



New York Theatre Wire™

Theatre Dance Performance Art Music
Alternative and International Theatre

Captain Petronio on the High Seas

Stephen Petronio Company

Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue at 19th Street, Chelsea

April 28-May 3, 2009

Tuesday and Wednesday at 7:30 p.m.; Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m.; Sunday at 7:30 p.m.; \$19-\$49

Tickets: (212) 242-0800 or www.joyce.org

Reviewed by Jack Anderson, May 3, 2009

Stephen Petronio choreographically navigated stormy seas in "I Drink the Air Before Me," successfully bringing his new hour-long work into a safe harbor. Petronio is known for turbulent dances. But here he's created a piece rich in fantastic implications as well as powerful actions.



He took his title from lines by Ariel in Shakespeare's "The Tempest": "I drink the air before me, and return / Or ere your pulse twice beat." His eleven dancers did more than drink air, they let their plunging bodies devour space. Although plotless, the dance, like "The Tempest," did seem to depict personal tempests eventually resolved. And much of Petronio's visual imagery was nautical.

The curtain was up when the audience entered the theater while dancers rehearsed on stage. Petronio, costumed by Cindy Sherman to resemble a grizzled old sea captain, prowled the aisles and pulled on ropes as if adjusting sails while making salty comments to the audience. Then he climbed a tower as if it were a mast and perched there to view the high seas.



Two upstage platforms held musicians. Nico Muhly, the work's composer, presided over a keyboard on one; an instrumental ensemble occupied the other. The Young People's Chorus of New York City gathered on the auditorium floor at the bottom of the left aisle for a melancholy chant, then departed as the dancing began.

It was often a rough voyage, with spinning entrances and exits and many lurches that made the cast appear to be bucking rough winds. The torrents occasionally diminished a bit, as in a brief playful sequence that could have been a postmodern hornpipe. But the respite was only temporary, for disquiet resumed as blasts of choreography pushed people into squirms with trembling knees and shaking elbows. And one scene showed three ominously gesturing women who might have been the Three Fates.

All the while, Muhly's music for bassoon, trombone, bass, piano, viola, and flute made an exhilarating clamor, as varied as it was exciting. Here was more than unrelieved stormy blare, for Muhly composed many rich layers of sound. There were percussive rumbles. At times, he seemed obsessed by an endlessly repeated tone that stubbornly resisted being dislodged. And, given how both music and choreography developed, some bell-like

sonorities proved prophetic. Here was one of the finest new dance scores in recent years.

After many entrances and exits, the dancers returned looking slightly weary, yet undaunted, for they had refused to be overwhelmed by storms. Bell-like sounds now increased when the dancers were joined by the chorus ringing real bells and singing a liturgical ode for the blessing of a bell that declared, "Whenever these bells shall sound May they drive away the malign influence / Of the assailing spirits / The horror of their apparitions." The storm had abated; everyone had withstood it. Choreographic courage had vanquished horror.

Stephen Petronio Company, "I Drink the Air Before Me." Top & Bottom photos: L-R: Davalois Fearon, Mandy Kirschner, and Shila Tirabassi. Images by Steven Schreiber. Middle photo: Pictured L-R: Amanda Wells, Shila Tirabassi. Image by Quinn Batson.

