

Chicago Tribune

MetroChicago

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 8, 1996

News from
THE CITY OF CHICAGO
along with reports from
around the region.



Tribune photo by John Bartley

The Stephen Petronio Company, which ended a three-day engagement here Saturday, performs at the Dance Center of Columbia College.

An unusual force

Stephen Petronio choreographs an assault on cliché

By Sid Smith
TRIBUNE ARTS CRITIC

Stephen Petronio's choreography seems hellbent on a mission to defiantly obliterate the cliché.

Though very grounded in movement, though graced by post-modern echoes of ballet, Petronio's work has the brash self-confidence and assault of performance art.

His Stephen Petronio Company finished a three-day engagement here Saturday at the Dance Center of Columbia College, his first visit in nearly a decade. In that time, he has clearly matured from the highly kinetic young artist who played here late in the '80s. His emphasis on utter physical attack has modulated; mood, tone and content are increasingly important.

And his work with fashion designer Manolo has inspired strokes of new vaudeville—corsets are the attire in one work for the men (who otherwise wear only dance belts and thus appear nude from the waist down) and gauzy fish-netting and other Neptune-like

fashion show up in another—fey, giddy touches in works highly serious in so many other ways.

The three ensemble works on view (joined by a solo added for Petronio at the last minute) seem to boast a different goal. "Drawn That Way" is about design; "Middlesex Gorge" is about its theme, sexuality, particularly raw and even threatening sexuality, as well as eroticism; and "Lareigne" is about speed and its antithesis, stillness.

Indeed, the final work alternates between high-velocity lyricism and almost maddening halts in the action, moments when the dancers stop and pause, an interruption that ends in engaging the viewer even more than a consistently fast work.

Petronio remains an iconoclast. Probably all the pieces could stand a little trimming. He is a source for the well-tailored, courtly fine-art dance.

Indeed, in his solo, "#3," he almost

dares the audience to watch. He remains in place, never moving from position while he contorts his body in a series of spasmodic moves. And yet his twisting, gnarled hand at one point sweeps a circle of invitation at one point, beckoning viewers to bear with him and join in. The dancer's pained, even unpleasant journey is nevertheless one of invitation, not threat.

"Middlesex Gorge," the oldest of the pieces, is energized by its British post-punk score, by the group Wire, and by its intermittent puckishness. In a work mostly abstract, one of the men goes after the foot of a woman dancer with unbridled sexual lust, and later three of the men simulate the beginnings of group sex.

"Drawn That Way" seems all about design. Though its balletic echoes are instantly recognizable, its intricate, puzzling structure is an inventive use of space. Here Petronio takes ensemble architecture and turns it inside-out, only one reason he remains one of the most interesting and unusual forces in contemporary dance.

Dance review