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THE WESTSIDER

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DANCE

Great Scott

Working with immigrants, John Scott choreographs the new Irish experience

BY SUSAN REITER

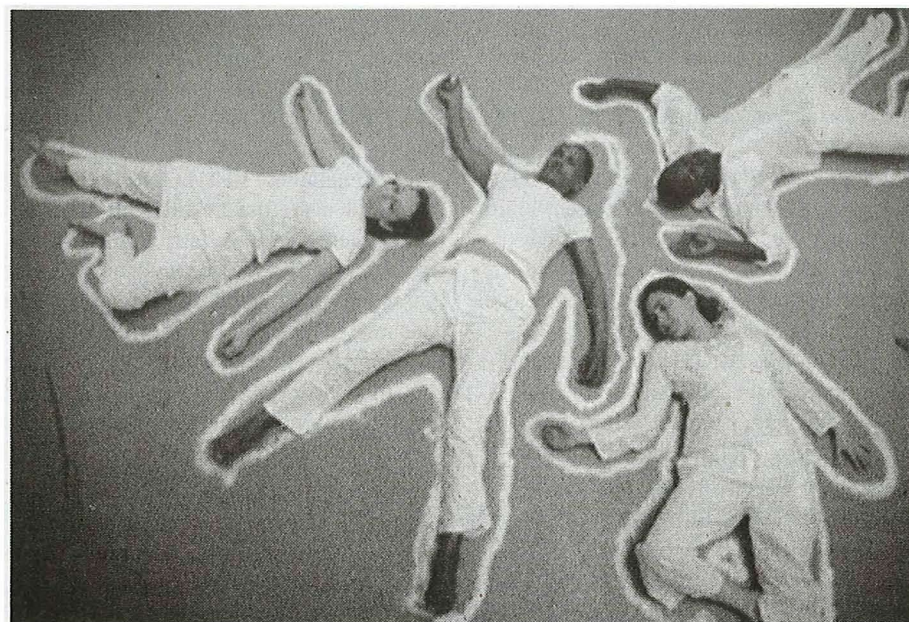
John Scott studied with the legendary Living Theater founders Judith Malina and Julian Beck. He trained with Meredith Monk's performers and performed in a revival of her *Quarry*. Earlier, he had taken a stab at a ballet career, apprenticing with Dublin City Ballet, before founding his own company, Irish Modern Dance Theatre, in 1990. But none of this varied background quite prepared him for his 2003 encounter with 10 people at Dublin's Centre for Care for Survivors of Torture, where he had been invited to lead a dance workshop.

Scott hadn't known the Centre existed, nor realized the extent to which it was needed in his native country. "I thought there couldn't be people in Ireland who've been tortured," he says. But, as he discovered, there were plenty of people in need of the Centre's services, which included doctors and counselors. "Particularly after 9/11, America's doors started closing, and people were desperate. With the dreadful things happening in places like Congo, Uganda and Sudan, the floodgates were opening. Other countries would get big waves of refugees; Ireland would get little trickles. We had a law for a long time that gave citizenship rights to anybody born in Ireland. Now the number of asylum-seekers has leveled off, because the immigration law has become draconian. They are deporting people very quickly, and also imprisoning people when they come."

Many of those who made it to Ireland bore the physical and psychic scars of having been tortured, and at the Centre, specialists understood what they had been through. Scott was brought in so that they might find further healing through movement. "I went there initially to do

four workshops and maybe make a five-minute sketch to show at the end, for their own benefit," recalls the fast-talking, ebullient choreographer. He began with improvisation exercises he'd learned from Monk. "I told them, 'My work does not tell stories, and does not deal directly with issues. I deal with feelings and with abstract elements. If you want to say or do anything, you're very free to do it. I will never ask you what it means, but I will help you express whatever you need to express.' One of them told me, two years later, that when I said that, they felt safe. One of them said that in the workshop, when you fell, somebody caught you. They didn't feel alone anymore.

"After working with them for a year, I decided I had to make a piece, because what I was experiencing in the room was giving me goose bumps." He describes the simple power of a Ugandan woman's arm movements: "She was dancing with every ounce of her being." He recalls how, through breathing and improvisation, an initially stiff Angolan soldier "began flying around the room like a bird." A young Sudanese shepherd suddenly revealed a "phenomenal natural jump." Scott brought in two dancers from his company "to hold the choreography together if necessary," and eventually *Fall and Recover* (an allusion to Doris Humphrey's innovative breath-based modern dance technique, as well as the performers' experiences) took shape. "It kind of made itself," Scott recalls with some amazement. He worked from simple exercises, "but the power of what they were doing—when we put it on stage, it became this ritual about their existence." Rossa O'Snodaigh provided an atmospheric original score.



Dancers in a scene from John Scott's work.

Scott planned just two performances for the Centre's clients in June 2004. But the word got out, lines formed, and there were repeat performances followed by tours all over Ireland. Finally, after a year, Scott moved on to his next project, but several of the Centre's clients continued working with him. In 2009, Laurie Uprichard, a longtime figure in New York's Downtown dance scene who now directs the Dublin Dance Festival, invited Scott to present *Fall and Recover* at the festival, and it got a new life. Its impact there led producers at La MaMa to present it here, and it opens March 25 for a two-week run.

The cast will include many of those original 2003 workshop participants, as well as some newer clients of the Centre. The youngest is a 17-year-old from Nigeria, who hopes to train as a dancer. Among the nations represented are Togo, Uganda,

Iran, Romania, Cameroon and Angola. Two members of the Irish Modern Dance Theatre will join them.

"Most of the original clients I met eight years ago now have full Irish citizenship," Scott reports happily. But there are also some he would have brought to perform, but who have not yet been granted asylum, and thus couldn't travel. (As it is, visa issues delayed the La MaMa engagement by a week.) The *Fall and Recover* performances are part of Imagine Ireland, a yearlong festival of events around the USA. Clearly, they will offer an entirely new and unique idea of what Irish dancing can be. ☒

Fall and Recover

March 25–April 9, La MaMa's Eilen Stewart Theater, 66 E. 4th St. (betw. 2nd Ave. & Bowery), 212-475-7710; \$25.