

Stephen Petronio Company, Joyce Theater, New York

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Published: April 28 2010 22:38 | Last updated: April 28 2010 22:38

For the 11-member ensemble's 1990 signature piece *MiddleSexGorge*, the men don corsets over bare bottoms. This unlikely coupling of restraint and outrageousness typifies the choreography as well. Dagger-like limbs punctuate roiling torsos and rolling hips. Plunging pliés fraternise with stork-like balances. Strident awkwardness makes peace with ribbony grace. Formalism works in the service of chaos.

The five dances on this year's smartly curated programme – two premieres and three repertory works from the 25-year-old company's first decade – include solos as short as a pop song and ensemble works five times as long, pieces in an ironic romantic mode and pieces as impersonally theatrical as the weather. Over the course of this prismatic evening, the choreography grows more beautiful – and mysterious.



Dagger-like limbs: Stephen Petronio Company performs 'Ghostown'

The evening begins with Petronio spotlit and alone on stage. In the 1986 solo *#3*, his arms seem to be squeezing his torso into place, as if without the contortions of his creaturely arms it would ooze on to the floor. In this rare cameo, the 54-year-old dancer is both luscious in body and precise in tortured limbs.

At one point he impersonates Balanchine in that famous photograph of him demonstrating the proper way to do a *tendu*, an essential ballet step. Petronio is preparing us for his deformations of classical pieties. In the group pieces *MiddleSexGorge* and the not yet fully realised *Ghostown*, legs don't point skyward, they slash sideways like a sword. Instead of pas de deux, we get trios, with one dancer suspended crucifixion-style between the other two, restrained as much as supported. And the spatial harmonies in the several clusters of dancers doing different things at the same time, as in *Cunningham*, are only clear enough to make the threat of anarchy more tangible and thrilling.

More than classicism, however, Petronio rebels against the anti-pop orthodoxy of much postmodern dance. Fashion designers create his costumes: this year, Jillian Lewis, one-time finalist in the reality TV show *Project Runway*, contributed wafty black-and-tan numbers for *Ghostown*. And the music is by Radiohead and the electro-punk band Wire, for example.

But he is not just being trendy. Petronio makes his best dances when a regular beat is banging away. It not only gives him something forthright to push against, it also reminds him of his purpose: however elusively, to manifest the hard edge of joy. (★★★★☆) www.joyce.org

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