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Petronio's dance troupe springs to life at ICA

By Thea Singer

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Stephen Petronio's new "BLOOM" bursts forth like a bullet shattering bone: It is sleek, and lightning quick, and leaves a fine, soft powder in its wake.

It was the most affecting of the three dances that the Stephen Petronio Company performed last night in the first full concert held in the Barbara Lee Family Foundation Theater of the gleaming Institute of Contemporary Art.

Petronio — whose formalistic rigor derives from his years dancing with Trisha Brown, a seminal figure in the "no to virtuosity" Judson Dance Theater — has honed an idiosyncratic movement vocabulary with roots in the bonking collisions of contact improvisation. It's full of hard-edged angles and ambidextrous permutations of body parts sprung from everyday gestures — a handshake here, a nod there — abstracted and revved to the nth degree. Petronio's is a world of kinetics rather than images, of bodies folding into origami shapes rather than narrating tales.

"BLOOM," a dance for the full troupe of eight, is a case in point. The piece is set to an original score by Rufus Wainwright that features the composer's layered voice singing lyrics combining the "Lux Eterna" of the Latin Mass with poems by Emily Dickinson ("Hope is the thing with feathers. . .") and Walt Whitman ("Unseen buds. . ." "Billions and billions, and trillions of trillions of them waiting. . ."). Leitmotifs — arms spread Christ-

like, upended legs creased into diamonds — flicker by as the volume and density of the stage space grows. Yet a tenderness pierces this work about the passage from childhood to adulthood — that moment when we cross the threshold into the rest of our lives. Forearms pressed together evoke entire bodies in prayer. Caresses — the dancers' hands running down their own backs and pausing at their thighs — pass as quickly as an intake of breath. There's something vaguely religious about it all; in a flash the dancers even appear to cross themselves. Amidst the solos and the duets, the comings and the goings, a woman lightly catches a man by the throat, and their lips nearly touch. The phrase catches the dance's theme in a heartbeat: Hope.

Also new, "Bud Suite," is an homage to connectedness, both physical and emotional. Set to previously recorded Wainwright songs ("Oh What a World," "Vibrate," "This Love Affair," and "Agnus Dei"), the dance begins as a duet for two men, each in tight red shorts and half a black jacket apiece. It's a paean to muscular, supple support. As time passes, various groups enter, among them three women with puffs of tulle on their behinds. A nearly nonstop compendium of movement ensues: Heads loll, pelvises thrust, elbows dart, hips roil, torsos jerk. As



EVAN RICHMAN/GLOBE STAFF

Members of the Stephen Petronio Company performing "BLOOM" at the ICA last night.

in "BLOOM," a tiny gesture — here, a hand cupped over a brow — strikes closest to the heart.

Petronio's exploration of Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring," "The Rite Part," an excerpt from "Full Half Wrong" (1992) was the least successful. There's a melodramatic quality to the ritual sacrifice that makes it slip almost into cliché.

Stephen Petronio Company

Presented by CRASHArts

At: the Barbara Lee Family Foundation Theater, Institute of Contemporary Art, last night; program repeats tonight.