

For Today I Am a Ship

In Stephen Petronio's work, violent doesn't mean hostile

by **Deborah Jowitt**

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The world that Stephen Petronio creates onstage is a slippery one. Movements slide onto the bodies of his superb dancers and glance off. The dancers themselves slip from one another's grasp. Their heads sometimes seem not to know what their hands are doing, and they fling their legs in semicircles so often that you imagine them scything randomly through an invisible wheat field. But while Petronio creates maelstroms of movement, it's notable that the performers whipping themselves through the speedy complexities of his choreography never appear hostile. They're violent, but they don't propagate violence.

Although for Petronio's new *Without You II* H. Petal has costumed Elena Demyanenko and Michael Badger in greenish khaki shorts (plus a bra for her), and both wear dog tags, this dance isn't about battle, but loss. Placebo's "Without You I'm Nothing (Flexirol Mix)," in a remix by Americruiser, pours through the speakers. Badger curls and crumples even as he lashes out. Ken Tabachnick's lighting pins him in rectangles and circles. When Demyanenko appears, they don't embrace, but dance lavishly side by side or circling each other, almost as if a slow whirlpool is keeping them both together and apart. As the lights go out, Badger has collapsed, and Demyanenko is slowly lowering him to the ground.

In the choreographer's 2000 *Prologue*, dancers stood in a shoulder-to-shoulder line, sinking and catching one another in a continuous lyrical seething. *The Ship Song*, excerpted from a work premiered by Sydney Dance Company in 2003, employs a similar device for very different purposes. This time, to Nick Cave's recorded song, Gino Grenek, Petronio, Shila Tirabassi, and Amanda Wells turn and dip within their line in a sweetly erotic free-for-all—lips grazing lips, heads sliding past crotches. They wear idiosyncratic outfits designed by Petronio's frequent collaborator, Tara Subkoff/Imitation of Christ (Wells, for instance, is dressed in a diaphanous, bunchy, pale-green gown, while Petronio wears a loose-fitting black leatherette coat). The entire formation sways and undulates as the individuals within it shift to new connections. "Come sail your ship around me," sings Cave huskily, and, in this miniature '70s love-in, that's what they do.



Beastie Boys meet dance: ReBourne
photo: Steven Schreiber

Petronio has always worked with cutting-edge pop music and beyond-trendy costumes, and put his gayness on the line—happily and nonaggressively. A preview of two sections from *This Is the Story of a Girl in a World* (it'll premiere in 2008) suggests that gender ambiguity will play an important part in it. To Antony's "Bird Gurhl," Tirabassi and Wells sweep about, Tirabassi's ruffled, floating black poncho (by Tony Cohen) turning her effortlessly into an avian wannabe. Grenek appears through a gap in the back curtain wearing a pleated black skirt and a metallic collar. By the end, he's got both women in back bends. But "For Today I Am a Boy" accompanies a solo by the extraordinary Davalois Fearon. Caressing her body and dancing with voluptuous power, this beautiful woman has no trouble making us believe she's a boy contemplating growing up female.

Lest we forget what marathons Petronio's pieces can be, company alumni have pitched in to reconstruct part of the 1997 *ReBourne* (created in honor of Val Bourne, the former director of London's Dance Umbrella, whom Petronio saluted in a warm opening-night speech). Leaping, spinning, beating their legs together in the air to music of the Beastie Boys, the heroic performers (including Jonathan Jaffe and Mandy Kirschner) never look like ballet dancers performing similar moves; they're always canted or twisted, and deploy their arms and legs like contradictory windmills.

I'm glad Petronio programmed the luscious 2006 *Bud Suite*. Grenek is leaving the company at the end of this season. The opening duet with Badger exemplifies his ability to appear both bold and tender, ferocious in action, alive in stillness.