

Choreographers are renowned for their abstract approach — yet the Dublin Dance Festival will show they are not afraid to tackle thorny issues, says Eithne Shortall

When David Bolger was 12 years old, a woman from his south Dublin neighbourhood went missing. He didn't know her, but he knew where she had made her last known phone call, and the bus stop where she was last seen getting onto the No 18. He remembers the adults speaking in a grave tone, and the profound effect that the disappearance had on the community.

As an adult, the choreographer set up home near Haddington Road. He regularly passes the spot where Trevor Deely, a 22-year-old bank worker, was last seen in December 2000. How, he wonders, in an age of so much CCTV, social media and technology, can people just vanish?

"Sometimes I see those 'missing' posters and I build this picture of the person from their image," says the choreographer. "Over time, with the weather, I was really noticing the posters fading. That got me to ask the question: if no one misses you, are you missing?"

"I put this question into my head and said, 'I'm going to start researching this subject.' It's something that's been about in my life and yet I didn't know an awful lot about it."

Bolger discovered that a lot of people disappear — some 7,000 are recorded in Ireland annually — and that not a lot of art is made about it. The founder of Coiscéim dance company and one of Ireland's most successful choreographers, he decided to tackle the subject in a duet for this month's Dublin Dance Festival.

"It is a moving piece and some of it is quite devastating, because it is a devastating topic," he says of *Missing*. "We're

also looking at the idea of ritual and closure. One of the key things you hear from families of missing people is that sense of no closure. They're always left wondering, what happened? What if? If a family member of mine died, yes it's devastating, but there's a ritual of burial and a conclusion in some way.

"With this subject matter there seems to be no end — and emotionally that must be hugely traumatic. We've worked a lot on the emotion and there are some small pieces of text in the show, which was necessary just to do cold hard facts. I thought that was important."

In its declared intent, *Missing* sits well with previous pieces Bolger has made about the Irish famine and obsessive compulsive disorder. Yet such a forthright approach is rare in contemporary dance. Part of what accompanies the medium — as with all abstract art forms — is the liberty not to define the work, and many choreographers embrace this.

Philip Connaughton moved from dancer to choreographer two years ago and still finds it difficult to pin down his

work. *Mortuus Est Philippus*, his piece for the Dublin festival, is best described as "living in the place where decisions are made". He believes the abstract component is what's beautiful about contemporary dance. Yet Connaughton says he has seen audiences freak out while watching the medium — a disproportionate reaction caused by discomfort with the human body and a dependence on narrative arcs.

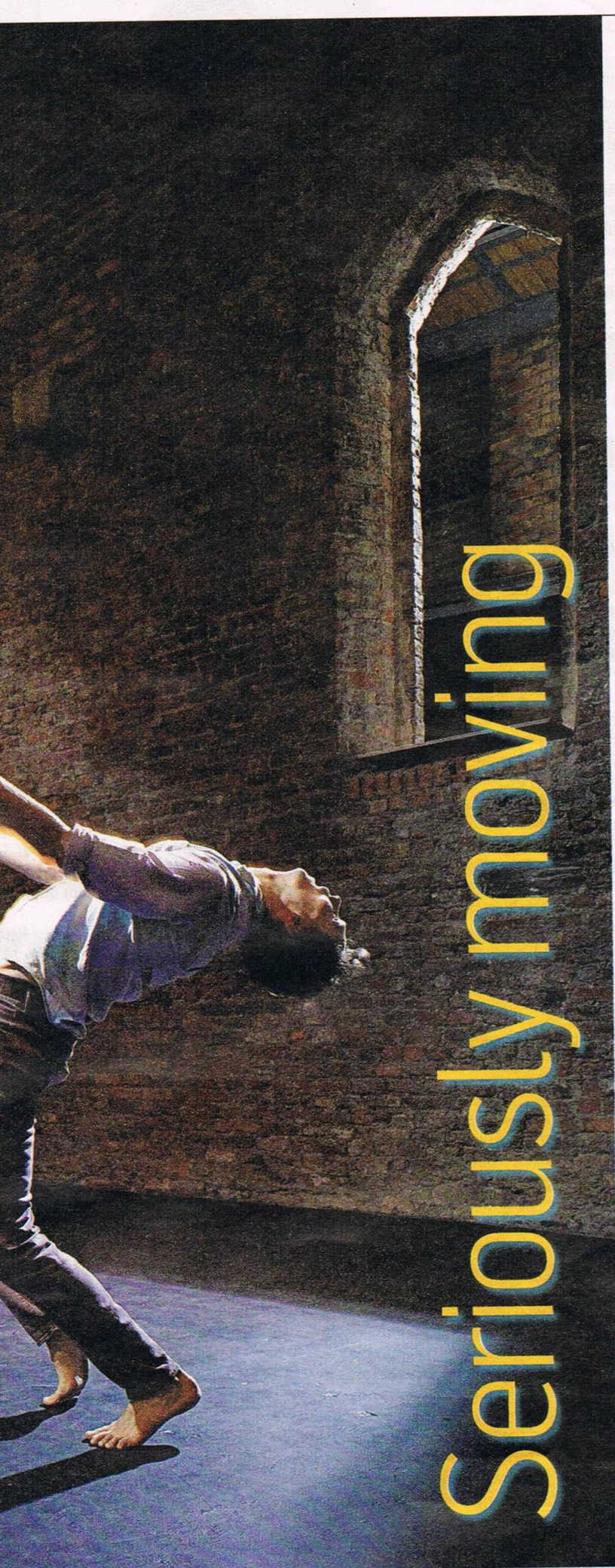
"We're so conditioned to have a beginning, middle and end in everything. It's much more interesting if we learn not to do that all the time," he says. "In the area of dance, contemporary dance has been the one to show people that's a possibility. Something can be moving and beautiful just for the sake of it. It doesn't have to have a narrative. We all find our own narrative anyway."

