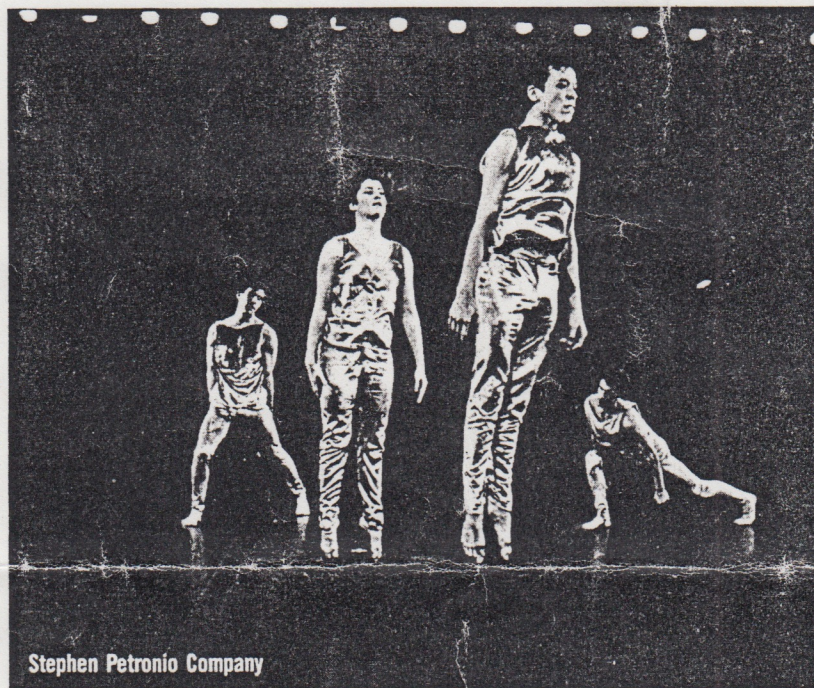


Thinking Feet

*Words of wisdom from the man with
"the fortunate body" — and other dancers.*

BY DONALD J. HUTERA

WALKER Art Center and the Minnesota Dance Alliance have joined forces this spring to celebrate the diversity of modern American dance in a series called Forward Motion '87. Each month from March through June, one ascendant choreographer/dancer will conduct a week-long residency in the Twin Cities that will culminate in a handful of performances. The series offers area dancers, dance-makers, and dance-watchers the opportunity to see some of the brightest, most inventive explorations of movement available in the United States today.



Stephen Petronio Company

MARCH: Stephen Petronio, dancing in the leadoff slot, is probably the most lauded of the Forward Motion talents. A reliable source on the international dance scene predicts that Petronio—a longtime dancer for the highly regarded postmodern choreographer Trisha Brown—will soon be as sought after as Brown is.

Petronio and his five-dancer company have won some attention in the fashion press, but he scoffs at the notion of being "in style": "I can't really worry about that. I wasn't in style for 30 years, so who cares? I'm still the same person. I have the same flat, work the same way, earn the same money." He says that he is both "laid-back and intensely ambitious."

Originally from Nutley, New Jersey, the 30-year-old Petronio now lives in a fair-sized but unremarkable apartment on bustling, hustling St. Mark's Place in the East Village of Manhattan. He suggests a dark, adult, New Wave Dennis the Menace, with

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lanky black hair that rises in a crest before it casually breaks over the side of his head. As he shows me videos of his company, he talks fluently, with unpretentious intelligence, about his work and himself.

Petronio discovered dance at age 18, when he was a pre-med student of nutrition and the world's food systems. "I had a very unphysical upbringing," he says, "so when I started dancing, it was amazing to me: 'You're doing this with your body?!' " Smit-ten, Petronio obsessively took every class he could find and entered "a long, intense period researching movement and new ideas" with Steve Paxton and other rule-breaking improvisationalists from the Sixties postmodern set. He calls himself, today, "a thinking dancer. That's part of why I found Trisha so fast. [He joined Brown's company at age 22.] My brain was there, and my body was trying to catch up. Also, I guess I have kind of a fortunate body."

