

BOSTON Herald

Pillow performance shows why Petronio is 'Man' of the hour

*Stephen Petronio Company,
at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in
Becket, Saturday night.*

By THEODORE BALE

"Stephen Petronio is a darling man," said Trisha Brown on Saturday afternoon at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival. "He has four snakes for appendages, maybe five," she added, inciting laughter from the audience.

DANCE REVIEW

A seminal figure in contemporary dance, Brown spoke about her illustrious career for about an hour with dance critic Deborah Jowitz. Naturally the topic turned to Petronio, who danced for seven years with Brown, before founding his own troupe nearly 20 years ago.

When he took the stage of the Ted Shawn Theatre later that night to perform his powerful solo "Broken Man," one could see that Brown was correct. His limbs are exactly like snakes, and the unique movement vocabulary he's spent years refining has become the basis for an emotional repertory of dances.

At the center of Petronio's world is a startling sense of compassion, though his individual pieces are hardly soothing. Rather, they slap you in the face with sudden direction changes, claustrophobic ensemble passages and dense phrasing designed to exhaust the performers.

The program opened with preview excerpts from "The Island of Misfit Toys," set to three chilling melodies by Lou Reed. When the dance has its world premiere later this year in London, Cindy Sherman will provide the set design.



THAT THING YOU DEUX: Members of the Stephen Petronio Company, featured at Jacob's Pillow on Saturday, perform one of their founder's works.

Pared-down excerpts shown Saturday began with a polished solo by Gerald Casel, then an angry duet in which a male/female couple's limbs are strangely amplified by the other dancers. The final passage is a daunting segment of chaotic traffic, emphatically stated.

The second section of Petronio's "Strange Attractors" followed. When the piece was shown last year in Boston, two enormous silver orbs by Anish Kapoor floated over the dancers. Perhaps the smaller proscenium at the Pillow couldn't accommodate them, and the result was more intimate, as if a microscope had been dialed in on one section of a vaster landscape.

"City of Twist," set to a haunting score by Laurie Anderson, served as the poignant finale. A series of portraits inspired by Petronio's transcendent dancers, it is his least slick and most endearing work.

Of particular note was Gino Grenek, who flung himself recklessly through the lengthy piece, oddly dressed in just a blue sailor's shirt and white underpants. He epitomizes Petronio's world, where people are vulnerable and sturdy at the same time.