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16/Dance

The New Irish

John Scott crafts humanitarian beauty in "Fall and Recover"

BY BRIAN MCCORMICK

"Imagine Ireland," a year-long season of Irish arts in America, is an initiative of Culture Ireland and Gabriel Byrne, that nation's cultural ambassador.

Working with presenters and producers across the US, and with Irish artists and ensembles across art forms, "Imagine Ireland" offers American audiences contemporary creations that will reshape and reinvigorate notions of Ireland and what it means to be Irish.

Among the works coming to New York as part of this project is "Fall and Recover," which opens on March 25 at La MaMa. Created by John Scott in 2004, in collaboration with individuals helped by the Centre for the Care of Survivors of Torture, and revived for the Dublin Dance Festival 2009, the mov-

**JOHN SCOTT/
IRISH MODERN DANCE THEATRE**
"Fall and Recover"
La MaMa
74A E. Fourth St.,
btwn. Bowery & Second Ave.
Mar. 25-26, 31, Apr. 1-2,
7-9 at 7:30 p.m.
Mar. 27 & Apr. 3 at 2:30 p.m.
\$20-\$25; lamama.org or
212-475-7710

ing work draws upon and highlights these people's extraordinary presence, dignity, and determination.

The piece features two professional dancers and a cast of 11 torture survivors from nine countries. Cast members have lost homes, careers, family, and health. Some have physical wounds from being hung upside down; others have seen family members killed in front of them or had to leave their children



Francis Akello in "Fall and Recover," opening at La MaMa on March 25.

behind.

But their dance celebrates the power of the human spirit and carries imprints from their lives and future hopes.

"It started as something to perform in-house," said Scott in an interview with Gay City News at the Puck Fair Bar in New York City.

Scott, the out gay founding director of Irish Modern Dance Theatre and one of Ireland's most highly acclaimed and provocative choreographers, was invited to work with clients at the Centre after it was suggested dance might help them. The idea of his workshops was to help the clients feel comfortable within their bodies again, and the dance has allowed them to become more than just their torture.

In a 2006 interview with the BBC, one of the performers said, "I've been going to counseling

for two years, but the counseling didn't help me the way the dance helped me."

"It's not exactly what I do," Scott recalled thinking when the project first began. "It took six months to get going. On the night of the first workshop, when I arrived, there were 14 people sitting on a couch. I had no idea what to do. I'd been told not to ask them what happened or why they are here, because many of them are still figuring that out, processing what happened.

"But I don't tell stories in my work anyway, so we started with some simple breathing exercises I'd learned when working with Meredith [Monk] and Pablo [Vela]. I also remembered a movement from Anna Sokolow, lifting the arms slowly higher and higher. One woman

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kept lifting, lifting, and finally released this great sigh. It was a powerful moment."

Scott explained, "We are not making victim art."

The work was built around the things that the participants in the workshop came up with.

"It is a political thing using non-trained dancers and finding the aesthetic in what they do," he said. "I was genuinely inspired by the beautiful movements people were making. It's an instance where watching them try to make a straight line is much more interesting than the straight line."

In "Fall and Recover" the dancers find others there to support them when they lose their balance. The movement, explained Scott, is characterized by "things that enable, things that don't involve conflict, and being empowered by the group."

In one section of the work, each performer speaks in his or her native language.

"As we were pulling the strings together for the first performance," Scott recalled, one of the performers got a cell phone call, and switched from speaking English, her second language, into her own language, speaking much more freely, quickly, musically. That moment was one of many revelations for the choreographer during the project.

After the 1990s peace accord with the British, Ireland's economic boom began attracting immigrants to the Emerald Isle. Many came from Africa seeking political asylum, but the system was being abused, and even then only the elites could afford to pay the high prices of getting transported across borders — sometimes as high as \$35,000 Euros, according to Scott. So deportations began,

including forcing out parents of Irish-born children.

"People think of Ireland and they think of Riverdance," he lamented. "These dancers come from Kampala, Iran, Luanda, Togo, Romania, and Eastern Europe. They have kids who are Irish, and they now identify as Irish."

Scott wasn't aware of the enormous challenges facing refugees of torture when first contacted by SPIRASI, a group that works with disadvantaged migrant groups, especially torture survivors.

"Most of them, I don't know their personal stories, but one or two I got involved with immigration when it got rough," Scott explained. "And the bureaucracy still imprisons them. One dancer can't come — the Irish government wants her to get a passport from her home country. Of course, if she does that, she can be sent back."

Scott also said that while many of the participants are devoutly religious, they have been accepting of his being gay.

"There's always more progress to be made," Scott acknowledged about the homophobia people learn and the widespread fear of coming out in many places.

At the end of "Fall and Recover," the performers lie down on the stage and outline their bodies with salt. When they stand up and exit, they leave their outlines on the ground, a poignant and lingering image in a work in which the performers embody expressions of home and community — old and new, lost and found.

Rossa Ó Snodaigh will accompany the performances with live music. Visual art by former child soldiers from Uganda will be displayed in the La MaMa gallery in conjunction with the performances.