In performance, Petronio is loose and limber to an extreme—with a liquid, rag-doll quality that is reinforced by an explosive attack and precision. "I don't have a reputation for being incredibly virtuosic," he says. "The skill I have is: I can get a very obscure

idea very clearly in my mind, and my body is dumb enough to try to do it. I can make really fast changes and strange innuendos with my body that end up being virtuosic, but not because of ballet training or anything like that. For me, it's about having a very clear mental map and a dumb faith, because dancing is a struggle. I'm still uncomfortable with the persona of the dancer." (Indeed, even the word "dancer" causes Petronio a certain discomfort. He recently changed his troupe's name from Stephen Petronio and Dancers to Stephen Petronio Company.)

Of his seven years with Brown, Petronio says: "Trisha's a great inspiration. From her I learned how to go into a studio eight hours a day and really fight for what I want artistically. And before I met her, I wasn't memorizing anything I was dancing with the intention of reproducing it over and over again in performance. [Now all of Petronio's works are choreographed down to the tiniest movement.] Another thing I learned from her is: You just keep working, no matter what. I can never thank her enough for that."

Petronio's choreography marries intellect and physicality. "I make movement to have some kind of dialogue with my retina and my brain, as well as my gut," he says. "I find the movement by finding the mind. I can't remember the steps; I remember the ideas, and my body does the steps. I just have to constantly refresh the ideas.

"When I'm teaching really skilled dancers, sometimes I think they don't think simply enough about what they're doing. I don't mean that the movement is necessarily simple. I just think about it very simply: My arm is sticking into a glove somewhere, while my foot and my other arm are doing something else. When I hold these images

in my mind, it's not complex to coordinate the moves. When your body has a lot of facility that's caught in the dilemma of trying to inhabit several images at once—and the whole body, mind, and being are involved in trying to complete something that doesn't exist, except in your mind—I find that a real turn-on. There's nothing sexier than seeing an integrated body trying to do a really difficult task like that."

With his sexy, brainy brand of movement invention, Petronio "layers the body through space the way I layer ideas through the body." His pieces evolve through the gathering, filtering, and collating of images from television and magazines, art and entertainment, and firsthand observations from the street. "Often I work with very concrete images as a subtext," he says, "and

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then something totally different comes out. I'm really working from a moment-to-moment aesthetic, so everything is fair game for me."

Petronio's award-winning dance "Walk-In" is based on scenes of collision, impending disaster, and rescue, artfully juggled and reassembled. "The actual forms of parts of the dancers' bodies were taken from those kind-of-tense moments," he says. "I was also working with the idea of cohabitation of the body—two spirits fighting for the body." The title of the dance comes from a book of popular spirituality by Ruth Montgomery, who, Petronio says, writes of "highly evolved spirits who come into the body just as you're about to die—and take over."

One of the solos in the edgy, compulsive, unpredictable "Walk-In" is for a woman whose arm movements Petronio choreographed from watching TV advertisements, while her head and the rest of her body move with eerie independence. Another solo focuses on the back of a male dancer, because Petronio wanted to convey what it would look like if a dancer were partnering himself.

"Walk-In" will almost surely find its way into Stephen Petronio Company's engagement in the Twin Cities ("the breadbasket of dance," Petronio says, affectionately); so will one of his own solos. "I think of these solos more as character studies than dances," he says. "None of them moves through space; they're all done in one spot." He devised "#3" by asking himself, "How

do people behave when they're trying to say something in front of a group? How do you talk without saying *anything*?" His models were the likes of Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley, and Ronald Reagan. For 10 riveting minutes, Petronio distills the essences of these and other people's gestures and stances through his contorting body, which seems to be caught in some mercurial process of rapid-fire, sculptural mutation.

