

STePhen PeTrONio



THE STRUGGLE WITH THE BODY

By Jennifer MacAdam

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Photo: Beatriz Schiller



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Stephen Petronio: The Struggle with the Body

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With review of recent Joyce performance and interviews with Kristen Borg and Gerald Casel

Stephen Petronio's story is typical. The internationally acclaimed choreographer, who danced with the Trisha Brown Company from 1979-1986 (even after forming his own company in 1984), says he spent the early years of his life divorced from his body--more in tune with his mind.

"There is a fear about the body," he says. "Most of us have it ... I think that's important to acknowledge. This is where I was before I started dancing. My body was too primal for me. I didn't understand it, and so I was afraid of it."

It's hard to imagine Petronio the way he describes his former self: "a total spastic ... kind of physically shy." Compare that to his present-day stage persona--daring virtuoso--and it makes you wonder: How does someone make that leap? Petronio says he found his body in 1974, when he was 18, in an improvisation class at Hampshire College.

"When I started dancing, I discovered I had this whole thing that I didn't know about, but that had a whole lot of information for me. When I began to move through space, I began to experience myself in a new way. And probably because I was much more intellectually developed than I was physically, I became extremely obsessed with the physical. Sometimes I think of myself as really stuck in the physical world."

Indeed, if you look at Petronio's work over the past ten years, the common thread is an emphasis on visceral experience. Although his dances are generally abstract, they tell something of the myriad experiences available via the human body: Pleasure and pain, desire and repulsion, empowerment and humiliation.

With the help of his longtime collaborators, costume designer Manolo and lighting designer Ken Tabachnick, Petronio makes the audience acutely aware of the dancers' bodies. It's not just that their bodies are exposed--in revealing

costumes and defining light--they are exploited for all they are worth.

On stage, Petronio displays an attitude toward the body that is something between ballet's idealization and the more natural, realistic depiction in modern dance. He shows the body as strong and capable, yet admits its vulnerability. Typically, he designs movement in such a way that it looks difficult--even awkward--letting the viewer in on the dancers' negotiations with their bodies.

Less than two weeks before the Stephen Petronio Company is to open its New York season, April 9-14 at the Joyce Theater, assistant artistic director Kristen Borg conducts a rehearsal. Dancers Kimberly Olson, Gerald Casel and Steven Fetherhuff run through a phrase from the opening section of *LAREIGNE* (1995).

The three start out lying on the floor and slowly ascend, standing motionless a few moments before raising their arms above their heads and commencing a fluid stream of movement that remains stationary. They turn their hands in toward their chests and trace a heart shape that points to the groin. Moving both hands to one hip, they shift their weight accordingly, then roll through the spine to reach the other hip.

Borg usually dances in this section, but since Petronio isn't present for this rehearsal, she's wearing her other hat. "Let's try that again," she says when they finish the phrase.

"Kim, you're doing something extra in the wiggly-wiggly part. I think it's smaller than that." Olson tries the movement again as the other dancers watch--this time aware of a superfluous spasm of her spine. Borg asks Casel and Fetherhuff to show Olson how they do it. Olson watches. Then, applying their example, she gives it yet another try. "Perfect," Borg tells her. Minutes later, Fetherhuff is having trouble with a movement that doesn't quite work for him. Fellow dancers Tony Ramos and Casel jump in to advise him. Casel comes up with the answer: "You're bending your knee too soon." He demonstrates what he means. "If you start with your leg straight like this, then you leave yourself a place to go." Fetherhuff tries it, and Casel's solution works.

"My dancers are extremely cooperative," Petronio says later. "I try to set up situations in which the dancers' minds get turned on. And a lot of times when I'm choreographing, my body will make something kind of rough. The dancers come up with the solutions."

According to Casel, working this way makes dancing for the Petronio company an empowering experience. "Stephen's work is different from any other work I've ever done because he uses problems as part of the creative process," he says. "When I've danced for other choreographers, they've given you the solutions. Stephen doesn't really tell us how to do it. It's like deep investigation; like research of an idea. He makes the steps in the very beginning of the process, but they all develop into more of an idea rather than just steps. We get so good at a phrase--a straight phrase, we call it--that you can manipulate it and create your own personal variations. A lot of it is because he trusts us--he lets us do it."

"To be inside of [Petronio's work] is very empowering," Borg agrees. "Because you're being asked to do incredible stuff. Sometimes when we're working he'll ask you to do the weirdest things imaginable. The human brain would want to right away say, 'Oh, that's impossible.' But then we'll just try it and it will happen."

"One of the things that I've discovered is that the only limitation I have is the one I think I have," says Petronio. "I'm physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually capable of a much more elastic range of things than I thought possible. You reach a limit and you think 'I can't do any more.' And you think you're just horrible. And then you set up another challenge and you reach something beyond that. And it's very, very exciting. That's probably the best gift dancing has ever given me: It keeps pushing these limits farther and farther away."

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