

'Bud Suite,' 'BLOOM' blossom

By Theodore Bale

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A few years ago, choreographer Stephen Petronio told The Herald that he had "some kind of interest in reckless ecstasy." That interest is still there, and particularly evident in his latest efforts, two brilliant and highly structured explorations of glorious music from composer and singer Rufus Wainwright.

"Bud Suite" and "BLOOM," both made in 2006, premiered in Boston last night by the Stephen Petronio Company at the sparkling new Institute of Contemporary Art. It was a historical event for Boston as well, because this was the first dance performance presented by CRASHarts at the Barbara Lee Family Foundation Theater.

"Bud Suite" is set to four tracks from Wainwright's classic "Want One" and "Want Two" CDs, each an emphatic rumination on love and redemption. The choreography, thankfully, is not narrative, performed simply in front of black curtains without sets, and the dancers wear cleverly deconstructed dress clothes by designers Tara Subkoff of Imitation of Christ and H. Petal.

"Oh What a World" was a startling, sexy opener: Two young men (each wearing bright red trunks and half a black jacket) offered a dense, somewhat tangled duet. It was as if each was desperate to keep the other by his side, realized with an athletic and passionate sensibility. A trio of women followed, finally moving into a duet when one left. The men returned for Wainwright's harrowing "Agnus Dei," and metaphors exploded despite the simple decor.

God, love, the physical body - these are big themes, and it is to Petronio's credit that they were conveyed entirely through the choreography.

"BLOOM" is an even more startling work, more complicated in structure - a quartet transforms smoothly into a sextet, for example - and set to an original choral score by Wainwright, who sings all of the parts. Some of the harmonies are as adventurous as a Gesualdo madrigal. The choreography showcases the extraordinary flexibility of the limbs, spine and head. It's mesmerizing work from two artists of sophisticated intuition.

"The Rite Part," an excerpt from 1992's Full Half Wrong, finished the program, a lesser dance that is of interest only in that it shows Petronio at the early stages of his present "reckless" and ecstatic technique. tbale@aol.com