

Stephen Petronio Company

★★★★★ Queen Elizabeth Hall, London

Judith Mackrell

Stephen Petronio's programme starts with a nod to his own past in *Lareigne*, a work he created in 1995. Set to a relentless electronic score by David Linton (introduced by a redeeming blast of the Stranglers), this abrasive, crackling piece is a snapshot of all we have come to know as the best and worst features of Petronio's style. At times its crammed vocabulary of stiff, wheeling arms, sullen kicks and ardent, lopsided jumps can make the dancers look like deviant angels, and its thrashing dynamic can make them appear trapped and inert.

Yet when the programme fast-forwards to Petronio's two latest works, both of which are set to music by his new favourite songwriter, Rufus Wainwright, an exhilarating change takes over. In *Bud Suite* the imaginative territory looks familiar, with eight dancers negotiating their way through ambiguous, sensuous encounters to the urban love lyrics of four Wainwright songs. But the purity and suppleness of Wainwright's voice seem to have unlocked a new lyric vein in Petronio. His steps embrace a more organic logic as arms are allowed to curve, torsos yield and hard linear patterns regroup into lingering, fluid shapes. If this is a surprise, the joyful onslaught of *Bloom* is a revelation.

Wainwright's specially commissioned score is a setting of poems by Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, arranged for his own multi-layered vocals and a live children's choir. For *Umbrella*, the 40 kids are drawn from two south London comprehensives, and their presence alone is terrific as they swell the volume of recorded sound to an overwhelming sweetness. But Petronio's choreography is on a rhapsodic high of its own. As it surfs on the waves of the score, breaking it into a spray of skittering detail or plunging deep into its sonorities, it doesn't flag for a second. Nor do the dancers, who give a marathon performance, and still manage to look transformed for the ecstatic climax.



Deviant angels... the
Stephen Petronio Company.
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Kenton