



REMEMBERING AMNESIA, FORGETTING AMERICA

here; solos are snapped mid-leap, partners quickstep towards stage-right oblivion, then rematerialize in spirals.

All these risky interventions may not work. The copycat gyrations of "Simulacrum Reels" (also on the Kitchen menu) stagger some. Such inventive rascality is not everyone's cup of tea.

But Petronio and his fine corps risk more than others dare. In a time when so much choreography seems merely derivative or just misspent, only Kenneth King has Steve Petronio's attention to surprise.

GROUP MOVEMENT

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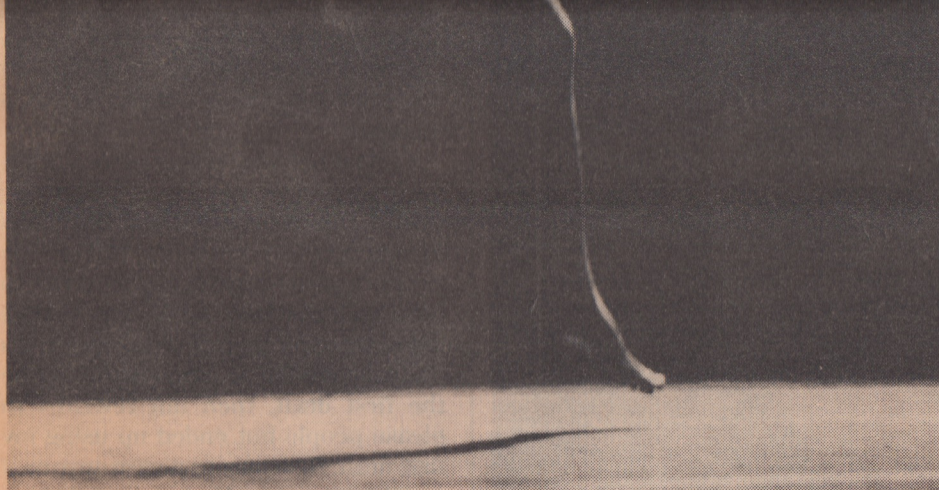
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session. Gordon wants us to share his austerity, wants us to hear the texts, consider the music.

BOWERY BOY

Sometimes the modesty is endearing. The strict grace of Valda Setterfield moving against a recitation of midwestern wrestling and Chopin would disarm the most cynical. Meridel Le Sueur's account of the eruption of lust at country dances is perfectly subtitled by the mannered rotations of Gordon's Pick Up group.

In the crime spree "New York" section, gingham-and-dungarees goodness does not suffice. Here Gordon, a New Yorker, seems self-conscious; his choreography looks calculated to appease out-of-towners' notions of us. Worse, he pushes the wrong buttons: his "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue" only reminds us of Balanchine's. Clearly, Gordon doesn't mean to pit himself against a classic, but his rough-hewn tribute



Stephen Petronio in AnAmnesia.

BILLY MacKAY

One critic said that Steve Petronio's dances don't develop, they happen. She's at least half right. Dazzlingly rapid, Petronio's choreography doesn't dawdle or plant repetitive clues that hint at significance. Sudden as a mugging, the dance is catastrophically there and constantly extinguished. "Those moments of being out of control," he revels, "are kind of delicious to me."

At the Kitchen last month, the Steve Petronio Dancers shared that delectability. Onstage they skirt chaos by subverting expectations. By resisting predictable trajectories, the company strikes against the grain of incremental choreography, dance that gradually accrues meaning.

FRONTAL ASSAULT

These willful erasures challenge spectators almost as much as performers. It's not surprising that one of these lightning attacks on the temporal lobes is called "AnAmnesia." Petronio's somewhat deformed neologism evokes, of course, a

kind of shotgun wedding between "amnesia" and "anamnesis."

His visual interjections are more artful. The movement owes something to Trisha Brown, contact improv, William Forsythe, and recollections of childhood frolics. Undancer-like abandon juts in the face of balletic lift.

With its percussive testiness, Peter Gordon's eclectic music seems a stunning match. The resourceful score never trespasses, but conjures nuances of carnivals and carnage, images of zen and xenophobia. Its massive electronic evolutions underpin the fluttering.

CUTTING ROOM

But what sustains Petronio's kinetics most is his sense of visual tension. Using quick counterthrusts and hasty exits as editing devices, he works like a filmmaker. Petronio knows that the stage is not a flat thing waiting to be filled, but a locus of optic muscles in torsion.

Thus, a rapid diagonal advance becomes a close-up, a contradicted zigzag insists on being seen. No preciousness

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Rigorous and quirky, the project in some ways resembles *U.S.A.*, John Dos Passos' newsreel-style trilogy. But has any novelist ever survived this much help? Gordon thanks scores of individuals and regional arts institutions for research and financial support.

But should we credit this to sea-to-shining-sea patriotism or to the vagaries of public arts funding? One imagines non-profit institutions vying to have their state immortalized on the boards, or artists rummaging through dusty archives, hunting for some endowable idea.

CRAGGY AMERICANISM

In any case, Gordon's national roll-call at BAM included "Minnesota," "New York," and "San Francisco." This motley triple-decker is sandwiched together by taped excerpts of Robert Frost musing on poetry. As weathered and gnarled as a Vermont crabapple, Frost's voice is sometimes danced to, sometimes not. Mainly, it serves as defining border.

Gordon uses frames to emphasize and undermine his larger fantasies. Years ago, he anticipated *Roger Rabbit's* 'toon revolution in his self-reflexive *Trying Times* and *Framework*.

But *United States* offers no featherweight themes. With Frost's rustications setting the tone, the dances unfold with the leisure of a practice

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Gordon's "Beowulfian classicism" (as Arlene Croce called it) is capable of setting off tremors of elegance. His dance with wife Setterfield is a touching reprise, as unguarded as it is premeditated. His tender pushiness re-

DANCE

mains speculative. I just wish he'd leave the Tony Bennett medleys in San Francisco, and remember what he's best at: smuggling downtown uptown.

BATTERED BALLERINA

One ballet fan accidentally called her Heather Nussbaum. Certainly Heather Watts has been New York City Ballet's battered wife, pilloried by the critics, overworked by taskmaster Peter Martins. With Stephanie Saland, Lourdes Lopez, Maria Caligari, Patricia McBride, and Merrill Ashley all on the mend, Watts has been stretching and pretzeling even more than usual. The NYCB is alive and recuperating in its 40th anniversary year.

Helene Alexopoulos, Damian Woetzel, and Margaret Tracey are emergent luminaries; Kyra Nichols, a super-nova. Even with hobbling stars, an NYCB ticket is the best arts buy in NYC. †