

Style

MONDAY, OCTOBER 11, 2004

Dance

Shane O'Hara, Leaping to the Left in the Political Debate

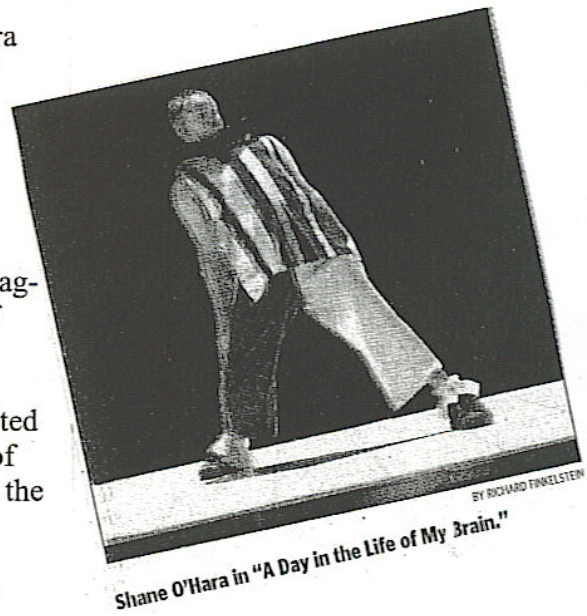
Shane O'Hara attends to the details when he dances. The way he sets his jaw, swipes his arm through the air or rocks back on his heels before lunging and leaping forward indicates a gravity of purpose in his dancing. For O'Hara, who's on the faculty at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Va., dance doesn't merely tell stories, it takes sides -- especially so in this season of political debate. Saturday at Joy of Motion's Jack Guidone Theater, O'Hara wore his heart and his liberal politics proudly on his sleeve in "Biting My Tongue and Other Solo Dance Adventures."

Three of the works dealt plainly and purposefully with issues of war and peace, patriotism and power, silence and outspokenness. The evening's centerpiece, "Biting My Tongue," featured musical collaborator Mitchell Mercurio joining O'Hara onstage in a politically charged rumination on flag-waving nationalism, which O'Hara finds divisive. With his spoken text of personal stories and a score combining taped collage, live guitar and percussion, the work unspools in fits and starts, like O'Hara himself, who initially couldn't force words from his mouth. The 25-minute solo catapulted O'Hara into paroxysms of rage, the keening of a mourner. His rendering of "The Star-Spangled Banner," mumbled before a row of miniature flags at the front of the stage, spoke chillingly of liberties usurped.

"Sound Bite," a premiere, served as a companion to "Biting My Tongue." O'Hara offered biographical accounts of Iraq's war dead -- civilians and soldiers. Accompanied by the achingly warm notes of bassoonist Douglas Kehlenbrink performing Willson Osborne's "Rhapsody," the work spoke eloquently through O'Hara's stooped body, hands clasped helplessly behind his back.

O'Hara maintains an intriguing long-term partnership with mid-century modern dance soloist and activist Daniel Nagrin, now based at Arizona State University. Nagrin's biting satiric "Wordgame: A Cartoon," an antiwar manifesto from 1968, fit O'Hara as well as a politician's suit. O'Hara launched himself fearlessly into this nonstop tour de force, his brow wrinkling one second, smoothing out the next. The result was provocative, and if the postures -- shrugs, fists clenched in victory, hands jingling loose change -- didn't suggest Richard Nixon, you were born too late.

-- Lisa Traiger



Shane O'Hara in "A Day in the Life of My Brain."

BY RICHARD FINKELSTEIN