

A choreographer challenges dancers, tastes, and himself

By Valerie Gladstone, Globe Correspondent | January 12, 2007

NEW YORK -- "This is the first time in my life that I have more than enough to do," says choreographer Stephen Petronio on a break from a recent rehearsal in SoHo. "The company is touring widely. I have commissions everywhere, my board is expanding, and I'm making piece after piece after piece. It's fantastic."

Such success would be a dream come true for most artists, but for Petronio, whose provocative work once inspired as many boos as cheers, it's more a vindication for staying true to his vision. From the beginning, Petronio challenged taboos and chose unusual collaborators such as artist Cindy Sherman, composers Laurie Anderson and Lou Reed, and singer-poet Diamanda Galás. Now audiences have finally "got him," and his six-member Stephen Petronio Company, founded in 1984, finds itself acclaimed not only in the United States but in Europe and Australia.

The troupe brings three Boston premieres to the Institute of Contemporary Art tonight and tomorrow night. They represent a spectrum of his work, from the tempestuous "The Rite Part," an excerpt of a 1992 piece set to Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," to last year's exhilarating "Bud Suite" and "BLOOM," both choreographed to the plaintive music of Rufus Wainwright.

Turning to the four women dancers rehearsing "The Rite Part," Petronio, 50, watches them leap aggressively across the studio, scissoring their arms. Dressed in black, his arms tattooed with declarations of love for his longtime partner, Jean-Marc Flack, Petronio looks fully the part of downtown artist, though he now lives in a farmhouse in upstate New York. "Pelvis," he yells out when they slide to the floor, writhing like snakes trapped in a maze. Responding, they rotate their bodies even more sensuously.

Petronio choreographed "The Rite Part" after extensive research into the Stravinsky ballet, which shocked audiences when it premiered in 1913. "At the time of its composition," he says, "it was very radical to present the anthropological concept that a pagan sacrifice promoted agricultural bounty. But when I created my work, at the end of the 20th century, it seemed very retro to suggest you could get the corn crop going with the sacrifice of a virgin. So I wanted the women in my piece to be very sexual and strong and move things forward socially. They express anger and ferocity and determination."

Sexual politics once dominated Petronio's work. Dubbed a punk artist when he began choreographing, he often scandalized audiences, in one instance appearing in nothing but a corset. Though he never compromised beautiful movement or complex structure for his ideas, he loudly asserted his homosexuality and support for activism to fight AIDS. Then in 2001, he began to change, a development seen most clearly in "City of Twist," his emotionally stirring work in response to the attacks of 9/11. There were new qualities of tenderness, intimacy, and vulnerability that had never been apparent in his work before.

In "Bud Suite" and "BLOOM," those qualities and a feeling of hopefulness are even more pronounced. For "Bud Suite," Petronio says, "I was thinking about how people handle each other, emotionally and physically. I then went from that physical and erotic place to the more spiritual in 'BLOOM.' "

"Bud Suite" is set to preexisting Wainwright songs, but Petronio commissioned a new score for "BLOOM." The two selected poems by Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson for the "BLOOM" lyrics, and Petronio arranged for the Young People's Choir of New York to sing them during his engagement at the city's Joyce Theater last spring. "I had begun to feel that I was in a little too comfortable and predictable niche, so I decided to include younger people," Petronio says.

"The piece is about the transition from childhood to what you're going to be -- that moment of opening," he continues. "I wanted to create something that was filled with light." When the work is performed without a choir, as it will be at the ICA, a recording of Wainwright singing all the parts is used as accompaniment. "Rufus's voice is so angelic and honest and open like a child's," Petronio says, "that it reflects the sound of a youth choir."

In rehearsal, Petronio's dancers begin "BLOOM," changing within seconds from a fierce to a lyrical style. "There's a lilt to the movement," the choreographer says. "Things build on one another, so they all add up to something. I'm usually much better at breaking things down and chewing them up. My work is pretty discordant, and I wanted to do something more harmonious."

Performing Petronio's pieces tests his dancers. "Stephen's movement is wild and technical and exhilarating," says Shila Tirabassi. "In my solo in 'The Rite Part,' there's so much to think about. I can really express my emotions. It's like therapy."

Gino Grenek finds the challenges inspiring. "You have to use your head and every ounce of your ballet and modern [dance] training," he says. "But no matter how hard you try, you can't be perfect at Stephen's dances. Somehow I find that beautiful and poetic -- they are always a bit out of reach."

Unlike many contemporary choreographers, Petronio didn't spend years studying different styles or dancing with other troupes. In fact, he didn't begin to dance until his freshman year at Hampshire College. But he got hooked with his first contact improvisation class, and after graduation he became a member of choreographer Trisha Brown's company for six years. He cites her and Merce Cunningham as his main influences, as well as a performance of Rudolf Nureyev that he saw in his teens.

Petronio's optimism surfaces when he's asked about his legacy. "I'd like to think that I will be responsible for making dance much more popular, without it being as stupid as the dance on television," he says. "It's one reason I sometimes work with artists in the pop realm. Elderly audience members in Brighton, England, came up to me when we performed there and said, 'I really loved your dances. I usually don't like rock 'n' roll, but they were very beautiful.' " ■