Which doesn't mean there aren't weighty issues behind ambiguous pieces. Connaughton's first choreographed dance work was *Embodiment*, which had its premiere two years ago. The dancer's aunt had just died of Parkinson's disease and that inspired a piece about how one movement influences another. Yet Connaughton didn't tell his audiences about the illness — he didn't feel it was important. "I felt it would be almost compromising myself if I said, 'This piece is about Parkinson's,'" he says. "I mentioned it was a study about placing one movement on top of another, and as an audience member you can take what you need out of that."

"You can decide two ways about it," acknowledges Bolger, who has included some equivocal components in *Missing*. "I always want to connect my dances

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Disappearing act: David Bolger tackles the subject of missing people

with stories. That's where I start. I always research, no matter what subject matter I'm doing."

Liz Roche believes the act of dancing is automatically tackling a social issue. While it might not be as significant in other countries, the freedom of the body needs to be addressed in Ireland. "We have a culture of being divorced from the body and kept separate from it," says the established choreographer. "Even the act of going to see somebody moving in a really integrated, natural, co-ordinated way might be a small step. People have constantly grown up with this reserve and separation from themselves."

As Irish arts go, contemporary dance is a particularly international medium. Most dancers leave Ireland in their mid to late teens for training. If they return several years later, international influences swim through their heads. Roche, who has created *An Outside Understanding* for the Dublin festival, doubts whether people could identify her work as Irish, but it is assuredly informed by her nationality. Because dance is often performed without language, and can transcend cultural expectations, it travels more easily. It's a freedom that makes it difficult to be culture specific.

Dance has never been as prominent as literature or theatre in the conversation about contemporary Ireland and, while the low profile is natural, Roche says the art form has suffered as a result. "Even with people that speak when they dance, it's considered an art form that doesn't have a voice in that way," she says. "Somehow dance doesn't bring itself to the table, but it should be part of that conversation. We have a sense of working away on our own."

Bolger, who is particularly interested in Irish history, maintains the medium

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has much to offer. "To be basic about it, the body can't lie," he says. "Dance can say huge amounts in one movement or one breath."

"What it can't do sometimes is get down to details, but it can certainly give you layered meaning and several readings."

Aoife McAtamney trained and worked internationally before returning to Ireland in 2012. The choreographer has

found herself drawn to more political work since coming home. Of particular interest are issues around sexuality and gender. Her piece for the Dublin festival is entitled *Egg Charade*, and is about fertility.

When Nina Vallon, her Swiss partner for the piece, first came to Ireland the dancers had a different theme in mind, but one conversation over dinner changed the focus completely.

"We were talking about how

difficult it is to have a relationship being a dancer and choreographer because you're always off travelling, and then [suppose] you wanted to have a baby," she says "I'm 26. I don't have a boyfriend and I'm bisexual, so there's that whole other issue of, 'Will I end up with a woman or a man?' I remember when I was 23, I didn't have a boyfriend at the time, but my body was screaming at me to have a child. It was the weirdest thing. As a choreographer and dancer, I can feel the slightest twinge and my whole body became soft. I was training and quite muscly anyway, and everything went soft. It was like, 'I am ready to be impregnated.'"

The women became interested in the rationality around this and wanted to remove the taboo preventing people from saying, "I don't have a lot of money or career stability but I want a baby". McAtamney and Vallon visited an IVF clinic in the guise of a lesbian couple interested in sperm donation. They saw the stress that can accompany trying to get pregnant. Fertility, McAtamney concluded, is shrouded in myth and no two situations are the same.

McAtamney points to the programme notes that supplement dance pieces and how they provide a hint as to what the piece is about. She, however, tends not to read them. "If you were talking about making a



Right move: Roche likes to keep her work abstract

piece about, say, the Celtic tiger, you wouldn't get a script but you might get a paragraph and that's enough," she says. "Whether it's theatre or music, that's the freedom of art — it is interpreted by you. You give it out to be received."

Picasso said that abstract art always starts with something real and only afterwards are the traces of reality eliminated. A lot of contemporary dance is borne

from political concerns and personal issues and personal issues. It is the prerogative of the artist to confirm, neither. While there are answers, it might comfort to our limitations to know the pertinent questions

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The international response

In 2010, a dance piece staged in New York was greeted with much excitement. Political Dance Project looked at the 1930s, the golden age of American political dance, and in particular the work of choreographer Martha Graham. The financial crisis, slavery and workers' rights were debated on stage. The work appeared to suggest that the desire to put our woes into movement has since died out.

However, international contemporary dance has continued to throw up the occasional work that happily declares its social intent. Hofesh Shechter is one of the best-known choreographers working today, and much of the acclaim is due to his political subject matters. The Israeli dancer has looked at the sinister undercurrents in contemporary society since his career began. In more recent times the work has brazenly stated its purpose, with titles such as

Uprising and Political Mother. The kept its exact inspirations vague, but dealt with military dominance, tyranny, repression and governmental power.

All this made it the perfect piece to rearrange, supplement with local references and to stage in Derry two months better to approach the thorny issue of Northern Ireland's politics without anyone than by packaging it in the medium of dance?

Back in America, Paul Taylor did a controversial work entitled *Banquet of Vultures* in 2006. The choreographer identified one of the characters as George W. Bush and proceeded to take the president to task for warmongering. The reason for making a dance piece typically candid. "The first time I was walking on television, I did not transform," he said. "His walk is a lie."