Stephen Petronio's archive is a place where fashion and performance art collide

LET'S DANCE

Interview Stephen Greco

Photography courtesy of Stephen Petronio Company

In postmodern dance of the '70s and '80s, costumes rarely functioned as clothing, and still less as the garb of "characters." Instead, they helped make movement itself legible, defining form, intensifying velocity, and establishing atmosphere. Before the dancers even started moving, the costumes set the mind in motion.

For Stephen Petronio, who founded his company in 1984 after dancing with postmodern master Trisha Brown, that conversation was especially vivid. Across four decades of making dances known for their brashness, sensuality, speed, and ecstatic attack, Petronio often turned not to stage costume designers but to fashion designers — people accustomed to bodies in motion of another kind, walking through streets and into rooms, declaring themselves before a word was spoken. His collaborators included Narciso Rodriguez, Cindy Sherman, Manolo Blahnik, Tanya Sarne of Ghost, Tara Subkoff of Imitation of Christ, and Leigh Bowery, among others.

Now, after sunsetting his company, Petronio has entrusted his paper archive to the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, while evaluating possible homes for his collection of commissioned costumes and sets, now in storage in Cairo, New York, being photographed and prepared for their next life.

SG *Stephen, what are you doing now?*
SP Jacob's Pillow offered me a very beautiful solution last year, a touchdown, a soft landing — a final season for my company. Now I'm making a digital archive that will live online, and that has been very emotional and overwhelming and beautiful.

And it's not like I haven't been making dances. I just made a solo for Sandra Loring. She commissioned it for the love of doing it, and I made it for her for the love of doing it. That's a very different proposition from having to make one or two pieces every year for my company and feeling that if they didn't succeed, I was screwed.
SG *What is the solo called?*
SP *Leave Me Alone.* Maybe it was about me! Maybe it was about everybody asking if I'm retired. I mean, I've never uttered the word. I'm an Aries. How do I retire?
SG Tell me about the costumes. How did you begin to work with a particular designer?
SP I treat a fashion designer as one equal pillar of the collaboration. They're not just dressing us. My first thing always is: when



