

# Fast on His Feet

## Bad-Boy Choreographer Stephen Petronio Delights in Warp-Speed Moves and Sexuality

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**C**horeographer Stephen Petronio doesn't know whether he has the virus that causes AIDS.

It's not that he suspects he's positive, necessarily. He's robustly healthy. But Petronio, who leads a relaxation workshop for HIV-positive people today in Irvine, used to get tested every now and then but doesn't anymore.

"I just live like I'm positive," said the shaven-headed bad boy of New York postmodern dance. That means, among other things, living in the moment—an attitude that's apparent in the ferocious velocity and urgency of his work.

"It's part of where my interest in speed comes from," he said. "Life is short, and I've seen a lot of friends go, and, you know, you have to make your mark while you're here now. I try to think of each dance as my last one."

Petronio, 40, makes his Orange County dance debut Thursday night, appearing in all but one of four pieces with the troupe that bears his name. The eight-member ensemble will dance at the Irvine Barclay Theatre, which is also the site of the 1 p.m. workshop.

Petronio, a former Tricia Brown company member, has fine yet bold features, long limbs and beautifully arched feet that frame a striking, graceful stage presence—variously likened to Egyptian sculpture and a feline giving chase.

Along with his attraction to warp speed, sexuality has informed his choreography—particularly his own homosexuality.

Several years ago, he and his then-companion, renowned British dancer Michael Clark, performed a piece in which they "explored and celebrated every naked inch of each other's bodies," as *Mirabella* magazine put it.

"That was a very special time," the candid, congenial dancer said during a phone interview from his Brooklyn home. Actually, he added, he views speed and sexuality as similar dance dynamics. "You're not going to see illicit sex on stage, but you're going to [sense] the human being as high performance, and that's sexual to me."

Of late, however, Petronio has been focusing more on "architectural constructions" formed by relationships between dancers' bodies.

"The urgency or violence of speed is still very important to me, but I'm trying



BEATRIZ SCHILLER

"Drawn That Way," with Stephen Petronio, will get its West Coast premiere Thursday.

to create a still picture out of high-velocity motion. The [movement] hardly ever stops, but I'm trying to freeze the images in your mind in a certain way."

The new concentration can be seen, he said, in "Lareigne" (1995), and "Drawn That Way" (1996), both on the Barclay program. The latter, a West Coast pre-

miere, explores how we're all compulsively drawn to move in ways unique to our nature.

"Dancers have a certain bent, as I have a certain bent," Petronio said, "and I try to get at that nature by creating [choreographic challenges] that are so complex that the body has to use all its instincts to

solve them.

"There are many reasons for our physical responses—some are emotional, some are intellectual, some just physical. I don't really know how to separate them, and I don't think it's really my job."

"Drawn That Way" is one of Petronio's many collaborations. Cuban-born high-fashion designer Manolo crafted the stringy, post-mod costumes, and the trancelike music is by Suede, a British new-wave band.

**P**hotographs by contemporary artist Cindy Sherman inspired "No. 3," the 1986 signature solo he'll perform here as well. Her works were placed in the studio as he choreographed and are used in other pieces as decor.

"Cindy Sherman pushed me, and she pushes the audience, and I pushed her. We both got into uncomfortable situations in terms of being in unknown territory, and that's the fun, to get disoriented and then solve that creative problem. It's a very exciting way to spend your time."

The New Jersey native said Tricia Brown has influenced his work, but more so have his parents, although neither had any arts background. His father is a truck driver, his mother, now dead, was a housewife.

"I think of them a lot when I'm working," Petronio said, "because, I don't know, I think of myself as a dumb dancer—I had no exposure to art [growing up] at all, and I started dancing late [in college], and I feel if I keep that blankness I brought to my first experiences in art, and if I can still get a response out of myself at that level, I'm doing a good job."

"My dad once said, after he saw 'No. 3,' that he had no idea about what I was doing but he could not take his eyes off it," Petronio said. "I hold that as the objective."

■ *Stephen Petronio Company performs Thursday at 8 p.m. at Irvine Barclay Theatre, 4242 Campus Drive. \$26. Petronio will lead a workshop for HIV-positive people, their friends and families, at the theater today at 1 p.m. No dance experience is required. Free. Information for both events: (714) 854-4646.*