firmly ugly that you can't take your eyes off it and you can't help but wonder about its parentage (is that spraddled-legged, half-toe stance due to a recessive gene from Doris Humphrey's *Life of the Bee*?).

The six splendid dancers (Nancy Coenen, Doug Johnson, Chrysa Parkinson, Lucy Guerin, Sarah Perron, and O'Connor) walk thuddingly, legs apart, bodies hunkered over. They run and freeze. They prance bending back. They peacock awkwardly. Sometimes they look as if they're fighting off cobwebs.

The entire time, they hold themselves so stiffly that they shake.

In their bright clothes—short, sleeveless coral jackets and black trunks by Paul Gagnon—they toddle around in front of an artfully drab set by Brian MacDevitt made of ragged, partly tied-up burlap hangings. (MacDevitt also created the dramatic lighting.) Windup toys from hell—who are

these people? Sometimes they seem to have muscular disabilities; sometimes they look demented. They huddle together and stare upward, as if afraid. Lucy Guerin is cast out; then someone holds her while Johnson slowly pushes his head into her stomach.

They dance to a score put together by O'Connor in which, underneath the beats that cue the dancing, we hear what sounds like fragments of Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* being run down a garbage disposal and the sweet sound of two small children laughing and laughing.

Is it the children's voices that make me feel tender toward these numb but determined caricatures of people? Or is it the fact that O'Connor deploys them in masterfully designed, spatially ingenious formal patterns—creating images of harmony and order that contrast strangely with the harsh, awkward themes. Too, as extreme as their stances and actions are, they never look out of control; every move is precisely shaped and rhythmed, so that they can move in perfect unison. Imagine bears trained to walk on their hind legs doing a Balanchine ballet as scrupulously as they can, even though their paws are killing them.

In *Grounded Angel Triptych*, I also feel O'Connor savaging our notions of grace and flow, but this dance seems even more strangely poignant than the other. Again, O'Connor has put together the music—high thudding piano sounds that closely follow the rhythms of the movement, organ tones, voices. This time, he's designed the ingenious costumes too: he, Chrysa Parkinson, and Sarah Perron wear loose white garments that look almost like undershirts nipped in at the crotch to form pants; their legs are mottled with dark makeup, as if they'd been wading in a bog.

Here too, the dancers are skillfully awkward, straining. Fallen angels for sure. Their heads tremble. Are they trying to shake the sound of earth out of their ears, or tune in to heaven? They stretch their arms and fan the air fiercely. One of the women (which? these two strong, tall beauties might be twins) dances in a calm, private bout of dancing, while the other two follow her. O'Connor distorts his body with almost operatic intensity. Why don't we laugh? As in *Nursing the Newborn Pig*, the patterns are formal, the dancing violent in its energy but controlled in its design.

I haven't seen such an original, shocking concert in quite a while. What can O'Connor be up to?