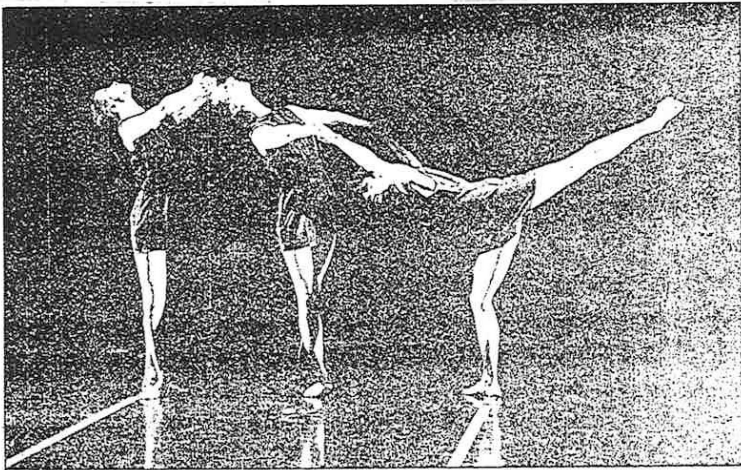


7 DAYS • MARCH 22, 1989

DANCE

JOAN ACOCELLA

NURSERY CRIMES



Sara Perron, Chrysa Parkinson, and Tere O'Connor in *Four Sister Dances*

Such seepage is the subject of Tere O'Connor's work. His pieces generally use a small ensemble, maybe five or six dancers, often dressed identically, in carefully sewn little getups—pinnies or smocks or overalls—that look like school uniforms. All together or in smaller groups, the dancers do a sort of adapted barefoot ballet full of urgent gesture: fingers pointing, buggy eyes staring, feet drumming rhythmically on the floor. You never know what the gestures mean, but whatever

it is, it's not nice. Imagine that Mummy and Daddy were killed in a plane crash and then Nanny went down to the cellar and never came back. O'Connor's dances are what would go on in the nursery for the next year or so, until the social worker came.

As the lights go up on *Four Sister Dances*, the most recent installment, there is an earsplitting blast of sound and we see four dancers in blue coveralls lined up across the stage while a fifth (O'Connor) stands behind them,

looking nasty and bossy and wearing a little smock. The smock image becomes very important as the piece progresses. It appears painted on panels that the dancers rip down with violence. Then it reappears upside down on the back wall of the stage, and the dancers seem to worship it. (I think it's the spirit of the missing grown-up—Nanny's dressing gown, as it were.) They worship it, though, as certain tribes worship the enemy they have just killed and eaten.

But I anticipate. O'Connor passes his smock to the wide-eyed Nancy Coenen, who seems to be a sort of good sister. (Coenen, a wonderful dancer, is almost always O'Connor's lead woman.) Besmocked, she now gets to be Nanny. But the other children instantly start to disobey. And these are no mischievous scamps. They are evil-hearted little bastards. O'Connor, who seems to be the older brother, keeps peering at her sideways, lingo-like, and whispering awful little things in her ear. Worse, however, is younger brother Christopher Batenhorst, the kind of boy with whom household pets are not safe. Younger brother has "fits"—in the middle of a dance, smack, down he falls—and all the children stand over him and stare until he gets up again.

The piece proceeds from the opening group dance to the smock worship to a trio and a concluding duet. Finest is the trio, for younger brother and the two other sisters (Chrysa Parkinson and Sara Perron). A sky full of clouds is projected onto the big smock on the backdrop—this is an image worthy of Magritte—and younger brother does a frenzied stamping dance in front of it. The sisters enter in pink dresses, except that they hold their dresses over their heads and come in backward, with their innocent little backsides out. But are they innocent? The undersides of their pink dresses are scored with black lines, like a spider web. They bring in pink blouses and tie them on their brother—one around

his neck, one around his waist—readying him for some battle, it seems (the takeover of the nursery?). They all exit stamping. Then the smock-backdrop fills with stars, and in another part of the garden, or so I imagined it, the artless Coenen encounters a gorgeous blue bird with gold hair, who, funny thing, looks a lot like older brother. They dance, and as the dance ends you see her life ebbing out of her.

One of the beauties of the piece was O'Connor's way of adapting ballet to his dramatic purposes: the rounded arms to frame Coenen's sweet, open face and make her look a little dumb, the fastidious placement of O'Connor's feet to underline his elegant evil. The piece needed more dance variety—more rhythm, more steps. In every section but the dancing outwore its ideas. But I can still remember how, when younger brother falls in a fit at Coenen's feet, she looks down not at him but at her dress—and touches it, inspects it. Is she worried that his fall has made her dirty? Or that she was dirty, and that's what made him fall? This is a child's sense of sin, or a madman's, still with us in our dreams.

As Freud said, we all become psychotic every night, when we go to sleep. But the rest of us wake up and forget. O'Connor doesn't forget, and that's his gift.

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