

Stephen Petronio Company



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by Jennifer MacAdam

I always walk away from a performance by the Stephen Petronio Company a little bit confused--having just seen dancing that made me feel in turns exhilarated, humbled and disturbed. But the mix of emotions I experience have a simple explanation: I am moved by the dancers' humanity.

To go through the rigorous paces of Petronio's choreography would seem to require superhuman strength. He pushes his dancers to extremes, and they meet the challenge. They execute the often complex steps with force and precision--speeding forward, seemingly without boundaries. Yet, sometimes they look as if they're programmed for self-destruction: some internal defect prevents a movement from being fully realized; their muscles rebel or their legs collapse beneath them.

This struggle with the body is the essence of Petronio's work. His dancers undoubtedly have greater access to their bodies than the rest of us. Yet nothing appears to come easily to them.

In #3 (1986), the third solo in his series of postural studies, Petronio portrayed a man who is perhaps frustrated in his attempts to communicate. His body is articulate--he can move so much of it and in such surprising ways--yet he stammers. His feet serve only to turn him to face another direction. Movement doesn't carry him anywhere; it ripples from one area of his body to another, stops abruptly, then reverses itself--as if taking back

what he just said.

Petronio continued to explore the idea of moving without locomotion in #4, which premiered at the Joyce. This time the result was eerie and uncomfortable. Atop a beautiful three-tiered Plexiglas platform designed by Arnaldo Ferrara, the four dancers--Kimberly Olson, Ori Flomin, Tony Ramos and Petronio--looked like tortured angels in Manolo's costumes of tattered blue satin trunks and rows of needles held across their backs by straps that criss-crossed over bare chests.

Diamanda Galas' heart-wrenching voice resonated in "Balm and Gilead" as the dancers moved slowly and carefully--sometimes in unison, sometimes in canon--perhaps afraid of falling off the pedestal or getting pricked by a needle if they made a wrong move. Their gestures, like sign language, told of their distress: one arm lifted the other by the elbow to extend a hand reaching for something beyond its grasp. I cringed as I watched these strange angels writhe in pain. The only interpretation I saw possible was that there is no transcending the body, even for those who suffer.

The intricacy of Petronio's choreography demands an attentive viewer. Clearly he wants us to notice every nuance of a gesture; every contraction and release of a muscle. The anatomical detail extends even to organs--as when the dancers trace a heart shape over their chests that points to their groins in *LAREIGNE* (1995) or when Gerald Casel holds his hands over his kidneys at the conclusion of his solo that leads into *DRAWN THAT WAY* (1996).

But recently, Petronio has been moving his choreography in another direction. Both *LAREIGNE* and *DRAWN THAT WAY* are more concerned with moving through space than movement invention. Rather than directing your eye to details, these works encourage you to see the landscape of the stage.

DRAWN THAT WAY was monumental. Underscoring the crucial role of composer Andy Teirstein's *Rhapsody for Boy Soprano and Strings*, the orchestra and singers also served as a set. Behind a scrim toward the back of the stage, the musicians sawed at their instruments in the shadows of Ken Tabachnick's moody lighting; and on a raised platform to the side stood the three boy sopranos, whose sweet voices seemed to float above the scene.

The music seemed to propel the dancers, sending them darting, spinning, reeling across the stage in groups of two, three or four. The dancing had an urgent quality, as if they were racing to accomplish something. A repeated phrase moved sideways with the elbow jabbing as if to say "get out of my

way." Weaving in and out and between one another, the dancers seemed to be engaged in an elaborate game.

The intensity and momentum of the dancing continually built up until, midway through the piece, it bottomed out. A group of dancers whoosh past your eyes in a blur of movement, then suddenly the stage is empty a few moments before Jessica Meeker and Casel slowly move in to perform a very quiet duet. It was the closest thing to tenderness I've ever seen in one of Petronio's dances.

Photo: Beatriz Schiller

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