CANDY SAYS,
MICHAEL ANGEL



STRIPPED,
JANINE ANTONI



HARDNESS 10, PATRICIA FIELD
ARTFASHION AND IRIS BONNER



WRONG WRONG,
LEIGH BOWERY



FULL HALF WRONG,
LEIGH BOWERY & MANOLO



FULL HALF WRONG,
LEIGH BOWERY & MANOLO



FOREIGN IMPORT & CREEP,
BENJAMIN CHO



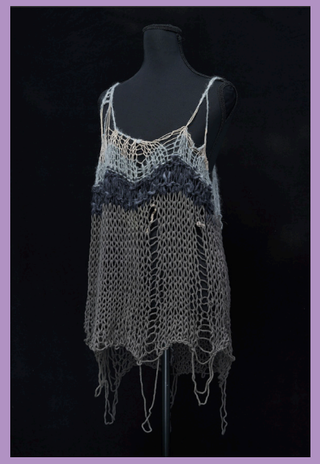
FOREIGN IMPORT & CREEP,
BENJAMIN CHO



FOREIGN IMPORT & CREEP,
BENJAMIN CHO



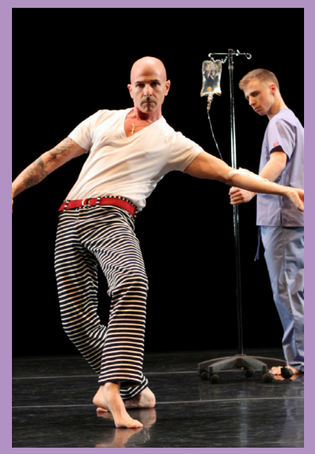
STRANGE ATTRACTORS,
TANYA SARNE, GHOST



ARCHITECTURE OF LOSS,
GUÐRUN & GUÐRUN



INTRAVENOUS LECTURE,
JOHN BARTLETT



INTRAVENOUS LECTURE,
JOHN BARTLETT



THE ISLAND OF MISFIT TOYS,
TARA SUBKOFF/CINDY SHERMAN



DRAWN THAT WAY,
MANOLO



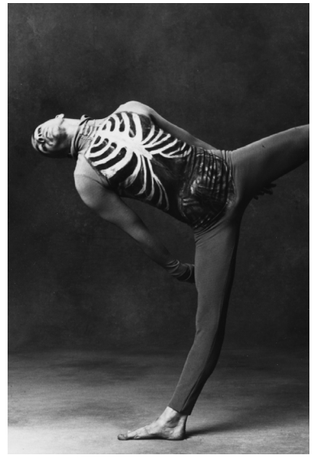
LAREIGNE,
MANOLO



LOVE ME TENDER,
MANOLO



LOVE ME TENDER,
MANOLO



THE KING IS DEAD,
MANOLO



THE KING IS DEAD,
MANOLO



LOCOMOTOR,
NARCISO RODRIGUEZ



CLOSE YOUR EYES AND THINK OF ENGLAND, H.PETAL



CLOSE YOUR EYES AND THINK OF ENGLAND, H.PETAL



MIDDLESEXGORGE,
H.PETAL



MIDDLESEXGORGE,
H.PETAL



UNTITLED TOUCH,
H.PETAL



BLOOM,
RACHEL ROY

the curtain goes up, the first thing you're going to see, if I'm not naked, is the costume. Before there's any motion, you're going to get some kind of subliminal hint by what you see.

When I was coming up in the '80s, fashion was a no-no. It had to be white minimalist pajamas or unitards. Fashion was considered superficial. But I have this [Andy Warhol] quote that haunts me: "Well, I am superficial, but I'm deeply superficial." I wanted you to see something spectacular on the outside. I wouldn't step outside in my sweatpants in the East Village — I might now, but I wouldn't then. You were prepared to perform at all moments.

SG *What were the practical issues of working with fashion designers?*

SP There are some very basic issues — like, what about the crotch? Can you bend your legs and kick your legs? That took years for me to impress upon people. My job was to impress upon them that there needed to be flexibility at the first chakra. And that's a good lesson in life. There should always be flexibility at the first chakra.

SG *Of course! What else?*

SP It has to be washable. It has to move. It has to fold up in a suitcase, because we're a touring company. How do you get the biggest look with the simplest costume? The only time I rejected anything was if it didn't work physically. My belief is that the artist is a collaborator, and they get to bring the best of themselves. If you want the best of the artist, set them free.

SG *Who was the first fashion designer you worked with?*

SP Yonson Pak. She had a store in Soho and was a friend of a friend. She brought to me the long sleeve past the fingers, which became kind of an early trademark of mine. She understood that it had to stretch at the crotch. She made the costumes for *Walk-In*; the piece I won a Bessie for in 1986. That was my first lucky experience. The most adventurous ones really got inside and built something for us.

SG *Narciso Rodriguez was one of those?*

SP Narciso was thrilled to build something new. They were basically like short unitards, with different colored panels. He saw that we were running backward and flipping faces a lot, and he knew his color choices would accent and confound the way the body moved through space. He saw the dance and came up with that solution.

SG *Was the dance usually made first, then the costume?*

SP There's no normal way. I always have a title. I go to them with a title at least.

With Cindy Sherman, the first piece I made with her was *The King Is Dead*. In the early days, all my pelvises were pushed forward. Then when the king died, I pulled all the pelvises back off the leg. It was more of a retreat, which is kind of powerless. She came to the studio in the East Village and sat there for a couple of rehearsals, and I showed her the beginning of that. Then she came back with what I think inspired her wrapped body parts, the mummies. That's where that came from.

SG *And Manolo?*

SP I did a series of works with him. He understood movement like nobody's business, and he understood that the crotches need to be free. For *Lareigne*, because my mother had passed away and it was named for her, he wanted it to have an elegy feeling. So, he made them all white, like handkerchief white, with very nude bottoms. He brought that to me.

