

# Metroland

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## The Rules of Attraction

By Mae G. Banner

Stephen Petronio Company

JACOB'S PILLOW DANCE FESTIVAL,  
BECKETT, MASS., AUG. 16

**S**TEPHEN PETRONIO'S DANCERS move like characters in *The X-Files*. They're on a mission, but the instructions keep changing, and they don't know who's on their side.

Whatever the dance—*Strange Attractors, Part II*; *Broken Man*; or *City of Twist*—each heroic dancer seems to be moving in all directions at once.

Sometimes, they collide; sometimes, they even dance in unison for the briefest moment, but, soon enough, they punch, pummel and push each other away.

Petronio's dances, equally propelled by anomie and the will to survive, blocked out the pastoral environs of Jacob's Pillow and filled the stage of the Ted Shawn Theatre with a New York state of mind. Black costumes were the rule. Original music was modified rock mixed by James Lavelle of U.N.K.L.E. or beautifully eerie electronic strings and percussion by Laurie Anderson.

*City of Twist* (2002)—begun before the devastation of the Twin Towers, but completed in full response to that destruction—was the evening's main

event, and the culmination of themes played out in the dances that preceded it. Against a dark backdrop, we see a changing set of projections: narrow-slatted Venetian blinds, a nightscape of skyscrapers with windows lit, a velvety starry night with two moons (but, the blackout just happened—how could he know?). Dancers enter and perform character-revealing solos, then get together—sort of—to get each other through.

Gerald Casel, short and wiry, comes on in a shiny, thigh-length black jacket

over dollar-store white briefs, and does a silky, low-to-the-ground solo. Next is long-haired Jimena Paz in a black teddy with a glitter design on the front. She moves beautifully, sensually touching her legs and buttocks, sliding into strange poses. It's glamour, skewed.

Gino Grenek (who danced on Broadway in the male *Swan Lake*) starts in ballet's third position, then turns and turns, his long arms and legs extended.

After a group section in which people thrash on their backs, yet also raise their spines off the floor in what must be hope, Ashleigh Leite dances the final, angry solo. She wears a ravaged costume by recycler Tara Subkoff that looks like a torn macramé sewn to a

discarded white damask curtain. The fringe flies as she whirls and shudders.

The group does mundane gestures that are freighted with meaning. Punch your own gut to check whether you're actually here. Sort of salute, but see your fingers shudder. Put a quiet hand to your forehead and almost look at us.

Petronio founded his company in 1984, while dancing with Trisha Brown's troupe. He combines his own bent for fast movement and sudden stops with a Brown-inspired affinity for human gestures mixed with unearthly poses and shifts. In his new solo, *Broken Man* (2002), his hands, arms and fingers reach and twist, as if he's asking himself which way to go.

Dressed as a survivor of some catastrophe, Petronio has only his right arm in the sleeve of a suit coat that dangles off his back. It's tied to his frame by two leather straps. He steps this way and that, veering between defeat and defiance.

Well, it's not defiance, really, but persistence, the will to keep on. His final gesture, hands low in front, palms up, says, "What do I know?"

Though he often sets individual dancers apart from the ensemble, Petronio has said that he likes the idea of a group dancing and holding a common language. In *Strange Attractors, Part II* (2000), eight dancers in New York black turtlenecks and bikini underpants are drawn to each other like the moving magnetic points posited in chaos theory, but they fly apart soon enough.

This is a handsome dance, bearing touches of contact improv, but softer and more ensemble-oriented. The whole group may line up, like a numeral 1, then split into pairs in which one member puts a hand on the other's shoulder, causing the other to bend back, while the two circle each other slowly and warily.

Back to the line. Random legs kick out to the side. Heads pop. Fists fly. The line breaks. We see angry lifts, stony faces. Two dancers hold hands, a third breaks the connection with a karate kick.

The mood is emotional guardedness in a broth of sensuousness. The dancers are clipped and sexy, like lovers in a comic book. In the final image, three women stand deserted on the stage. The others have left them. Attraction over.

The evening opened with a preview of the last part of *The Island of Misfit Toys*, a work in progress set to mellow vocal music by Lou Reed. Again, Petronio uses fast jumps and human gestures, this time to explore guilt. Dancers reach from behind to touch each other in forbidden places, using the children's game of "making my hands appear to be your hands." People brush each other's hands away in moral uprightness and self-recrimination. This is a choreographer consumed by opposing emotions. M