

FINANCIAL TIMES

Stephen Petronio Company, Joyce Theater, New York

By Hilary Ostlere
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At first, you imagine this bare-chested man in shabby shorts has just got out of bed to do his morning exercises; complicated ones that only a dancer might do.

There's a longing in the sweep and thrust of the legs, reaching arms and backbends, a compulsiveness that thrums through Placebo's "Without You I'm Nothing". Then Elena Demyanenko swirls on to join Michael Badger and Petronio's new work Without You 11 becomes less an exercise in sexual frustration than a duet for people who understand each other even if they don't always agree. They writhe and tangle but at the end she holds him up tenderly until he quietly sinks to the floor.

Petronio, fiftyish, doesn't dance as much as he used to – but when he does he is riveting. His appearance with Gino Grenek, Shila Tirabassi and Amanda Wells in The Ship Song, an extract from the 2003 Underland for the Sydney Dance Company, reaffirms his potency on stage. In a close, undulating line, almost shoulder to shoulder, they turn this way and that, lightly running their hands up and down each other, embracing or supporting when someone sags.

Last year's Bud Suite, to music by Rufus Wainwright, has the beat of Ravel's Bolero surfacing through the vocals. Grenek and Badger wear red trunks and split a black jacket between them (each gets one arm), their torsos bound by black straps. The costumes suggest gladiators, although the choreography implies things are much friendlier. Everyone joins in for the finale.

Davalois Fearon is full of vigour and vehemence in a piece in progress, This Is A Story Of a Girl in a World to Antony Hegarty's breathily rendered For Today I am a Boy. But for the best of Petronio's choreographic style, full of steely grace and deconstructed ballet steps, it is still hard to top his 1997 ReBourne, an energetic free for all to the Beastie Boys.