

Virtuosity Plus

Stephen Petronio
September 11-13
Dance Place

by **Suzanne Levy**

When Isadora Duncan prophesized in 1902 that the future of dance would reside in "the highest intelligence in the freest body," she certainly was not thinking of highly virtuosic dancing and she most certainly was not thinking of men doing it. Yet it seems the aptest of descriptions for the work of Stephen Petronio and his company. Fact is, these dancers can do anything with their bodies and Petronio has created choreographic worlds of which Duncan could not have dreamed.

When Petronio was performing with Trisha Brown's company, his dance intelligence seemed to shine forth, illuminating the physical and psychic space around him. Now Petronio has accomplished what so few great dance interpreters manage to do, he has created a compelling repertory in a voice utterly distinct from that of his mentor.

Petronio has had his own company for only three years, yet in that time he has gained attention as a strongly individual sensibility, bold and fresh and compelling in its oddities. After several false starts, Washington finally got the chance to see what Petronio and company are up to in performances that spectacularly kicked off the Dance Place's '87-'88 season September 11-13.

Since he first began showing his work—notable then for its emphasis on sensitivity and nuance—Petronio has acquired a cool, high gloss which belongs strictly to the '80s. The trappings are all standard East Village hip. The propulsive art-rock rhythms of Lenny Pickett and David Linton drive the dance on through waves of blistering decibels.

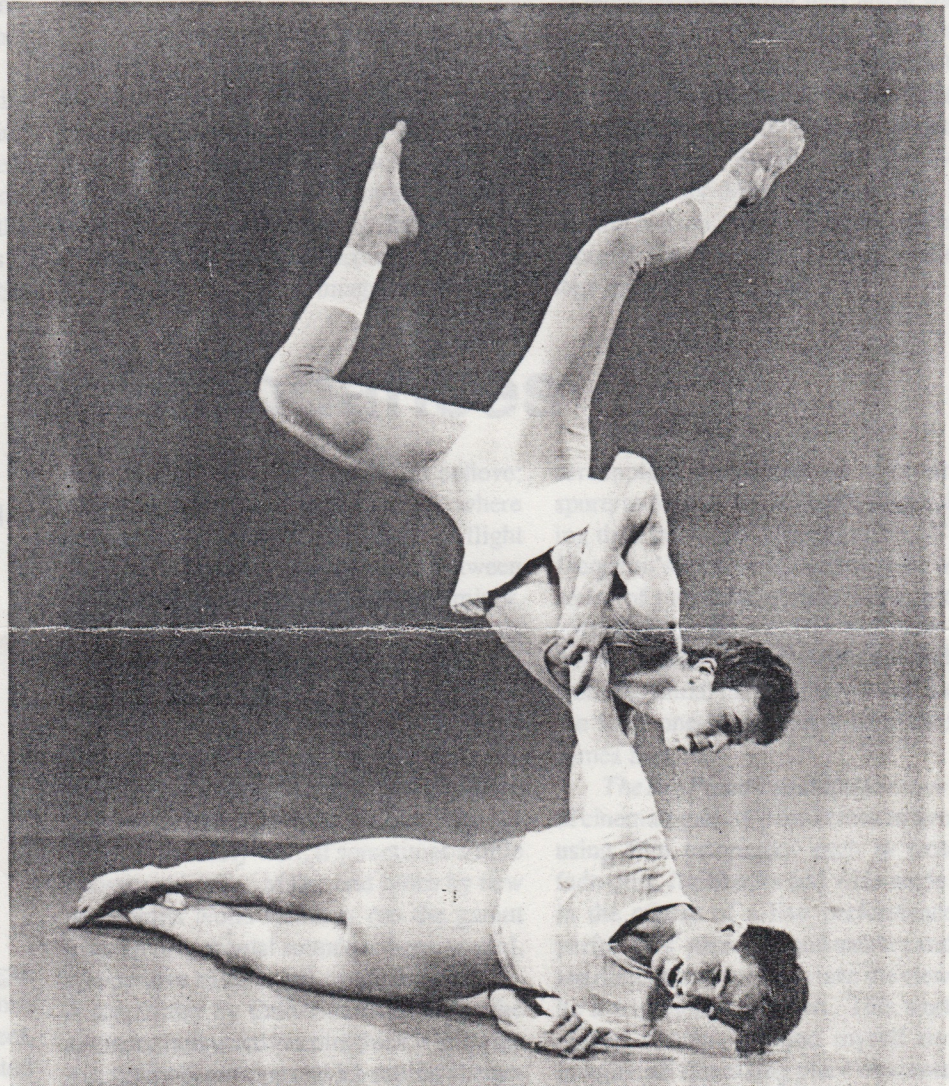
The costumes by Yonson Pak are downtown uniforms. To the pure black, white and grey of modernism are added

touches of gold lame—combining expensive chic with detritus—to identify it as "post" modernism. Like the choreography, the dress is unisex, with the men in full cullottes and the women in pants. (Further evidence that, in the '80s, *everything* is interchangeable.)

Despite its new wave veneer, Petronio's work is still loaded with a sensitivity to the kinds and qualities of contact people make, and an aliveness to nuance of gesture and the contact of skin and air. It is also, however, breathtakingly virtuosic—

completely fearless and fiercely radiant.

