

Stephen Petronio is a dance world celebrity. Mark C.O'Flaherty talks to him about collaborations with Michael Clark, Yoko Ono and now Cindy Sherman

When stars collide

Even if you haven't seen Stephen Petronio dance on stage then you've almost certainly seen him in his corset. On the last tour of Europe, the Chris Nash photograph of Petronio with shaved head and torso wrapped in the aforementioned garment was ubiquitous to the point of redundancy. "If my life was a film," he says, "that moment would have been represented by the same image on scores of newspapers and magazines, spinning down on to a pile with headlines slapped across."

He's not wearing his corset today, but he does have the same bald head, a pair of earrings that resemble oyster horns atop each ear, and a rather attention-grabbing deerstalker in his hands. "Dr Watson I presume?" jokes the waitress in the café of his Bloomsbury hotel.

Stephen Petronio is often myopically seen as the Stateside Michael Clark, mostly because of his high-profile love affair with the ex-Ballet Rambert student (as well as the high-profile divorce) and for their irreverent collaborations. Oh, and of course their alignment with the worlds of fashion - we are wearing a rather fetching baby blue Vivienne Westwood cardigan with the deerstalker today.

But beyond an appreciation of pop culture from Elvis to the Sex Pistols; their chosen profession; and a pair of tattoos for wedding rings, the two couldn't be more different. The equation of Clark's classical training and Petronio's lack of it made for some spectacularly romantic dynamics. "We had similar interests in terms of density and speed," he recalls, "but the mechanism in terms of getting there was quite difficult. It is touching when I look back at videos and see how our bodies resolved that. It is very inspiring to me."

Though the relationship with Clark has undeniably influenced Petronio's formal ap-



Light speed: Petronio is searching for new ways to create aesthetic velocity

now in relative retreat and the stasis of contemplation, or "staring" as Petronio puts it, is in its place. For his currently touring repertoire he has enlisted the collaborative help of Yoko Ono and Cindy Sherman. He asked the former to compose a score for his interpretation of The Rite of Spring - which began life as the

work that will be written about in chronologies of performance for the rest of time; the "moving and hysterical" aspects of the photographer's work which Petronio so admires being harnessed to contribute to something "gentle and disturbing." Is she really the recluse that the art world's star machine would have us

in staying in the art world box marked Controversialist. These days he doesn't fear losing funding from the National Endowment for the Arts in the US - he sits on the board. He had his moment of gay political vitriol and is now "post-angry". "I do not want to wave a flag all the time," he says, "whenever I wanted to make something pretty or light I was being manipulated not to." So is this an end to politics?

"There are a lot of ways to respond to a situation," he says. But this new, purer-aesthete is unlikely to be silenced by liberalism being put on the

Petronio is often myopically seen as the Stateside Michael Clark

doomed collaboration with believe? "Well she was frightened, but she was not

The PINK Paper

THE NATIONAL NEWSPAPER FOR LESBIANS AND GAY MEN

Issue 350

today, but he does have the same bald head, a pair of earrings that resemble oyster horns atop each ear, and a rather attention-grabbing deerstalker in his hands. "Dr Watson I presume?" jokes the waitress in the café of his Bloomsbury hotel.

Stephen Petronio is often myopically seen as the Stateside Michael Clark, mostly because of his high-profile love affair with the ex-Ballet Rambert student (as well as the high-profile divorce) and for their irreverent collaborations. Oh, and of course their alignment with the worlds of fashion - we are wearing a rather fetching baby blue Vivienne Westwood cardigan with the deerstalker today.

But beyond an appreciation of pop culture from Elvis to the Sex Pistols; their chosen profession; and a pair of tattoos for wedding rings, the two couldn't be more different. The equation of Clark's classical training and Petronio's lack of it made for some spectacularly romantic dynamics. "We had similar interests in terms of density and speed," he recalls, "but the mechanism in terms of getting there was quite difficult. It is touching when I look back at videos and see how our bodies resolved that. It is very inspiring to me."

Though the relationship with Clark has undeniably influenced Petronio's formal approach to subsequent projects, greater changes have taken place since. The concept of time and "the moment" is absolutely central to whatever themes he is exploring and he strives to "physicalise the moment we are living through". With the end of the millenium 6 years off, the fin de siècle has already become a fetish for artists - "the whole century has been a mistake, there is nothing to celebrate," quips cardigan maker Vivienne Westwood - and social commentators alike.

Petronio does not admit to subscribing to this obsession, but does find his work changing along with the zeitgeist. The in-your-face 80s was manifest in some very forward directional pelvic movements,



Light speed: Petronio is searching for new ways to create aesthetic velocity

now in relative retreat and the stasis of contemplation, or "staring" as Petronio puts it, is in its place. For his currently touring repertoire he has enlisted the collaborative help of Yoko Ono and Cindy Sherman. He asked the former to compose a score for his interpretation of The Rite of Spring - which began life as the

work that will be written about in chronologies of performance for the rest of time; the "moving and hysterical" aspects of the photographer's work which Petronio so admires being harnessed to contribute to something "gentle and disturbing." Is she really the recluse that the art world's star machine would have us

in staying in the art world box marked Controversialist. These days he doesn't fear losing funding from the National Endowment for the Arts in the US - he sits on the board. He had his moment of gay political vitriol and is now "post-angry". "I do not want to wave a flag all the time," he says, "whenever I wanted to make something pretty or light I was being manipulated not to." So is this an end to politics?

"There are a lot of ways to respond to a situation," he says. But this new, purer-aesthete is unlikely to be silenced by liberalism being put on the run. He knows that he is literally in the spotlight and that his sexuality is going to come before him, just as Bill T Jones' race and HIV status precedes him. But hey, "it's a gay world," he says optimistically. And the dance community cannot by any stretch of the imagination be considered inherently homophobic.

As Petronio prepares to don his deerstalker and depart we play a little game, can he name some great male heterosexual dancers? "Baryshnikov?" he offers, "...well, I haven't had him."

● *The Stephen Petronio Company performs in London at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, SE1 this Saturday and Sunday, 22-23 October. Box Office: 071-928 8800. See What's On.*

Petronio is often myopically seen as the Stateside Michael Clark

doomed collaboration with Clark, later to give birth to Mmmm... Modern Masterpiece - because "when you think of the 20th Century she is one of about 6 women who come to mind. "Being Asian, marrying a Beatle, breaking up the band and generally being greatly hated," are cited as the reasons.

But the real buzz surrounding his current work The King is Dead, is the involvement of Sherman. As with all show-business factions, the art world is made up of 5% inspiration and 95% desperation for the Next Big Thing.

Petronio has sat comfortably under the Big Thing umbrella for long enough to qualify for a certain degree of acceptance, and Sherman has been celebrated into legend. Together they have created a

believe? "Well she was frightened, but also excited about doing something new," he says, "but she was very easy to work with and rather lovely."

The King is Dead explores aspects of masculinity, but more directly addresses a passing of the kind of physical dynamics that this cultural construct implies. This is where the changing role of the pelvis in his dance comes in. Instead of dominating, it is passive and observant. The auteurist, "authoritative notion of ruling a stage" wasn't a concern. He is still searching for a way to get the same adrenalin rush that his strikingly physical, confrontational work did in the 80s, but is seeking out more appropriate, less literal forms to explore the parameters of this immediacy.

Similarly he sees little point