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Moving Men

BY DEBORAH JOWITT



Bitch, bitch, bitch: Rob Besserer, Greg Zuccolo, and Marc Kenison in Tere O'Connor's *Hi, Everybody!*

HELP! I NEED A different format for writing about Tere O'Connor's new *Hi Everybody!* I need to be able to scatter sentences around the page, to embed a manifesto (maybe set in italics) for universal health care into the lyrics of an old song, and to periodically remind all of you that I'm a writer in search of a structure.

I'm having to make do with the standard *Voice* page, just as O'Connor has to fit everything onto a stage—in this case, the Kirchen's spacious black box. But he's brave enough to violate most of the conventions that usually control a mix of dance and text. In last season's *The World Is a Missing Girl*, a story, buried in a dance-play about telling that story, emerged (if at all,

some might say) in fragments. *Hi Everybody!* has no hidden plot; it's all cranky subterfuge with rage, grief, and loneliness erupting from bouts of stand-up comedy, clichés intoned by Greek choruses, scenes, songs, dances, and quiet soliloquies.

O'Connor makes an early appearance to divide the performers for sitting around sobbing while attempting to warm up. They give him short shrift and laugh him off the stage when he attempts a windy speech about his work (undermined anyway by the fact that he has trouble pronouncing *genre*). From then on, with faultless theatrical timing and many shifts in character, the fabulous performers (Rob Besserer, Rebecca Hilton, Marc Kenison, Heather Olson, Chrysa Parkinson, and Greg Zuccolo) jolt from topic to topic and back again, and from sincerity to high artifice, beauty to vulgarity, camp to satire to tragedy, talking to chanting to singing to dancing. Enhanced by Brian MacDevitt's artful lighting, *Hi Everybody!* is like a revue that's been chopped up, dunked in bile, and comes up gasping with a bunch of roses in its derelict fist.

Health insurance is a big issue for these dancers: It takes only a quick gabled prayer for God to bring Lazarus to life. "Cool!" exclaims the revived Kenison, bouncing up into a split-second scene demonstrating that appeals to God will not get you into a hospital if you've got no insurance. Mood and style change with the speed of MTV cuts, but absurdity and exaggerated jobiness somehow actually support poignancy. A character played by Hilton, for instance, tells a wonderfully weird story about her husband, who measures the tendencies of tides by planting tiny computerized figures of

sunbathers on beaches all over the world. She's happy, so are her kids. Suddenly her mate dies; suddenly a pain flares in her gut. She's about to tell us the sad reason when the others interrupt, fussing about getting into a diagonal to create a strong dramatic effect. A few seconds later, Zuccolo becomes the doctor who says her insurance won't cover the new treatment, and then a son (hers?) sobbing over his mom's death. Hilton stands quietly. "Oh kids . . .," she says apologetically, and the impudent chorus members become angels and fly beautifully around her.

Enforced religious education, the treatment of Alzheimer's patients, gay bashing, the tyranny of "family values," and many other grievances crop up, often couched in bitter comedy. Olson bossily organizes a Grieving Group (because, it turns out, she's so terribly sad). O'Connor's startling juxtapositions risk irritating spectators. Parkinson delivers a serious speech about how upset she is over the plight of refugees hounded from their homeland. Instantly, Besserer and Olson break into "Home on the Range," but the strumpy diatribe doesn't annoy us, perhaps because their slow song and dance has unexpected words and an unfamiliar tune sweetly delivered in two-part harmony (composer James Baker may have been responsible).

Heavy sobs and hearty artificial laughter punctuate the goings-on, but O'Connor has created a work that is both hilarious and truly sad. The union dance passages are a refuge for the performers, but also impose an order not of their choosing. The comedy acts as an antidote to swarming worries: How will I die? How will I live? How can I intervene in the world's injustices? Ha, ha, ha!