

The Dartmouth

America's Oldest College Newspaper. Founded 1799.

Petronio brings evocative music and visual flair to the Hop

By Liz Ellison, The Dartmouth Staff Published on Monday, January 8, 2007



The Stephen Petronio Company performed two visually and aurally arresting shows of dance, music and poetry at the Hopkins Center this weekend.

The Stephen Petronio Company is not your traditional dance company. In fact, calling their performance "dance" seems like a simplification. It's more like a multimedia extravaganza, with a stirring combination of music, poetry and costumes adding additional dimensions to the dancers' movements.

The company's two shows at the Hopkins Center, on Jan. 4 and 5, both boasted strong turnouts -- and with good reason. Stephen Petronio, the company's artistic director and choreographer, has built quite a reputation since he founded the company in 1984. The recipient of a prestigious John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, among other awards, Petronio has choreographed and directed more than thirty works to date. The company has performed in 25 countries, and Petronio himself has garnered international praise for his unique choreography in the company's works.

Petronio's choice of music is nothing short of brilliant. "Bud Suite," the performance's first work, opens with a haunting, almost otherworldly humming: the beginning of Rufus Wainwright's "Oh What A World." I could listen to Rufus Wainwright sing until the end of time. If someone set to music the ingredients in a can of soup and had Rufus Wainwright sing them, they would probably break your heart. Case in point: in "Bud Suite," Wainwright sings beautifully about fashion magazines, cell phones and Britney Spears. He packs emotion into every note, and his introspective, affecting lyrics provided a loose thematic narrative that lent some nice theatrical elements to the dancers' performance.

Wainwright's original music was featured in two of the three short works the company performed. In addition to "World," "Bud Suite" included the songs "Vibrate," "This Love Affair" and "Agnus Dei" -- all beautifully-performed pieces of music. Now add a group of world class dancers and some choreography that's interesting and lively enough to stand on its own, and you'll definitely never hear a Wainwright song quite the same way again.

The dancers were phenomenal too. The company's dancers have trained at world-class institutions such as the School of American Ballet, The Juilliard School and the Academy of Theatrical Arts in Moscow. And it showed. Every movement was captivating and stunningly executed. At several points during the performance, the music gave way to a brief silence punctuated only by the sound of the dancers' bare feet hitting the stage. As beautiful as Wainwright's voice is, these hushed moments allowed for a nice focus on the dancers alone.

The performance's second work, "BLOOM," features well-known poems by Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman and the words of the "Lux aeterna," -- the Latin Mass -- set to music by Wainwright. A particularly goosebump-inducing version of Dickinson's "Hope Is the Thing With Feathers" was the clear standout here. All seven dancers shared the stage for much of this number, and Petronio's choreography perfectly suited the music's uplifting, near-epic nature. Lighting designer Ken Tabachnick should be commended as well. The contrast of light and shadow as the dancers moved fluidly across the stage created a dreamlike effect, as though the performance was all part of an enormous, ethereal painting. The dancers' costumes, by designers Manolo, Tara Subkoff and Rocawear's Rachel Roy, reflected a breadth of interesting ideas in the worlds of art and fashion. From backless high-collared shirts to matching halves of a top worn by two dancers, the costumes never failed to fascinate.

If the performance had a flaw, it was that the music was just too good for, well, its own good. Throughout the first number, Wainwright's lyrics complemented the dance without distracting from it. Likewise, the dancers' motions seemed to spring straight from the song lyrics, letting the audience hear the words being sung in a new way. Music and dance collided almost magically, with neither distracting from the other.

In "BLOOM," though, there were moments in which the music -- in no small part a result of Wainwright's fantastic vocals -- came dangerously close to overshadowing the dancers themselves. Make no mistake, this was no mean feat. But I'd be willing to bet that plenty of attendees left the Moore Theater just about as impressed with the spectacular arrangements of Whitman and Dickinson's poems as they were with the dancers and choreography, and somehow that just doesn't seem quite right.

Music, fashion, poetry and dance seldom come together so beautifully. In all respects, the Stephen Petronio Company put on quite a show. 