

Dance

New Prayer For Now

Stephen Petronio Company's program for the Joyce Theater documents the company's growth with five new or reimagined works and makes a case for the continuation of digital dance as we move optimistically into "post-pandemic" times.

By [Jen C. George](#)



Are You Lonesome Tonight (2020) (stage version) by Stephen Petronio. Dancers Ryan Pliss and Mac Twining. Film still: Dancing Camera.

When confronted with an intruder or harsh breeze, the mimosa plant closes its leaflets with seismonastic movement yet continues to grow. Much in this way, the Stephen Petronio Company at once scaled down its work in response to the global pandemic and evolved its vision. The company's program in the Joyce Theater's digital season (streamed May 13–26) offers the viewer a study in this simultaneous contraction and expansion.

Artistic director Stephen Petronio presents the Joyce Theater audience an ambitious selection of dance, featuring five new or reimagined works. The company rehearsed in "bubble residencies" after meeting virtually during the early days of the pandemic, then filmed final views of the pieces at the Petronio Residency Center and Hudson Hall in upstate New York. This allowed for risk reduction, focusing on small rehearsals in a remote setting.

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Among the recorded dances is a film by Dancing Camera, entitled *Pandemic Portraits*, holding digital space for the dancers to speak directly about their individual pandemic experiences. Petronio also developed *In Absentia*, an accompanying book in collaboration with Sarah Silver and Rafael Weil. Pandemic-era journal entries, lush rehearsal photos of the ensemble, and close-cropped portraits of Petronio himself fill the pages and provide an extension of the performances.



Are You Lonesome Tonight, a film by Stephen Petronio, directed by Stephen Petronio and Blake Martin. Dancers Nicholas Sciscione and Lloyd Knight.

The show opens with three pieces set to Elvis Presley: two variations to “Are You Lonesome Tonight,” and a reimagined 1993 solo to “Love Me Tender.” In the stage version of *Are You Lonesome Tonight*, recorded and presented digitally, Ryan Pliss and Mac Twining cavort in dreamy beams of light by Joe Doran. The partially shadowed stage and loose pajama costumes lend a lazy feeling to the piece, as the dancers fall in and out of unison. Straight legs steer them spinning in orbits around each other and skimming the floor in small jumps meant more to travel than to elevate. Immediately following is the film version performed by Nicholas Sciscione and Lloyd Knight in black brief costumes, reprising the same song and stage, but cut with additional movement in a wooded setting. For a show developed as an exploration of loneliness and isolation, the footage is perplexingly erotic, featuring close-cropped shots of the dancers draping across each other’s bare skin. The discord is solved, however, by a thorough reading of the program notes, which explain the sexy duet as “memories of being together.”

Next, Sciscione performs *Love Me Tender*, returning to the pajamaed costuming theme and mirroring much of the world’s penchant for loungewear during the past year. In comparison to the previous work, his movement is more abrupt, with faster legs, sharp hops, and head circles that feel impatient against the slow, romantic musical accompaniment. A peculiarity of watching digital dance, we’ve learned, is that one can easily dismiss the athleticism of a piece, viewing the sweat and breath of a performer much more distantly than when from a live stage. That said, Sciscione moves comfortably in Petronio’s fast-paced choreography, indicative of his decade-long tenure with the company.

The show unfolds in reverse chronological order up to this point, continuing with the restaging of Trisha Brown's 1973 work *Group Primary Accumulation*, a component of Petronio's ongoing "Bloodlines" project paying homage to the leaders of American Postmodern dance. (This piece also nods to Petronio's personal history, as a former member of the Trisha Brown Dance Company, beginning in 1979.) The performance returns to the outdoors. Using what appears to be drone footage, the frame gradually zooms in on a quartet of pale-costumed dancers. They move their arms in repeated angular phrases, reclined on a platform surrounded by unadorned earth and barren trees. Performers include Larissa Asebedo, Ernesto Breton, Jaqlin Medlock, and Tess Montoya, but the filming renders them distant and unidentifiable, aligning with the show's themes of isolation and lost connection. Brown's choreography counterpoises Petronio's: hers favors arms while his favors legs, hers with specific placement and grounded geometric shapes, his with kinetic slashes through the air. *Pandemic Portraits* follows, and manifests like a post-show Q&A moved to intermission. The dancers' comments about their recent experience are earnest and informal, speaking to the confusion of isolation, tempered by gratitude for their "bubble residency."



New Prayer For Now (Part 1) by Stephen Petronio. Film Still: John Fitzgerald.

Lastly, Petronio offsets his more historical offerings with the debut of *New Prayer For Now (Part 1)*, performed by the full ensemble, and set to music by Monstah Black with The Young People's Chorus of NYC. The choreography suggests openness and hopefulness, beginning with three bare-chested dancers arching their backs and supplicating themselves on the stage. Gradually, the entire ensemble enters. The camera encourages us to admire their bodies, zooming in to fill the frame with collarbones, thighs, fingers grasping and stroking. The performance explodes outward in space as it traverses the full stage, then inward as it grinds to a slow-motion finish.

Throughout the performance, masculine bodies seem to enjoy greater visibility than their feminine counterparts. We don't encounter female dancers at all until the third work, *Group Primary Accumulation*, albeit from far enough away to blur gender. Petronio is frequently cited as the first male dancer to enter the Trisha Brown Company and seems committed to transcending traditional gender roles for male bodies in his own work.

Overall, the digital format supports the diversity of the Stephen Petronio Company's work, allowing for easy shifts between the various staging venues, and making a case for the continuation of digital dance in future creative projects. *Pandemic Portraits* motivates empathy, as the audience relates their own pandemic experience to the dancers'. Although the company may have had to cancel performances and scale back rehearsals in 2020, they leave us with a sense of flourishing optimism for 2021.

Contributor

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