

Stephen Petronio: Dancing on the

Acclaimed dance artist tests limits and boundaries with his high energy creations

By JON WOODHOUSE

For The Maui News

Stephen Petronio has been hailed as "the most fearlessly inventive, most audaciously virtuosic choreographer of his generation." (the San Francisco Examiner) A stunned critic in London's Time Out magazine described his work as "kamikaze ecstasy, dance at its whizzingly inventive best." And reviewing his company's latest work "Not Garden," a Newsday critic announced, "anyone even remotely concerned with dance in the next century should make it a point to catch their act."

One of America's premiere choreographers, Petronio is well-known for his innovative and physical dance style. His works usually combine a collage of fast, intense, explosive movements, all delivered with breathtaking precision, welded to striking image and sound.

In recent years, he has set his bold dances to the music of Igor Stravinsky, Yoko Ono, Maurice Ravel, Elvis Presley, and punk band Wired.

His latest work "Not Garden" features original electronic music by composer David Linton, along with pieces by Anglo-Indian drone artist Sheila Chandra and Johann Sebastian Bach, and costumes by celebrated London fashion designer Ghost.

Originally inspired by Dante's epic poem "Inferno," "Not Garden" reflects influences of the millennium and the Jewish mystical Kabbalah.

"The piece was initially inspired by the structure of Dante's Inferno, opening with a moral question, then descent into a deep dark pit, and then a release into light," Stephen Petronio explains. "My work is very abstract and I wanted to give a late 20th century feeling about a journey from darkness to light."

Read a review of Petronio's work and you will likely encounter adjectives like "daring" and "provocative" to describe his work.

"I think there's a lot of very tepid dance in the world," he suggests. "I like to move really fast, I like really sexy movement, and I like to work with contemporary ideas. I don't like to wade through dance history, I like to make the moment a historical moment. So that's probably provocative to people. I want my audiences to think. It's not just sit back entertainment."

"The movement is very beautiful to look at but it's a very visceral experience. It's not a gentle experience. The movement is sweaty and aggressive, people move in very quick masses of limbs and arms and legs and heads thrown all about. It's quite exciting."

Dance was an accidental discovery for this New Jersey native. Taking a drama class at Hampshire College, in Massachusetts, an instructor suggested Petronio enroll in dance to prepare for a role.

"I was the son of truck driver and homemaker and growing up in New Jersey you don't dance," he says. "I took a class in college and got totally addicted to it. That



show info

- **WHO:** The Stephen Petronio Dance Company
- **WHAT:** "Not Garden" dance concert
- **WHERE:** Maui Arts & Cultural Center's Castle Theater, presented by MACC and Maui Community College.
- **WHEN:** Friday at 7:30
- **TICKETS:** \$19.50 and \$15.50, adults; \$10 students.
- **INFO / RESERVATIONS:** 242-7469
- **WORKSHOP:** The free Grounding Technique workshop is presented today from 5:30 to 7 p.m. in the Center's Omori Studio.

was the end of my medical studies."

After college, Petronio became the first man to dance in post-modern pioneer Trisha Brown's New York-based company. "I felt like a bull in a china shop," he recalls. "There were all these incredible, sophisticated, intelligent, beautiful women and then there was this 21-year-old man. I felt too big for everything but I learned. It was very exciting."

In 1986, after seven years with Brown, Petronio established his own company. "The minute I started dancing I realized there was a personal vocabulary that I could try and discover," he continues. "So I spent the first 10 years exploring that vocabulary and now I'm making mature works with that language."

Because of his sometimes extravagant image (shaved head and corsets for him and other male dancers), the punk rock music he sometimes employs, and candid dance content (sexual themes include men kissing on the lips), some labeled him dance's bad boy.

"I think the dance world is incredibly conservative," he says. "A lot of times ballet critics have to review contemporary works and they're not equipped for it. I like using very contemporary music and it's really important that the work smells contemporary. I try not to do the same old thing, to the same old Bach pieces of music. I like to work with people who provoke and inspire me. In the '80s

I was doing a lot more to be the theme of the work. We are not supposed to be the theme of the work."

