

High Velocity Formalism

Stephen Petronio Company: *Bud Suite; Bloom; The Rite Part*
Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA

February 12, 2007

By

ALLAN ULRICH

allan@voiceofdance.com

© VoiceofDance.com 2006



Stephen Petronio Company. Photo by Sarah Silver.

After the Sunday matinee (Feb, 11), choreographer Stephen Petronio was greeted with the kind of ovation you only extend to an old friend. In a sense he is that. Visiting modern dance companies of quality often are received in this area with relative coolness. However, San Francisco Performances' Ruth Felt's established a long-term relationship with Petronio in 1995 and his many appearances here over the years have even incorporated a four-year residency. The company has performed in San Francisco seven times in 12 years. No wonder, Petronio feels like a member of the community. I have seen visiting dancemakers debut to half-empty houses and never return. But Felt has kept faith with what she likes, audiences have grown and other sponsors should carefully study her example.

(continued)

Happily, Petronio, who did not dance during this Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theater engagement, has assembled his strongest company to date. The eight dancers fuse speed and articulation with a gift for imbuing their attacks with myriad emotional nuances and the program provided plenty of opportunities to display it all.

Though he might recoil at the suggestion, Petronio has mellowed through the years. The angry young gay man who, in the 1990s, dealt in gender provocation and assaultive scores, has evolved into a kind of mid-career sage of postmodernism. The current program represents a collaboration with a gay icon of a younger generation, singer-composer Rufus Wainwright. Both works were completed last year. *Bud Suite* is set to four of Wainwright's recorded songs; *Bloom* is inspired by a new composition, which melds a choral setting of the *Lux Aeterna* (Sunday featuring 14 members of the San Francisco Girls Chorus, arrayed on a high balcony stage left) with settings of poems by Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson.

What Petronio hasn't lost is his high velocity formalism. The entire program might have left the unsuspecting viewer a bit breathless. *Bud Suite* anecdotally probes intimate relationships. If there's a message here, it has to do with fulfillment. We need another person to make us complete. Even the costumes by Tara Subkoff/Imitation of Christ make a pertinent statement. In the first episode, Michael Badger and Gino Grenek each sports one half of a suit jacket, and their routine to "Oh What a World" relies on fiery extensions, precarious realignment of balances and sensuous probing of skin surfaces. Four women in protruding pink tutus launch a push-pull routine to Wainwright's recording of "Vibrate," flirting with unisons. The genders mingle in "This Love Affair," swooping in costumes reminiscent of straitjackets. "Agnus Dei" summons reversals of gender roles as the men turn vulnerability into a virtue and the women hoist them high. It all happens so quickly and Petronio builds drama through sudden exits and entrances. Credit lighting designer Ken Tabachnik for the stunningly beautiful and consistently revealing illumination.

There's a curious tension in *Bloom*. Wainwright's music trades in emotional amplitude. Petronio favors a formalist approach, as the dancers propose the material, repeat and reassign it, building it all at the speed of a minor hurricane. The variations in dynamic range from a slow unison female quartet to insolent scissor leaps. Trios emerge, melt away and the members form new alignments. It does seem that Wainwright supplied considerably more music than Petronio needed or could use. Despite the thrilling, even disorienting redrawing of stage space, and the almost miraculous execution, *Bloom* could stand a bit of editing. In addition to those cited above, the Petronio company included Jonathan Jaffe, Elena Demianenko, Davalois Fearon, Shila Tirabassi, Amanda Wells and Jye-Hwei Lin.

The Rite Part, an excerpt from the 1992 *Full Half Wrong*, is a galvanizing setting of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps*, interspersed with electronics by Mitchell Lager. The extract danced Sunday, does not use all of the score, yet it can still stand comparison with the finer settings of this epochal music. Petronio blurs the distinction between sacrificial victim and victimizer (without any of the calculating rape nonsense of Angelin Preljocaj's vile setting). Details mystify: I couldn't quite figure out what connected the three women lying on the floor, bicycling horizontally, had to do with the rest, though the men later go through the same routine.

This was an astute revival. Petronio's musical sophistication was remarkable at such a relatively early stage in his dancemaking career. He resisted the kind of one gesture per beat formalism, which renders so many settings of *Le Sacre* unwatchable. But Petronio has captured the ritual, almost primordial element of the music in the weighty inexorability of the whole. One feels in *The Rite Part*, as one doesn't in most other settings of the Stravinsky, that what witnesses here, is an eternal drama of humankind, endlessly replayed.