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As Life's Chaos Fades to Dark, Still a Glow Remains

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Julieta Cervantes for The New York Times

Heather Olson and Christopher Williams in "Rammed Earth" at the Chocolate Factory. The dance requires the audience members to move their chairs in each of the work's four sections.

LAST FALL, when Tere O'Connor's "Rammed Earth" inhabited the Chocolate Factory, this lyrical, intelligent quartet seemed tailor-made for that raw little space. Last week the dance returned to New York, but to a larger, much more polished studio in the Baryshnikov Arts Center. No surprise, it still felt tailor-made.

Mr. O'Connor created "Rammed Earth" with adaptability in mind. Depending on the theater's size, any of the dance's four sections, which are framed by deft shifts in the audience's seating arrangement, can collapse or expand. (Try doing that with a painting; working with space has its advantages.)

This strategy might well have gone untested, given the dismal state of touring in this country: many works have only one brief run in a single theater. That would have been a tragedy, as "Rammed Earth," which I saw for the third time on Sunday, is a work that grows richer over time.

This deepening is a testament to Mr. O'Connor's immense abilities, as well as to those of his dancers. Hilary Clark, Heather Olson, Matthew Rogers and Christopher Williams have worked together since 2004, and it is hard to think of a more finely tuned contemporary ensemble than this nuanced, virtuosic troupe. Its members approach each performance as if discovering the material anew, like precocious children settling into a new environment, one built largely from the imagination.

"Rammed Earth" is very much an ode to childlike curiosity and wonder. <u>James Baker</u>'s densely layered score includes a recording of Mr. O'Connor reading a section of Laurence Sterne's "Tristram Shandy" that deals with the possibility of a mythical white bear.

"Is he wild? Tame? Terrible? Rough? Smooth?" The bear, a metaphor for imagination and the unknown, is all of these things, as is this dance, which continues Mr. O'Connor's meditation on the painfully beautiful welter of impulses and influences that surround and form daily existence. Many shows offer chaos: that is mere documentation. Mr. O'Connor shapes this chaos so that audiences are able to recognize themselves, and their lives, in his work: this is choreography.

The movement, created with the dancers, is often idiosyncratic, often mundane. A gorgeously pointed foot will emerge like a shot of strange clarity after a section in which one performer roughly and repeatedly shoves another, or simply gazes mournfully upward, a point of stillness in a precisely calibrated whirl of activity.

In the closing moments the dancers stand huddled beneath a single caged bulb (Michael O'Connor and Brian MacDevitt's lighting design is sublime), which dims until they grow invisible. Finally we see only the light: a white bear, fiercely glowing in its cage.