

Petronio: Shock wears thin

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EXAMINER DANCE CRITIC

STEPHEN PETRONIO may be one of America's leading postmodernist dancer-choreographers of the moment. And at its best, his work emits an undeniable buzz. But a little bit of that work, at least in its present form, goes a long way.

That may explain the patches of empty seats during the final part of Thursday's concert by the Petronio company at the Center for the Arts Theater, Yerba Buena Gardens, the first occasion on which the lackluster guardians of that institution's arts programming have permitted San Francisco Performances to penetrate the hallowed halls.

Petronio defines shock postmodernism for the moment. The crowned arms of ballet jostle supine bodies with raised rumps for attention. Serene unisons yield to confrontations with a nasty streak of sadomasochism. The industrial strength, pulse-pounding, gut-wrenching scores should encourage an ear plug concession in the lobby.

In the seven years since New

York-based Petronio last visited San Francisco (at the New Performance Gallery), he has become a much more accomplished and far less individualistic artist. The reason is generally attributed to his lengthy personal and professional relationship with Michael Clark, the iconoclastic British dancer-choreographer. After a lengthy build-up, Clark finally debuted at the 1987 Los Angeles Arts Festival, bombed megatonically and has not been seen on the West Coast since.

Yet, Petronio has maintained the gender-bending attitudinizing that now seems more dated than outré. Still, the fact that Petronio and his seven member company of disparate body-types attracted a large crowd Thursday (with an unusually high number of agenda-laden, quasi-dance critics in attendance) suggests he has caught the public's fancy in a big way.

At the last minute Petronio added for himself a solo, "No. 3," to the printed program. That consisted of "The King is Dead" (1993), "MiddleSex Gorge" (1990) and "Lareinge" (1995). Fortunately, it was all dance, some of it incredibly ferocious and terrifyingly



Stephen Petronio attracted a large crowd, but they didn't all stay.

sinister. No one in the name of dance flounced on to the stage and spouted inanities; and for that one can be grateful.

Yet, it was the undated solo lit so starkly by Ken Tabachnik that focused Petronio's talents most acutely. Lennie Pickett's saxo-

phone score is noisy and unrevealing. But the performer, who wore trousers a couple of sizes too big and planted his feet firmly on the stage, offered a stunning soliloquy about narcissism, moving only his upper body.

Petronio coquettishly pulled up the trousers to partially conceal his breasts. He caressed his extremities, feigned ecstasy and spoke volumes about a dancer's absorption with his own body. The viewer felt like an eavesdropper on a very private moment. And the viewer dared not look away.

Inspired by a death in the family, "Lareinge" was the most successful piece on the program in conveying a wide range of dynamics. There are moments in this latest piece when the dancers actually freeze in suggestive arrangements, looking upstage, before tearing off into a blizzard of motion. Ori Flomin led his barefoot colleagues in the prologue, stumbling in a manner that can only be called virtuosic.

The dancers all wear long white shirts, constantly regroup, sink into deep pliés. One of the women twists Flomin's leg until he falls

and rises again. He crosses his arms in an image that suggests religious revelation. "Lareinge," at least hints at a cyclical shape. The music — "No more heroes" by Gary Gilmore and sound by David Linton — is abrasive, therefore meaningful for many.

San Francisco is probably seeing "MiddleSex Gorge" (to taped nonsense by the group that calls itself Wire) a few years too late. When it was new, Petronio and Clark danced it together. Both wore corsets and G-strings and they were, reportedly, the zenith of trendiness.

But, with the break-up of the relationship, Petronio does the androgynous bit with corset and tights festooned with petals. "MiddleSex Gorge" concerns sexual role reversal. And, for much of the work, the women, garbed in black bathing wear suitable for Balanchine's "Concerto Barocco," twist, manipulate and abuse Petronio.

There are other men on the stage, all with bare posteriors; and they, too, submit to all manner of torture.

"MiddleSex Gorge" contains several potent images, but the effect is diffused by its prolixity. It runs for 25 minutes without any musical or formal justification. And the shock wears off quickly. At 15 minutes, it might be masterful.

"The King is Dead" drips chic. Artist Cindy Sherman designed panels showing semi-wrapped mummies and looming eyeballs. Manolo fashioned mummy wrappings for the performers, complete with trailing strips of cloth, which flap in the air. But Petronio never clarifies the relationship between the blizzard of movement and the scores, "Love Me Tender," and — so help me — Ravel's "Bolero."

Petronio continues at Yerba Buena through Sunday at 2 p.m. For information, call (415) 978-2787.