

# The Sun

## Downtown Firebrand Gets Happy

Thursday, April 20, 2006

By VALERIE GLADSTONE

The Stephen Petronio Company usually hits town like a gale-force wind. Mr. Petronio's dances are so fierce and wild they sweep you up in their oddity and dark, engulfing emotions. But the famously provocative choreographer arrived at the Joyce Theater on Tuesday night with a program surprisingly touched by spring.

### STEPHEN PETRONIO COMPANY *Joyce Theater*

The program included two dazzling new works: "Bloom," set to a commissioned score by singer Rufus Wainwright, and "Bud Suite," to three Wainwright songs. The company also revived 1992's "The Rite Part," an excerpt from Mr. Petronio's "Full Half Wrong."

Mr. Wainwright's music perfectly mirrors the wistful mood of the dances. For the lyrics to "Bloom," Mr. Petronio and Mr. Wainwright selected poems by Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson and part of a Latin Mass. The Young People's Chorus of New York, under the lively direction of Francisco Nunez, sang them with sweetness and lucidity.

The members of the chorus — wearing bright white shirts handpainted with multicolored flowers — filed into the theater before the dance began, standing in front of the stage singing the Latin prayer, "Lux aeterna." When they left the stage, the curtain rose on five commanding women in the company: Elena Demianenko, Davalois Fearon, Jimena Paz, Shila Tirabassi, and Amanda Wells. Posed in dim light, they appeared like goddesses in a Greek frieze wearing short, billowy dresses of pale green, created by the ingenious Rachel Roy.

They remained motionless in their poses, their backs to the audience or curled up on the floor, like flowers ready to bud. The members of the chorus sang the words of Whitman's "One's Self I Sing" as they spiraled in turn across the stage. Mr. Petronio created layers of movement that continuously dissolved into one another.

To the phrase "Of life immense in passion, pulse, and power," the dramatic Ms. Paz spread her arms wide like wings and thrust out her chest. She curved her leg behind her in an almost impossible feat of balance, creating one of the evening's many lasting images. Gino Grenek, Thang Dao, and Jonathan Jaffe bounded in with springy jumps. Dressed in white

vests and shorts, they stretched their arms straight out and scissored them in the air, then paired up briefly with the women.

By far the most moving section came during Emily Dickinson's poem, "Hope Is the Thing With Feathers," which begins, "Hope is the thing with feathers / That perches in the soul / And sings the tune without the words / And never stops at all." The lighting, masterfully designed by Ken Tabachnick, bathed the stage in shades of pale green and orange. Ms. Wells stood alone, slowly lifting her leg to the side into a slow turn, before the dynamic Ms. Fearon flew in from a diagonal, changing the mood instantaneously. The young people's voices soared.

Through exhilarating movement, Mr. Petronio made optimism palpable, choreographing this sequence as if he were orchestrating the entire season of spring, urging new growth to burst forth after a long winter. Still, the joyous scene was not without a tinge of sadness and yearning.

"Bud Suite" began with dancers Messrs. Grenek and Dao, sexy and muscular in tight red shorts and halved white shirt jackets, facing one another on the barely lit stage. To Mr. Wainwright's song "Oh What a World We Live In," they leaned into each other, only their shoulders touching, and then lurched away, with one falling to his knees and the other lifting him to a standing position. Moments passed with them unable to stay together but still reaching for each other's hands. Mr. Grenek did a series of flutter kicks that turned into jerky movements, until haplessly falling into Mr. Dao's arms. Before long, the other dancers in the eight-member company swirled around them, creating a community of disjointed but caring people.

All this is enough to make you ask: What's this? Intimacy and tenderness from Stephen Petronio?

Mr. Petronio founded his company in 1984 and came on the scene as a punk artist who titillated audiences with highly sexual dances. He performed with the Trisha Brown troupe for seven years in the early 1990s, during which he loudly asserted his homosexuality and support of AIDS activism. But as his life has changed, so has his work. He now lives with his longtime partner in a farmhouse in upstate New York and has won enthusiastic audiences in Australia, Sweden, Britain, and France. Clearly his view of life has undergone a change.

Mr. Petronio started letting light into his dense and complex works with "City of Twist," a wrenching work created in the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001. The same light floods "Bloom" and "Bud Suite." Indeed, he has moved into new territory, broadening the emotional atmosphere of his dances. But he has not sacrificed the physically bold and idiomatic style that made him the quintessential downtown choreographer.

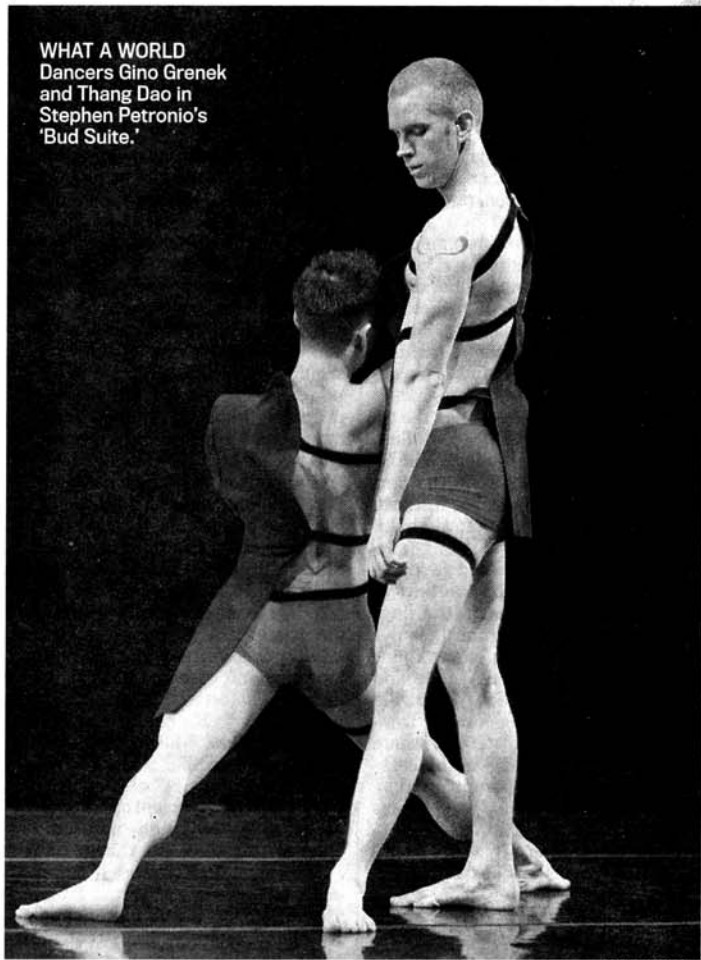
"The Rite Part," danced to Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," belongs to Mr. Petronio's earlier, more violent period. He created original, aggressive movements to Stravinsky's unpredictable and surging score — not an easy feat given its popularity with choreogra-

phers from Nijinsky to Balanchine to Shen Wei.

While the dancers often appeared airborne in the other works, here they spent a good deal of time close to the floor. They grappled with gravity and inner conflict. Dressed dramatically in black unitards decorated with ragged pieces of cloth, they reflected the harshness of primitive fertility rites. But while the work pulled one into its vortex, the final, riveting solo by Ms. Tirabassi went on too long. Or maybe Mr. Petronio simply offered too much to absorb in one program, a surfeit of riches.

Until April 23 (175 Eighth Avenue at 19th Street).

WHAT A WORLD  
Dancers Gino Grenek  
and Thang Dao in  
Stephen Petronio's  
'Bud Suite.'



FRANK THOMPSON