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Stephen Petronio Company at The Joyce Theater, *April 18-23*

With the world at war in Iraq, the Bush Administration encroaching on our basic civil rights and a country teetering perilously on the combined abyss of Christian fundamentalism and Republican avarice, Stephen Petronio has offered us a precious gift with his latest creation *Bloom*: hope. It may not be the most ambitious dance choreographically, but Petronio's current collaboration with singer Rufus Wainwright and the New York Youth Chorus delivers an evening of rare beauty. In fact, Petronio choreographed a total of seven Wainwright's songs, including poems by Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman and the hymn, "Lux Aeterna," none of which is easy material.

It's no accident that at one point in the performance, Wainwright's voice reverberates and stops on the word hope several times. It's a bit of Broadway razzle-dazzle, accompanied by superb back lighting by Ken Tabachnick, inserted into an otherwise more experimental presentation. That may be one of the reasons that critics haven't taken to this latest presentation en masse—it doesn't seem as humorlessly serious, perhaps, as some other downtown performances. But they are wrong not to do so. Dance, like all art, should endeavor to touch the soul, to light both intellect and emotions, to transcend. With the New York Youth Chorus dressed in white men's shirts with large colorful flowers painted on them (courtesy of Tara Subkoff and *Imitation of Christ*), accompanying Wainwright's plaintive, primal voice, Petronio's dancers displayed the speed and frenetic quality that they've become known for. In the process they achieved an organic whole that was both refreshing and uplifting.

An anomaly in contemporary dance, Petronio grew up in a small town in New Jersey and received no formal training as a youth. He apprenticed with Trisha Brown, from whom he acquired many of his basics: the idea that movement can begin with any part of the body, that it need not be linear or "clean."

Petronio has taken these ideas in his own, unique direction, creating a type of "order out of chaos" signature style. In *Bloom*, Petronio's dancers moved off-kilter yet in unison, increasing their speed and "jerkiness" as the songs proceeded: the impression it left one was of a choreographic tornado gathering speed little by little until a final, dynamic explosion.

During the first Wainwright song, Gino Grenek and Tahng Dao each wore half a blue jacket cut down the middle, while they performed an elegant and difficult homoerotic duet. Grenek shone throughout thanks to his magnetism and virtuosity. Then the other members of Petronio's eight-dancer company came on stage and looked like puppets banging against invisible surfaces: one arm moved high to low at an angle you'd never expect, then a leg appeared seemingly out of nowhere in whiplash contrapposto. When you first see Petronio's dancers onstage, you can't help but feel that there's something out-of-whack with the movement, but it is in fact precisely choreographed, at once brittle and powerful—exquisite movement.

In the second half of the program, Petronio reprised his 1992 *Rite of Spring*. If Wainwright interpreting Whitman is no Sunday jaunt, then it's no mean feat either to take on a ballet made famous by Nureyev and Diaghilev, and which has become a classic among classics. Others (Martha Graham, Doug Varone) have tried in the past, to varying success. But Petronio does so with originality and panache in this tri-parlite presentation.

The piece opens with Elena Demianenko on her back, legs up in the air. The first minute or so of floor work has you wondering if you're going to witness an upgraded version of your exercise class at Equinox, but you're quickly disabused of that notion. As the Stravinsky music tenses, she crisps her feet with such energy that you are riveted to your seat. The entire sequence performed with legs and feet, works as a reminder that powerful movement can be delivered from an entire set of positions and body parts that are rarely seen. To attempt to describe the movement itself in detail would be tedious and wouldn't do justice to Demianenko's talent.

I have my doubts about the second part of Petronio's *Rite*, which involved the entire company, dressed in what looked like war fatigues performing under a light so harsh that it lent a brutalist aspect to the "ravishing" sequence and belied the narrator's assertion that "the woman being ravished doesn't really mind. The next morning she'll wake up and won't remember a thing." (The woman in question, after all, is to be sacrificed in the original story as part of a pagan rite.) The third part of *Rite*—the sacrificial virgin—was danced by Shila Tirabassy with rare intensity and virtuosity. With a completely black stage in front of her and one huge circular light to illuminate her body and white leotard, Tirabassy was a woman possessed: arms flew, legs came out and whipped back in like a coil, head cocked to the side, body bent over then ricochet-ed back in place. It was one of the most riveting solos I've witnessed in years.

An aside on Rufus Wainwright, whose music is so integral to *Bloom*'s success. In a world of saccharine-sweet, brain-afflicted pop stars, Wainwright is an angel of mercy, a songwriter of rare intelligence, a poet of the soul. His lyrics are engaging, intelligent, witty. Half-provocateur, half prophet, this modern-day urban bard had the temerity to set to music Whitman and Dickinson, poets most singers would cower from: everything from the syntax to the vocabulary and rhythmic structure make transposing them to music a gargantuan task.

It's also lovely to see a singer whose themes in the past have included addiction, erotic love, fundamentalism and simply the angst of everyday existence, come together with a choreographer of Petronio's stature and create work so inspiring: something you can take home with you and perch somewhere deep inside your soul.