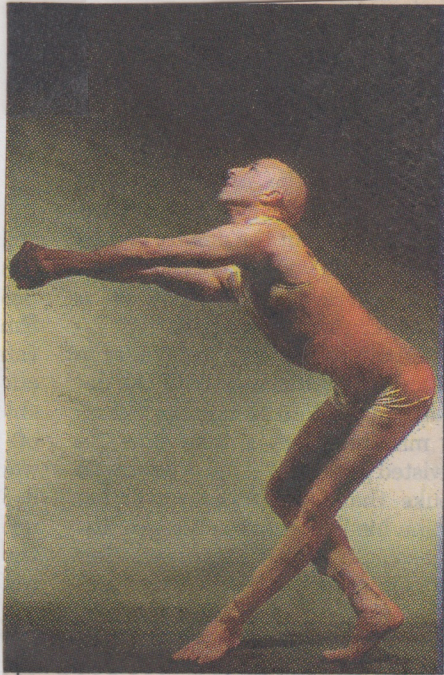




Dancer-choreographer Stephen Petronio has not lost his taste for outré costumes.

Something in the way he moves

Stephen Petronio's dances display energy, creativity, and a lot of skin

By Allan Ulrich
EXAMINER DANCE CRITIC

IS IT a new Stephen Petronio who is dancing so splendidly this week with his eight-member company at the Center for the Arts Theater, Yerba Buena Gardens? Or is it merely the old, old Petronio finally reasserting himself?

The old Stephen Petronio (that is, last year's model) was into fashionable gender-bending confusion, flecks of violence and gut-busting taped scores; nastiness ruled. The posture didn't really suit the New York-based choreographer, whose high-voltage movements and thumping music actually mask a rather sweet disposition.



Gerald Casel, left, and Tony Ramos in Stephen Petronio's "Lareigne" (1995).

But, on one topic, there can be no dispute: The 1997 Petronio, in residence here through Sunday afternoon, hasn't slowed down a bit. The tremendous energy, volatility and fearlessness he displayed in his company's San Francisco debut in 1988 at the New Performance Gallery has returned. The three works on the current tour should please folks who maintain the quaint notion that dance is about movement.

And it would appear that this community will be seeing a lot more of Petronio. Pending receipt of funding, he will next year begin a four-year residency at Center for

[See PETRONIO, C-9]

♦ *PETRONIO from C-1*

Stephen Petronio's energetic dances

the Arts sponsored by San Francisco Performances. To that possibility, add the Mark Morris Dance Group's continuing relationship with Cal Performances (Morris will visit Berkeley three times next season); and you will have additional evidence of a Westward shift in important dancemaking in America.

The emotion-drenched formalism Petronio and colleagues displayed Thursday at Yerba Buena suggested that the coming relationship may be an intriguing one. For sheer daredevil odysseys, the West Coast premiere of "Drawn That Way" and the revival of "Lareigne" (both 1996) will serve nicely. For something a little more unusual, "No. 4" (also 1996, and also a West Coast premiere), gets the nod.

What hasn't gone away is the sheer fleshiness of Petronio's work. The briefest of costumes and episodes of toplessness (as in "No. 4") were once shock elements in his work; now, the austere garb allows audiences to perceive the body in motion and repose. Yet, there's a lingering self-indulgence that troubles. Manolo's white corsets, stylized codpieces and floppy sleeves in "Lareigne" did not flatter the dancers last year, and time has not added to their allure.

What still gives delight is Petronio's gift for fashioning a restricted gestural vocabulary into lush, sweeping and often ecstatic tapestries of movement. When Gerald Casel launches "Drawn That Way" with a solo marked by torso shifts and rondes de jambes, you wonder where it will all go. But, then, veteran Kristin Borg appears (in a kind of grass skirt); she picks up on the squiggles and adds her own variations to the phrase.

The music comes from a rock group that calls itself Suede (but sounds like chenille to these ears) and the commissioned "Rhapsody for Boy Soprano and Strings" by Andy Teirstein, a more soothing opus and one that permits Petronio an entrance while a cherub is warbling on tape. The lighting here and elsewhere is by Ken Tabachnik, who may know more about indigo than anyone in the business.

The solo contributions afford much exhilaration. Tony Ramos, tall, muscular and fierce of attack, corkscrews around the stage. Tiny Kimberly Olson bustles in from the wings. Yet, Petronio confers shape of "Drawn That Way" with sudden cadences — the dancers simply stop in their tracks and flirt with their balances — or by assembling his dancers in a unison and having them fall out of formation. These caesuras pull you up short; you can hear the dancers' hearts pounding and you can hear your own, too.

"No. 4" is an exercise in non-dance dance, an elegy for those who have died of AIDS complications and, perhaps, the most startling dance essay in isolation since Anna Sokolow's "Rooms" in the 1950s. It would be hard to invent movement to compete with Diamanda Galas' recording of "Balm and Gilead," into which the inimitable vocalist introduces "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."

And Petronio really doesn't try. He positions himself at the base of an Arnaldo Ferrara-designed plexiglass tier, with Ramos, Olson and Ori Flomin arrayed above him. They are wearing blue loin cloths and metallic porcupine quills

sprout from their backs; and they might be angels grieving for the world.

They clasp their arms in unison, caress their bodies, reach out, run their hands over their cheeks and they do not connect with each other. They are powerless to change the world; they can only mark its transitions.

The program, which concludes with "Lareigne," will be repeated Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. Saturday at 2 p.m., the Petronio Company presents a special family matinee that will incorporate students from Mission High School, with whom the choreographer has been working for the last two weeks. For tickets, call (415) 392-4400.

Also of uncommon interest this weekend: The Mark Morris Dance Group performs at UC-Zellerbach Hall through Sunday at 2 p.m. with a new program that includes the local premiere of "A Spell." Petronio and Morris may both be pushing 40, but the similarity ends there.