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Hope Springs

Force that through the green fuse drives the flower

by Deborah Jowitt

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You turn 50 and move from Manhattan to a town north of the city. What happens? If you're choreographer Stephen Petronio, you do not go all bucolic, forsaking your gift for depicting what the *Times* of London saw as "the mania of the downtown New York scene." Even though Petronio called his two gleaming new works *Bud Suite* and *Bloom*, his is no easy vision of spring. Those buds have to crack the earth to emerge, and the blooms are wind-whipped and bee-stabbed. His eight stunning company members still perform as if they have titanium joints that they take apart and grease every night. Seldom can dancers fling and lash their legs high into the air with such speed and precision and still look fluid.



But both new pieces are a little softer than Petronio's usual driving, careering, hang-on-to-your-seat works, and he's set them to warm-toned songs by Rufus Wainwright and a new Wainwright score that employs a choir of teenagers. *Bud Suite* emphasizes connections between people, especially in the opening. Gino Grenek and Thang Dao are in costumes (by Tara Subkoff/Imitation of Christ) that suggest they're a unit: Each wears red trunks and half a black jacket held on with black bands. Even though—bursting into the air, legs flashing, feet beating together, bodies and arms whipping—they might be riding the fast train Wainwright sings regretfully of, they're also joined much of the time. Grenek sags into a split and Dao hauls him up. Often they hold hands while dancing furiously, and it's hard to tell who's tethered to whom. The lifts and supports don't seem manipulative; one man balances by leaning against the other, or clings to him like a vine.

Four women (Elena Demianenko, Davalois Fearon, Jimena Paz, and Shila Tirabassi) also function as a unit. They wear red trunks, white men's shirts, and short, frontless shocking-pink tutus by H. Petal with Deanna Berg (Petronio has always favored outré high-fashion deconstruction). Clustering, splitting into pairs, and joining again, they bring vaguely to mind the four cygnets of *Swan Lake*, but they're more discordant within unison, apt to look as if they're waiting to attack, and liable to melt. Wainwright may sing (on tape) "I guess I'm getting on in years," but these women are fresh and tender. Amanda Wells, alone onstage, looks as if she were twisting herself with a kind of voluptuous strain through suddenly thicker air.

The distinctive, fevered wail of Wainwright's "Agnus Dei" sets the dancers staggering, leaning, rolling, collapsing, reprising motifs, and picking up a litany of gestures Wells has introduced (while she sits, her back to us, in a pose suggesting meditation). Finally they fuse into a cluster.

Bloom, as befits its title, grows and expands into a kind of ecstasy. The sweet voices of the Young People's Chorus of New York City, under Francisco J. Núñez, intermittently float from a side balcony to join Wainwright's already layered vocals. The lyrics move from the "Lux Eterna" of the Latin Mass to two Walt Whitman poems to Emily Dickinson's "Hope is the Thing With Feathers," and the whole dance lifts and seethes as it goes. Here the performers' frequent one-arm-up gestures seem to hail the horizon, and Ken Tabachnick's imaginative lighting keeps changing the environment: Now it's orange-gold; now two figures dance into silhouette; now the air is bright and clear. Women in short, pale green pleated tunics by Rachel Roy stir the space around them, and the men (Grenek, Dao, and Jonathan Jaffe in green trunks and ruffled white vests) kite through like birds with a busy agenda. And that's just the first image.

This is a rich, constantly changing work, with the voices spurring it on, pooling it into quiet, lifting it higher. The choir chants Whitman's words about "billions of billions, and trillions of trillions" of buds waiting to burst from the earth, and the choreography has that churning force. It's formally very beautiful, with various pairs bookending successive central duets and the virtuosic dancing becoming more and more ardent. By the end two of the women have blossomed out in fluffy white dresses, and the piece all but boils over as the young people chant Dickinson's first word, "hope," over and over as if to hammer it up to the sky.

Perhaps appropriately, the evening ends with an excerpt from Petronio's 1992 *Full Half Wrong*, set to Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring." It's almost too much dazzling, high-energy dancing for one evening (with Demianenko and Tirabassi electrifying in wrenching solos). Spring comes with a vengeance of leaping and pantings and flying sweat.

Photo by Chris Woltman