

THE KITCHEN VIDEO MUSIC DANCE PERFORMANCE FILM

512 West 19th St. (Btwn 10th & 11th Aves) New York, NY 10011

Reservations: 255-5793

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Healing Power

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

TERE O'CONNOR. *Four Sister Dances.* At the Kitchen, March 9 to 12.

Tere O'Connor's agenda, I'd judge, is to get his audience embroiled in crisp dancing, then push the surface out of shape with fragments of narrative. The discontinuous images—almost always seeming to do with childhood—impart a dreamlike oddness to the whole. His dances are never uninteresting and never anything but accomplished in terms of composition, but his latest, *Four Sister Dances*, is more maddeningly opaque than any others I've seen.

I think that what makes *Four Sister Dances* more like a puzzle you try to solve than an enigma you settle into is the quantity of quick, neat, almost brittle dancing. The movement often looks like footsy little ballet steps spat out—coupled, perhaps, with crooked arm positions or twitchy crossed hands. What Burt Supree once referred to as O'Connor's "fierce prissiness" as a performer applies to the choreography as well. And because this dancing is hard to read much into, it doesn't lend itself to dreaming.

The first image we see is of Christopher Batenhorst, Nancy Coenen, Chrysta Parkinson, and Sarah Perron wearing navy blue gym suits (by David Dalrymple and O'Connor), each standing in front of one of four hanging panels on each of which is painted a blue dress. James Baker's well-designed score for bass, guitar, viola, violin, keyboards, and percussion begins with a clatter, and the four execute a rapid three-step in place—like a pas de bourrée. Their dancing conjures up O'Connor, standing at the back with one foot stuck out, leaning back, swaying. He's wearing a short blue dress that hangs straight from the shoulder like a very little girl's frock.

Dresses are definitely a motif. The four banners are pulled down and taken away. O'Connor slowly removes his dress and puts it on Coenen, inside out, so that its satiny underside shows. Later what at first looks like a huge fabric altar appears upstage, but it's an upside-down dress. Later still, Parkinson and Perron enter wearing orange and dress Batenhorst in puff-sleeved apricot bodices, using one as an apron. Batenhorst stands rocking as O'Connor did at the beginning of the dance, before taking off into suddenly tantrummy dancing.

There are some memorable passages. While Coenen dances, the others slash and punch the air; their gestures affect her like blows (Coenen does this wonderfully). In one extended dance sequence, all five performers spread out in a horizontal line and walk back and forth between the audience and the Holy Dress, the pattern and gestures becoming more complex and more violent with each repetition.

Everything is succinct and neatly meshed. The music can change from spare to clotted and ferocious in support of the dancing. Brian MacDevitt's lighting is clear and to the point. The dancers are excellent. But the mysteries deepen (especially when O'Connor emerges for a last duet with Coenen with his hair blonded, his face bluish and slashed with white). When it's all over, I feel curiously constricted—as if the very formality of the dancing had been constantly opening doors on imaginative vistas and then slyly slamming them shut.

