

the DANCE insider

Flash Review 1, 10-17: Reflections with a Twist
Living in the Glam with Petronio & Co.

By Nancy Dalva
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NEW YORK -- Uptown Tuesday night, at Radio City: the VH1/Vogue Fashion Awards. Downtown, at the Joyce Theatre: the post-modernly fashionable Stephen Petronio Company, dressed by Tara Subkoff of *Imitation of Christ* (the actual name of a "creative collection of social engineers" whose portfolio includes clothing design) and Tanya Sarne of *Ghost* (another fashion house). The packed house was glam, but the dancers were more glam. And none more so than Petronio himself, opening the program with "Broken Man," a new solo in which -- no small accomplishment -- his silky, noirish allure was subsumed by the really heartbreaking allusions he conjured.

Subkoff dressed Petronio in what the choreographer once, in conversation with me, amusingly referred to as "reverse drag" -- that is, in a dark business suit, or a version of one, with the jacket, half off, suspended by straps that looked like a car's safety belt. On the back of the white shirt were some cryptic graphics. Inside the black jacket was a blood red lining, the only flash of color on a somber stage. Ken Tabatchnik's lighting provided the set: slats of clear light stacked up in columns -- or towers -- on the backdrop.

To music by Blixa Bargeld, Petronio threw himself through a rich tumult of activity, with his usual pantherine attack. As ever, he was demonically lyrical, or lyrically demonic, swift, muscular. All this intensity was heightened by some charged gestures, as when he held his fingers straight out in front of his eyes, like rays, or symbolic tears. Indeed, this was a dance that seemed, to me, to have enough tears for everything. Petronio had been recovering, I'd read, from a broken foot, and from that you might deduce that the dance is about being broken, and in pain. Or, "Broken Man" might be about some kind of spiritual break, or a break with another person, or perhaps a break from reality. Somehow, with his jacket half off and his feet bare, Petronio seemed to have been thrown out of something -- a vehicle, a thought, a complacency, or, indeed, life itself. Somehow, he seemed to dance the movement and what the viewer was thinking about the movement. (That is true charisma.) To me he was not fallen, but falling, falling, as if from some place high, and the sight filled me with sorrow.

This remarkable dance, quite short, was mirrored, at the end of the program, by an equally sorrowful solo by Ashleigh Leite, who closed the new "City of Twist." Dancing before another set composed only of light projections on the backdrop -- at this moment a night city scape, at others a starry sky with dual crescent moons, a red sky at dawn, and more -- Leite leapt forth, wrapped in fringed white drapery that floated around her like feathers. She was not Petronio's mirror, as his dancers often are, but there was a similitude, as if she were his spirit, or an angel come to avenge him.

In between these solos there was, of course, the rest of the program. "Prelude" (2000) is a line-up dance where the performers grope (mostly) themselves in an orgy of solipsistic hedonism -- this being Petronio's signature attitude, for better or worse. "Strange Attractors Part II" (2000) followed. It's the Petronio dance that looks like gene decoding, or chaos, or buckyballs, or entropy -- something inevitable, yet difficult to explain.

"City of Twist" is a much hotter item, with the same expansive projection, powerful torque, and limited vocabulary, but more differentiated gender roles, and less interchangeable dancers. Subkoff's oddball costumes -- fetching black cocktail and bedtime attire for the women (her trademark is recycling vintage garments, an amusing gambit) and unfetching white dress shirts (plus one sweater suitable for a maritime adventure; hello, sailor!) and teeny underpants for the men -- give it a French loony bin flavor (reminding me of that old Alan Bates movie "King of Hearts"). The piece opened with a series of solos. Each performer appeared in isolation, as if dancing not in a theater, but at home, before a mirror. I felt like a voyeur, and I thought they looked a whole lot like Petronio even while portraying themselves, which is not a bad thing, really. The dance -- it continued on with shifting, strangers-in-the-night encounters -- transpires to beautiful silvery original music Laurie Anderson composed for the occasion. When he danced with Trisha Brown (1979-1986), Petronio had a memorable solo in "Set and Reset," which transpired to another wonderful Anderson score. Back then Petronio could blow anyone off a stage, though he wasn't rude enough to do it. Twenty-odd years later, he still has that power. A whole company of Petronio dancers, excellent all, is still not as compelling as just one Petronio, but they're the real deal.