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Dance

Lively Leaps of Imagination

*Shane O'Hara's Quirky Choreography of Character*By Alan M. Kriegsman
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A blend of wit, histrionics and flavorful eccentricity was the principal impression left by "Behind the Eyes—an Evening of Dance/Theatre," the program at Dance Place this past weekend. The skill, intelligence and humor disclosed in the course of the proceedings, however, raised hopes for a corresponding depth, a quality that materialized only fleetingly.

Still, the rewards were far from meager. The evening was mainly a showcase for the appreciable creative and performing talents of Shane O'Hara, a dancer-choreographer-performance artist who has toured widely both domestically and abroad. Currently he's a member of the dance faculty at the University of Alabama.

On this program, O'Hara was represented as a performer in five of the evening's seven works, and as a choreographer of two solos for himself, a quartet for four women and another for two couples, danced by the Thompson & Trammell Quartet (Cynthia Thompson, Kate Trammell, O'Hara and William Seigh). In addition, O'Hara danced a pair of 1948 solos taught to him by their creator, modern dance arch-rebel Daniel Nagrin, and Thompson and Trammell (from James Madison University) performed a piece they choreographed jointly with Washington's highly accomplished Meriam Rosen.

All this made for a lively mix, in which the emphasis fell heavily on quirky character sketches of varying idiom.

The least successful of the lot was the Thompson-Trammell-Rosen "Schizophrenic Girl," in which the attractively contrasted Thompson and Trammell traded mostly inscrutable verbal and gestural quips to the accompaniment of a troubadour trio (Annette Gallant, Jenny Klein and Vicki Vidos). O'Hara's exquisite physical control and assured characterization were manifest both in the piquant Nagrin portraits ("Strange Hero," about a Capone-style mobster, and "Man of Action," a frenetic Everyman undone by urban dissonance) and in his own deliberately waspish sketches—"What Ever Happened to the Horses," an anti-technology tract he declaims while circling on a bike, and "Modern Warrior," a Japan-bashing caricature that's part samurai, part Green Beret and part Robocop.

In some ways the most stimulating entries were the concluding ensemble pieces, both choreographed by O'Hara. In "Guzu Guzu" (a note explains that the phrase means "mumbling" in Japanese), the Thompson & Trammell Quartet plays musical chairs to the sporadic accompaniment of a Hammer number as they spout words, noises and exclamations. It's a fitfully amusing lampoon of failed or phony communication; there are times, however, when it comes perilously close to being an example of what it's attempting to satirize.

For its hypnotic atmosphere alone, "The Shedding of Skin"—set to a montage of jazz, marches and Near Eastern music and given its premiere here—was the evening's most riveting offering. The four women (Laney Abernethy, Neeya Byrd, Kristin Naccari



Dancer-choreographer Shane O'Hara.

and Wendy Lett) are barefoot but clad in black evening dresses adorned with symbolic red scarves and long gloves, and each clutches an apple, sometimes in hand, sometimes in mouth. The piece begins with the four squirming and rotating restlessly on a bench, a passage teeming with erotic insinuation. What follows is a kind of Four Faces of Eve, running a gamut from sexy writhings to majorette struttings. In one stretch, the foursome arches backward, holding their apples just overhead and licking upward lasciviously toward them as they slouch forward. The whole thing keeps threatening to erupt into an ecdysial orgy in keeping with the title. In the end, however, though the apples, the scarves and the gloves are shed, the clothing is not. The one not small problem with the piece, as with "Modern Warrior," is that nothing in it indicates clearly enough whether it is intended as a tease, a spoof or a polemical indictment of female stereotypes. On the other hand, maybe ambiguity is the point.