His ideas originate from the time of creation. "I've never been on my mind. In the '90s it was much more literary. And to, making the dance lead me is the hard part."

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Besides debuting his work, Petronio's cooperation with the Center for a free Grounding Technique workshop with HIV.

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Then Friday night eight high-energy dancers' bodies to the limit of the video clips, projecting movement, "Not Garden" kaleidoscopic work."

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- A moment from 'Not Garden'
MATTHEW CAZIER photo

I was doing a lot more sexually driven work. That seemed to be the theme of the late '80s for me. Sex and high art are not supposed to mix."

His ideas originate from a variety of influences relevant to the time of creation. "Every year it's different, it's whatever is on my mind. In the late '80s it was sex, in the early '90s it was much more about spatial architecture and now it's more literary. As soon as I have a concept to hook on to, making the dance is pure fun. Finding the right idea to lead me is the hard part."

Courageously challenging boundaries including pushing the body to its limits he says: "That's the goal, to keep on increasing the capacity for your range of motion. And if it's not for me it's for the dancers. You keep looking for new things. When you can jump five feet you try to jump six, then you always keep upping the ante."

Besides debuting his new work on Maui, Petronio, in cooperation with the Maui AIDS Foundation, will present a free Grounding Technique workshop tonight for people with HIV.

"I love doing it," he says. "It's about releasing energy and connecting different parts of the body so it works in a more efficient, relaxing way. It's nothing to do with dance, more getting in touch with your own energy."

Then Friday night we'll experience Petronio and the eight high-energy dancers of his company pushing their bodies to the limit in his propulsive choreography. With its video clips, projected text, abrasive score and surging movement, "Not Garden" is not just about dance. It's a kaleidoscopic work ushering us into the next century.

"The work is layered," Petronio says. "There's a projected text with a list of 100 names of people who have moved this century, mostly in a villainous way, then there's images that reflect the last 50 years. It's quite a lot to look at, but it's really fun and kinetic. It's like a banquet. I like to give people more than they'll choose. If you can have a little bit of this and that, your experience will be different from the person sitting next to you. I love that about art."

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Future dance

Petronio's style
at the MACC
In MAUI SCENE



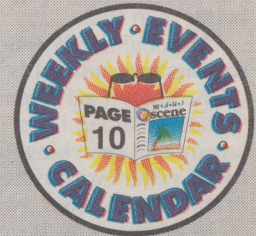
Council service

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*Your Entertainment
and Dining Guide
from The Maui News
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**STEPHEN
PETRONIO**

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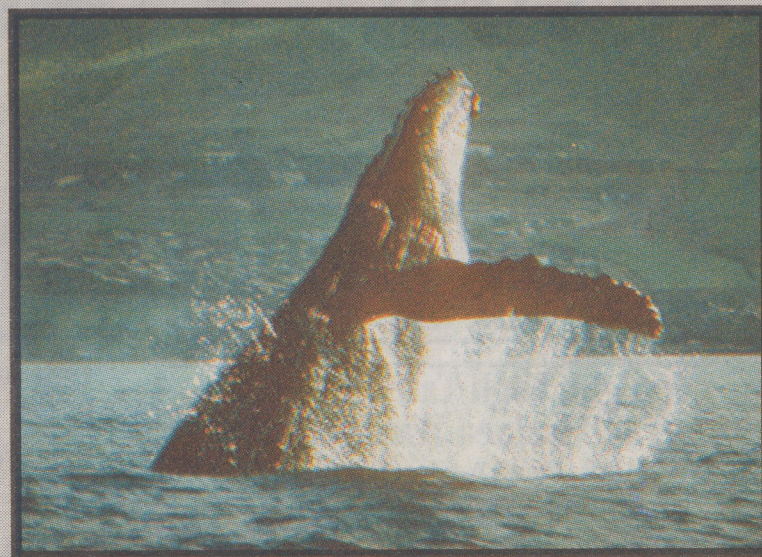


PETRONIO

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'MAME' OPENS AT SEABURY



WHALE WEEK SURFACES IN KIHEI