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Petronio's Springtime



Photo by: Chris Woltmann.

Stephen Petronio Company

April 18-23, 2006

Evenings through Saturday at 8, Sunday at 2 and 7:30 p.m., \$40

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

Reviewed by Jack Anderson April 20, 2006

Just look at our world: global warming, devastating storms, political scandals, wars, threats of war, unending disasters. No matter what the calendar says, this may be a perpetual winter of discontent. But at the Joyce Theater, the Stephen Petronio Company keeps dancing through spring.

Petronio has often choreographed mysterious and even disquieting works. Nevertheless, in these troubled times he turns his attention to spring. What's more, his dances do not appear to be mere escapism. Petronio's spring has significance.

Two premieres are set to melodic and occasionally slightly plaintive vocal music by Rufus Wainwright. The four-part "Bud Suite" derives from a male duet created last year that now serves as this work's first section. As performed by Thang Dao and Gino Grenek, it remains an eloquent display of vitality and tenderness by two athletically agile and emotionally sensitive men.

This gives way to a quartet with happily changing partners. Then, like the male duet, a women's duet for Jimena Paz and Amanda Wells honors togetherness. Yet the dancers avoid touching, letting their many unison steps suggest their union. The concluding ensemble finds everyone squirming unpredictably. Wainwright's score here incorporates bits of the "Agnus Dei" from the traditional Mass, which speaks of the Lamb of God taking away the sins of the world. The sexual undercurrents that flow through the entire dance suggest that Petronio considers sex to be not a root of sin, but a cause for celebration.

Some themes from "Bud Suite" blossom grandly in "BLOOM." It's no wonder that Petronio chose a booming upper-case title for this expansive ensemble to Wainwright's choral score to texts from other sections of the Mass and poems by Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Seated in the theater's left balcony, the Young People's Chorus of New York City sang with gusto, with Francisco J. Núñez conducting from the right balcony. Dickinson praised hope, as did Whitman, who called unseen buds "Germinal, exquisite." And he extolled "Life immense in passion, pulse, and power."

Reflecting these sentiments, Petronio sent everyone lightly leaping, twisting, swaying, and rushing. These were choreographic puffballs or petals in the wind. The ceaseless activity occasionally grew dizzying, and slightly tiring, to watch. More often, however, Petronio's whirligigs exhilarated. When, quoting Dickinson, Wainwright's score ended with vigorous choral repetitions of "Hope, hope, hope," music and choreography made me speculate that whereas pessimism may lead to despair and facile optimism may harden into arrogance (think of Iraq), hope may be a leap of faith that makes meaningful action possible.

There's more than fun to spring. That became clear in "The Rite Part," a reworking of a section from Petronio's "Full Half Wrong" of 1992. The program credits the recorded accompaniment to Stravinsky, Mitchell Lager, and an arrangement by Simon Rattle. What was heard were parts of "The Rite of Spring," some percussion and electronic sounds, and a brief perplexing statement about ravishment.

Spring, honored with effortless bounding in the Wainwright dances, here inspired weighted steps and much thrashing about, as well as a powerful concluding solo with paroxysms of thrusts and throbs for Shila Tirabassi. Although the action vaguely hinted at some sort of scenario, one never crystallized. But Petronio's use of the Stravinsky excerpts made me wish he might choreograph a complete "Rite," to any scenario he desired.

For all its peculiarities, "The Rite Part" served as a striking reminder that forces of nature can be forceful indeed.