

## DANCE

### Freeze frame

Tere O'Connor gets to the bare essentials in *Frozen Mommy* By **Gia Kourlas**

Not too long ago, Tere O'Connor stumbled upon a stylistic breakthrough—the act of freezing movement. But unlike his usual choreographic inventions, its roots were not found in the studio. “I quit smoking last year and one of the ways I did it is that whenever I was jonesing for a ciggie, I would stand completely still,” he recalls over coffee in Soho. “In that moment, I’d think, Okay, I can walk right into that deli and get a pack of cigarettes—I can do whatever I want. But instead of doing that, I would freeze in whatever position I was in until the desire passed. That started to become a really secular kind of meditation for me, and ultimately that stillness ended up being part of my process—waiting for something to emerge, as opposed to always pushing an idea into visibility.”

The choreographer’s newest work, *Frozen Mommy*, explores that process as well as the fleeting nature of memory within a purposely barren theatrical setting: There are five performers, who shift in and out of a slew of madcap characters, some real (they play aspects of themselves) and some imagined, and only one lighting cue. In keeping with O’Connor’s rich output of dance-theater, there is no real narrative, though the piece is at once terribly sad and funny; throughout his 20-year career, he has proven adept at focusing his creative lens on the fragile edge between humor and despair. “I just love this dance in the studio,” he says of the intimate work. “It’s the scariest in terms of bringing it into the theater.”

In preparation for *Frozen Mommy*, which will be performed at the Kitchen beginning

December 2, O’Connor became entranced with examining his own work’s inner structure. “At first, I was looking at my phrase-making: How I create the next movement in any given phrase is arrived at by exiting the idea before it,” he explains. “It had to do with



**TIGHT SHOT** Matthew Rogers and Erin Gerken, from left, face off in *Frozen Mommy*.

looking at the closeness of disparate parts. Now, it’s switched to another idea of detaching from narrative to fully embrace the dance. I’m really interested in making the choreography the protagonist of the work. This dance is like throwing dust on invisible events that are going on in space and just giving them life for a moment.”

Part of O’Connor’s decision to avoid theatrical embellishments that would make the performers and the choreography the primary focus of *Frozen Mommy* is a reaction to his most recent *Lawn*, which featured a slick film by Ben Speth. “*Lawn* was so much about its extradance elements,” O’Connor says. “So on both process and aesthetic levels, one of the things *Frozen Mommy* is about is just stopping. Spatially and dramatically, this is an incredibly pared-down work. There is music, but basically what

I’m going for are moments that bubble out of silence.”

Also unusual is the costuming; each night, the five dancers—Hilary Clark, Erin Gerken, Heather Olson, Matthew Rogers and Christopher Williams—will pick what they wear from a preordained selection. “Even *thinking* about dance costumes is like having your kidney removed, stomped on and put into a blender,” O’Connor says. “They land on one aspect of a theme, and they’re not malleable—except in the hands of some great people like Sarah Michelson.” The experiment, O’Connor hopes, will lead to the dancers being dressed in their emotional sensibility at the time, rather than in the clothes they’re actually wearing: “Costumes don’t allow the viewer to

turn corners, and that’s an unfortunate thing about dance—some people exit a dance, and some people enter it. For me, dance is a ticket to enter your imagination.”

O’Connor, who views the art form as a theatricalization of dreaming, refers to his works as countries. “I find that watching and hearing people talk in foreign countries is like choreography,” he explains. “To some degree it looks like they’re doing the things that human beings do, but since you can’t make sense of anything, it becomes an abstraction upon which you project a narrative. That’s what happens in dance, too. If I’m brave enough, and if I can create a world that doesn’t have holes, it will feel like you’re visiting the country of *Frozen Mommy*.”

**Frozen Mommy is at the Kitchen December 2 through 4 and 8 through 11.**