Petronio's work is set apart from that of other high tech companies by its spatial and rhythmic peculiarities. The first thing you notice is that much of the movement is successive, beginning in the extremities and flowing in toward the center (and vice versa). The effect is of movement curling and twining around the body, a look rare in the postmodern lexicon, which has co-opted the simultaneous, broad, flat arcs of ballet. The result is movement which seems deeply textured and springy.



Members of the Stephen Petronio Dance Company in Walk-In.

This curving line is the wellspring from which Petronio draws his solo, #3, which in its expressive imagery belies the anonymity of its title. Caught in a white pool of light, rooted in place in a wide open stance which exposes his inner thighs, Petronio's arms semaphore some desperate message as they form tendrils around his body. His body stretches out iconically hanging in the air like Christ in his crucifixion, then curls in again like a potato chip frying in hot oil.

Another truly extraordinary aspect of Petronio's dances is the syncopation and unpredictability of their rhythms. In contrast to the kind of freeze-'n'-go, musical chairs approach to rhythm that seems all but ubiquitous these days, Petronio's phrasing keeps us off balance. And this in spite of the strong rock scores he employs; the rhythms do not seem imposed but remain the body's.

This is technically exalted dancing, but it impresses even; more by its dynamic shading and gestural fillips. In Petronio's universe bodily attitude and arm gestures become signifiers.

A long and complex work for the entire company, *Simulacrum Reels* seemed a kind of East Village *Runes*. While Taylor went back to primitive ceremonies for his dance, Petronio finds his "secret writings" in the New York downtown scene which seems to be equally as violent and scrabbled, but

which substitutes ironic distance for a sense of community. Though we are unable to "read" them, the twining limbs form glyphs which seem filled with portent.

In *Simulacrum Reels*, as in all Petronio's work, there are no sex roles, and indeed, no sex. With its long, leaping steps and jumps that seem to go straight up, the opening male direct is sensual-gentle and curving and tender—without crossing the line to the sexual. The women lift the men much of the time and other notions of gender differences in movement pass unobserved.

This is not to say that the work is without its visceral thrills. There is a strong horizontal thrust to the choreography—unfortunately reined in by the Dance Place's inadequate width—as the dancers seem to forge trenches across the space. The work is filled with daring and risky movement which gain strength and momentum from the broadly planted stance of the dancers in repose.

Another Linton commission assaults us in accompanying *Walk-In*, a Bessie-Award-winner with family resemblances to *Simulacrum Reels*. In *Walk-In*, there is the suggestion of some kind of sublimated scenario as relationships take hold and then shift among the dancers. There are further suggestions in Justin Terzi's decor, with its images of political

heroes and villains and of urban dangers and valor, of a deeper meaning which is just beyond our grasp. Here is another male duet, witty enough to provoke guffaws, and a remarkable running solo for a woman which brings her as close to levitating as a human is likely to come without the aid of a guru. A repeated motif of arms held out from the body, bent at the elbow with the lower arm dangling, brings to mind ideas of puppetry or vaudeville schtick but it also has its own special significance within Petronio's language. In its insistence, it seems a personal pronoun, maybe even a definite article.

Walk-In, too, contains quantities of technical wizardry and displays of physical courage: hands are used as the base of support, dancers skitter, thrust and hurtle through space with unlikely quickness, crashing leaps seem to come from nowhere. All this danced by Petronio's company with an intensity suggesting they are at war.

Each of Petronio's company members is extraordinary, each of them fascinating in his own right. Petronio is nurturing a Tayloresque company of strong individuals—Kristen Borg, Susan Braham, Bessie-Award-winner Meg Eginton, Frey Faust, Jeremy Nelson, Mia Lawrence and Petronio himself. They are not "perfect" bodies, but they are perfect dancers.

Screen dances

**Yoshiko Chuma and
the School of Hard Knocks in
The Big Picture
October 15-17
Dance Place
and
Eiko and Koma with
CODANCO
October 24-25
Dance Place**

By Lisa Traiger

Yoshiko Chuma's evening length work, *The Big Picture*, presented at Dance Place as part of the Japan-America Project, purports to present us with a rose-tinted world view. The world is not as big and

unfeeling as we have been led to believe; rather, in today's fast-paced society, where one can as easily hop on a transatlantic flight as board a Metrobus, differences between people and countries are increasingly minor. Chuma's point is well-taken, if a little corny, like those five language cards you get from UNICEF at Christmas time.

The six performers (including Chuma) make an eclectic bunch. Some sing, one plays the sax and clarinet; they speak in three or four different languages, and they all move remarkably well, if sometimes a little idiosyncratically. Music and lyrics by new wave artist Nona Hendryx run the gamut from environmental sounds to heavy metal, syrupy love ballads and commercial kitsch. A screenplay by Catherine Bush keeps the audience interested in a plot thick with corny international intrigue and jet-setting characters. Unfortunately, this soap opera of a

screenplay, presented in disconnected spurts and small doses, is often more absorbing than the actual choreography. Yvonne Jacquette's scenery is integral to the work: a series of moveable scrims which grow increasingly smaller in size and view of the world. These screens deftly focus the eye from the initial map of the western world to the final one-person view of a section of Times Square.

The Big Picture attempts to move the art of cinematography from screen to live stage, using film techniques such as close-ups, fade-outs, flashbacks and wide angle views in the course of a live performance. The performers' narration and camera and lighting directions try to convince the viewer that he is experiencing a film. This works to a certain extent—I found myself trying to imagine all this taking place on screen—but eventually renders the entire piece a copycat