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Stephen Petronio wraps up 20th season with revealing tour of past, hint of future

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO, Associated Press Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Stephen Petronio wraps up his 20th anniversary at the Joyce Theater this week, presenting 15 years' worth of intense, ostensibly abstract dance.

In truth, the program throbs with unstated narratives, from the barely restrained, sexual violence of 1990's "MiddleSexGorge" to the new "bud," a tender but muscular male duet set to Rufus Wainwright's "Oh What a World."

"I love the subtext," Petronio exclaimed during Wednesday evening's post-performance discussion. He went on to describe "MiddleSexGorge" as an "anthem" for his experiences as a young, politically active New Yorker angry about AIDS in the late 1980s.

Often, contemporary choreographers' claims for content in their works leave audiences scratching their heads. But Petronio is that rare artist who can always say what counts without ever explicitly telling people what they're seeing.

He's helped in this by a virtuosic company of dancers, who make his aggressive partnering, lateral thrusts and whipping twists look so urgent and inevitable that one often forgets the choreographic hand behind the movement. Still, Petronio is the unmistakable guiding force, infusing relentless, breakneck speed with a clarity more akin to a balletic vocabulary. The result, in works such as "MiddleSexGorge" and 1995's "Lareigne," is pure extravagance.

"MiddleSexGorge" suggests a late-night, underground club, from Ken Tabachnick's densely layered lightscape to Wire's driving "Ambitious Plus" and H. Petal's white corset tops worn by the men. (Petronio prefers fashion to costume design; no dowdy leotards or ice skating get-ups here, thank you.) The work feels not so much dated as grounded in a very specific time and raw, defiant space.

Waves of dancers crash through this space like anonymous pleasure-seekers; replete with sexual energy, the work lacks any sense of emotional intimacy. As one after another of the dancers is manhandled by the group — arms held back, waists clasped — and lifted aloft, their rigid limbs lash out, scything through the air. All hold the threat of great violence. But it seems the harm they would do is to themselves. Their leggings wreathed in pink petals, Petronio and Gino Grenek provide a mysterious counterpoint to this dangerous whirl, suggesting a road not taken in several brief interludes.

Despite its name, 2000's "Prelude" feels like the aftermath of some great disturbance. Their bodies draped in revealing black garments, eight dancers stand in an interconnected line, gently writhing like a frieze come to life. If Radio City Music Hall used heroin addicts as Rockette stand-ins, the result might look something like this.

True to its title, the brief "bud" implies a beginning. Thang Dao and Grenek function as two halves of a fragile community. They are mirror images in tight red shorts and halved suit jackets, anchored by black strips circling their bodies like restraints. Claspings arms, they whirl each other through the air. But exertions yield to sudden stillnesses. At the end, Grenek sinks into a deep knee bend, one long arm draped around Thang's neck.

The program note describes "bud" as "the first glimpse" of an upcoming work. It looks like the wait will be well worth it.

Stephen Petronio Dance Company performs at the Joyce Theater through March 27.