SG Your work with Tara Subkoff seems to have shifted something in the way the audience could enter the work.

SP Tara came to a show with Sandra Bernhard. Tara really loved dance. She came backstage and said, "I could make people see your dance very differently." She said, "Let me make them people." Because my works were more abstract. Even if there was an emotional color underneath, or a theme, it was about how the movement gets made and how the movement gets infused with that concept. But she said, "The audience needs a hook."The first dance she did was *City of Twist*. She put all the women in these crazy little cocktail dresses. Her thing was taking vintage clothes and reimagining them. The women were sexy, with their legs super long, and the boys had their shirts flipped around so they looked like they were in straitjackets. There were these crazy men and these sexy women, and that piece was a very big breakthrough for us.

Then *The Island of Misfit Toys* — she made us all infants, putting us in children's colorful pajamas. And when I did *Underland*, that was amazing. She came to Australia with me and shopped through vintage stores in Sydney. There were army-fatigue scenes and Elizabethan sections. She really went through the history of clothes in that piece. I owe a great debt to her. She was wild and crazy and fun to work with, and she really did give a different look to my work.

SG *Were there designers whose existing collections you used?*

SP In *Strange Attractors*, parts one and two, I worked with Tanya Sarne from Ghost. Her work was perfect for me — Georgette, loose-fitting, washable. The line was already these clothes, and she was so busy, so she said, "Pick some stuff that you like." I picked tops and bottoms for the men, and these crazy, beautiful spaghetti-strap dresses for the women. I often don't use dresses, but these moved with the body.

For part two, she gave me these black, shiny, high mock turtlenecks and little black bikini panties, and everybody had the same. It worked so beautifully with the silver discs above us.

SG *Did anything ever simply not work?*

SP A lot of crotches have split. When people make a typically constructed pant, those never work, and everybody tries to do it. In *Underland*, Tara had a section with Nick Cave's "The Weeping Song," and she wanted to make them soldiers. So, she put them in these crazy fatigues torn up with blood-red scarves popping through. The crotches on those fatigues all ripped, of course. But she didn't care. She felt they should look like they were blowing up, and I accepted that.

SG *You've talked about the final season, the archive, the costume collection. Isn't there one more piece of your move to the next phase?*

SP Yes — a $400,000 gift to a prominent dance festival. I can't name it until the Attorney General approves it. It's called the Petronio Bloodlines Future Award, for young choreographers. I'm really, really proud of that. And we put seventy-seven acres up here [in Round Top, Greene County, surrounding the Petronio Residency Center] into conservancy with the Doris Duke Foundation.

I made some dances, but helping the next generation and saving that land is really important for me. UD

Stephen Greco's most recent work of historical fiction is The Woman Who Had Everything, *a novel of Elizabeth Taylor and the summer of love.*



BLOOM,
RACHEL ROY



BROKEN MAN,
TARA SUBKOFF



BUD AND BUD SUITE,
TARA SUBKOFF



BUD AND BUD SUITE,
TARA SUBKOFF



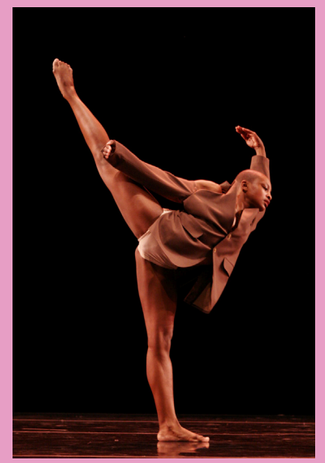
CITY OF TWIST,
TARA SUBKOFF



CITY OF TWIST,
TARA SUBKOFF



FOR TODAY I AM A BOY,
TARA SUBKOFF



FOR TODAY I AM A BOY,
TARA SUBKOFF



UNDERLAND,
TARA SUBKOFF