

Stephen Petronio and Joe Goode Venture on High Seas

By **Deborah Jowitt**, Page 1 of 2

Friday, May 1st 2009 at 2:09pm

You wouldn't expect Stephen Petronio to host his own new evening-long work, but, hey, it's the 25th anniversary of his company, the wind is up, and change may be in the air. He preps us for the voyage that *I Drink the Air Before Me* turns out to be by roaming the stage and the theater wearing the deconstructed togs of a sea captain (fakey gray beard and all) designed for him by Cindy Sherman. The musicians who play Nico Muhly's score are assembled on a metal upper "deck," the piano that Muhly will play sits on a lower one, and a sail, hanging from a metal light tower, covers half the stage. With a helper in a slicker, Petronio pulls down ropes that slant from the ceiling to form a V; he also drills a dancer in the hornpipe, carries a woman draped over his shoulder to a seat in the first row, and grabs another, saying, "But first, a kiss!" As he hauls in the sail and climbs the tower to the crow's nest, he's muttering, "I won't be your man at all, if I can't be your salty dog."

But once this ship has embarked, he lets it run itself—and run it does. On very stormy seas and with strong winds. The title comes from a line of Ariel's in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "I drink the air before me, and return/Or ere your pulse twice beat." And speed and tempest (without and within) have shaped this thrilling work. I've often thought of Petronio's dancers as whipping through movement as if on the edge of unknown disaster, but never have they seemed so warm and so alive to changes in the weather. As always, they fling their limbs around—sometimes in unlikely coordinations; they spin and leap and beat their feet together in the air. But there's an increased awareness and sensuousness to everything they do. Muhly's score provides a wonderfully variegated climate for them. Just imagine for a second what an ensemble consisting of bassoon, bass, trombone, piano, viola, and flute (plus a little electronic help) can do in the way of suggesting—in highly musical ways—growling thunder, alarms, lashing winds, and calming seas. The Young People's Chorus of New York City appears twice to sing, and although it's hard to understand the words, I hear "the spirits of the tempest" and "to the ends of the world" in their final song, when some singers ring handbells that chime the conclusion of the trip.

Amanda Wells begins the work, trailing a long black cloak behind her. While two men in black raincoats roll windily on the floor behind her, she



stretches her long limbs and arches her back extravagantly, canting herself into slightly off-kilter positions. Slow and confident, she might presage the gathering storm, but her movements recur fleetingly elsewhere in the piece.

There are moments of calm throughout. Jonathan Jaffe sits down to stare out at the audience (then stand on his head) shortly before Michael Badger explodes into a tantrum of movement (the trombone quacks in sympathy). The others on stage freeze to watch Badger, then flurry to re-group and freeze again. In a calculated pause, Barrington Hinds grasps Tara Lorenzen's hands and leans her dangerously far out to peer over the edge of the stage and the imagined waves below.

In *I Drink the Air Before Me*, Petronio, more than usual, makes us aware of themes and how movements reappear in different guises or echo one another. There's cohesiveness and definition amid the lavish physicality and ongoing high energy. Many of the brief duets—Wells and Shila Tirabassi, Hinds and Mandy Kirschner, Lorenzen and, as I remember, Julian De Leon—involve holding hands in various ways through rapid, twisty maneuvers that sometimes suggest ambitious ballroom dancing running amok. The performers come and go as if blown onto the stage, as if the floor were tilting; they struggle against gale-force emotions—and survive through the act of dancing. The first half of the piece ends with Gino Grenek (returning to the company as a guest artist) in a solo that emphasizes his uncanny muscular fluidity and sense of phrasing. It's an ordeal about attempted mastery, I think, and he ends it by jumping off the stage into darkness.

When the piece resumes after intermission, the dancers have new costumes. Gone are the men's gray shirts and pants and the women's grey union suits, cut off at the hips so that where the legs might be are four little shirrtails. Now all the terrific performers (including Davalois Fearon and company newcomer Joshua Tuason) sport different black-and-white striped outfits (costumes by Adam Kimmel). And the music and the dancing seem more festive. The performers cover more ground—leaping, hopping, spinning, running—breaking in and out of unison, falling into quartets. Kirschner collapses downstage, and the others cluster briefly to gaze down at her. But that's just a temporary reminder that danger is always in the air. Tirabassi steadies herself in a solo, and the piece calms down in a pealing of small, bright bells. **Photo by Steven Schreiber, The Stephen Petronio Company, *I Drink the Air Before Me*.**