APRIL: Sarah Brumgart, a native Chicagoan formerly with Laura Dean Dancers, migrates north from her home in Dripping Springs, Texas.

Brumgart (whose work I haven't had occasion to see) is by reputation an extraordinarily lithe dancer/gymnast. She has compared her rigorous, improvisation-based solos (often performed sans musical accompaniment) to diurnal autobiography: "I move my diary as [other] people write their diaries: how I'm feeling that day, anything that's available as potential movement. I empty myself to let my body move the way it wants to move."

MAY: Susan Marshall, coming from New York, also began her performing career in gymnastics. She graduated from staging high-school routines to the somewhat constipated (her word) environs of the prestigious Juilliard School before branching out on her own. Marshall's company of six to eight dancers has been together for only a few years, but in that time she has created a solid body of work for them. "It's not like dance material," she says. "It's more familiar. I don't like to use movement derived from codified dance vocabularies because it identifies the people onstage as dancers, and you lose the chance to relate to them in any human, theatrical way. I like to use movement that comes from a recognizable source." And then Marshall says something truly *avant-garde*: "I like my work to be understood."

Marshall's dances—and her dancers—tend to be as sensitive as they are street-smart. Sometimes her movement, with its quick roughhousing and taut tussles, consciously suggests wrestling. "I thought our repertoire needed more takedowns and things," she explains. Her abstract motifs are interdependence, communication, and competition as she explores such subjects as sibling rivalry, female bonding, and ballroom dance.

Marshall's newest group dance, "Arena," was prompted in part by her brother's interest in ballroom dance. It's a perceptive, full-bodied, comic look at a kinetically delineated microcosm of humanity. "Ballroom is ready-made to be shown and organized," Marshall says. "It's a perfect medium, because people tell you so much

about themselves while they're dancing. The characters are so clear that you don't have to make them clichés. As a choreographer, your dance moves are right there."

Marshall is a bony woman with short, up-swept hair and an appealingly frequent nervous laugh. She lives in a small apartment high up in an old residential hotel on the Upper West Side. There, she showed me a videotape of her pithy, provocative piece "Arms." It's an intricate and accelerating duet for a man and a woman—or, more precisely, for their upper bodies, with an emphasis on the limbs. When I told her that the message of this non-dancy but very active five-minute dance is as clear as its effect is strong, she jauntily challenged me: "What's happening in 'Arms'? What do you see?"

"I see antagonisms and affections . . ."

"Yeah," Marshall interrupted.

"... dependencies and independencies. It's very stationary, yet it's continually moving. Its hook is: Everybody has embraced at some time."

"Exactly," she said. "It's completely understandable on that level. I think that's enough. Yet often people ask, 'Well, what's it really about?'—as if there's something else more specific than what you just said."

Marshall pooh-poohs the suggestion, which others have made, that "Arms" is a violent piece about battered women. It's easy to accept her denial. The male dancer's movement is masculine, and the movement of the woman (Marshall herself) is feminine—which doesn't mean that he wields the power. As often as she's fending him off, she's guiding him on in their relationship. Marshall carefully balances their harsh holds and actions with an underlying tenderness.

Amusement, Marshall says, is her reaction to a London critic's description of her company as "fast, sharp, and slick survivors": "That sounds as if we're real New York: kind of hard-edged, more like Petronio or someone. Almost a little chic, sleek. I don't think of our pieces as being chic at all."

JUNE: Rounding out the lineup for Forward Motion is Yen Lu Wong of Los Angeles, whose week at the Walker will find her producing a new work or substantially amending an existing one. Wong, who has no company of her own, will use a pickup company of local dancers.

I have not witnessed Wong's work, but this I can report: She usually eschews a concert format, preferring to enact her elaborate, ceremonial dances in public or at natural sites. Her aesthetic is to weave the strands of her Asian heritage into a new, universal fabric that is simultaneously joyous and holy. □