

PERFORMING ARTS

CLASSICAL MUSIC • DANCE • OPERA

His Dance Fever Can't Be Cured

Choreographer Stephen Petronio may have initially stumbled into the field, but his steps are sure now as he finds ways to expand his art.

By Paul Ben-Itzak

NEW YORK—Imagine if Woody Allen had to make a movie that wasn't about male-female relationships. Or if Chuck Norris had to make a film in which he couldn't have a fight scene.

Choreographer Stephen Petronio set such a stricture on himself two years ago. Instead of exploring the movement possibilities of isolated parts of the human body, his forte, he created a dance that examined the way a group of bodies interacting can carve up space. The resulting work, "Lareigne," is one of three on the Stephen Petronio Company's debut Los Angeles program, Friday and Saturday at UCLA's Schoenberg Hall.

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company. Shortly after he arrived in New York, he met a Brown dancer who suggested he come to a group audition. "I chickened out," he says, "because I'd only been dancing four years." Ultimately, he auditioned privately, and was accepted.

Brown, who specializes in creating often esoteric, minutely articulated movement, remembers Petronio as "the ribbon man. He has no joints, and he can move sequentially with amazing alacrity."

He found Brown's style just what he was looking for. "I had this image of how I wanted to dance," he says. "It connected the looseness of improvisation with the virtuosity of ballet. When I saw Trisha that was the closest thing to the image I'd seen."

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Schickele joins his local
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Schickele program I
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Church in Pasadena
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"I took invention of the [individual] body away, and I was left with speed," Petronio said recently of "Lareigne," between bites of a humongous muffin at an upscale Soho coffeehouse. "That just gave me locomotion—if you just have bodies locomoting through space, then you're building space. So that was the kind of accidental discovery."

For Petronio, who grew up with little exposure to the arts, dance was an accidental discovery. The New Jersey native was taking a drama class as a student at Hampshire College, in Massachusetts, when his instructor had him enroll in dance to prepare for a role.

"I didn't know I had legs," Petronio, a 41-year-old who looks a decade younger, recalls of this moment of revelation. "It was like a major gong on the head that I had a body and didn't know anything about it. It was one of those primary physical experiences."

After college, Petronio surprised himself again, by becoming the first man to dance in post-modern pioneer Trisha Brown's

company. Shortly after he arrived in New York, he met a Brown dancer who suggested he come to a group audition. "I chickened out," he says, "because I'd only been dancing four years." Ultimately, he auditioned privately, and was accepted.

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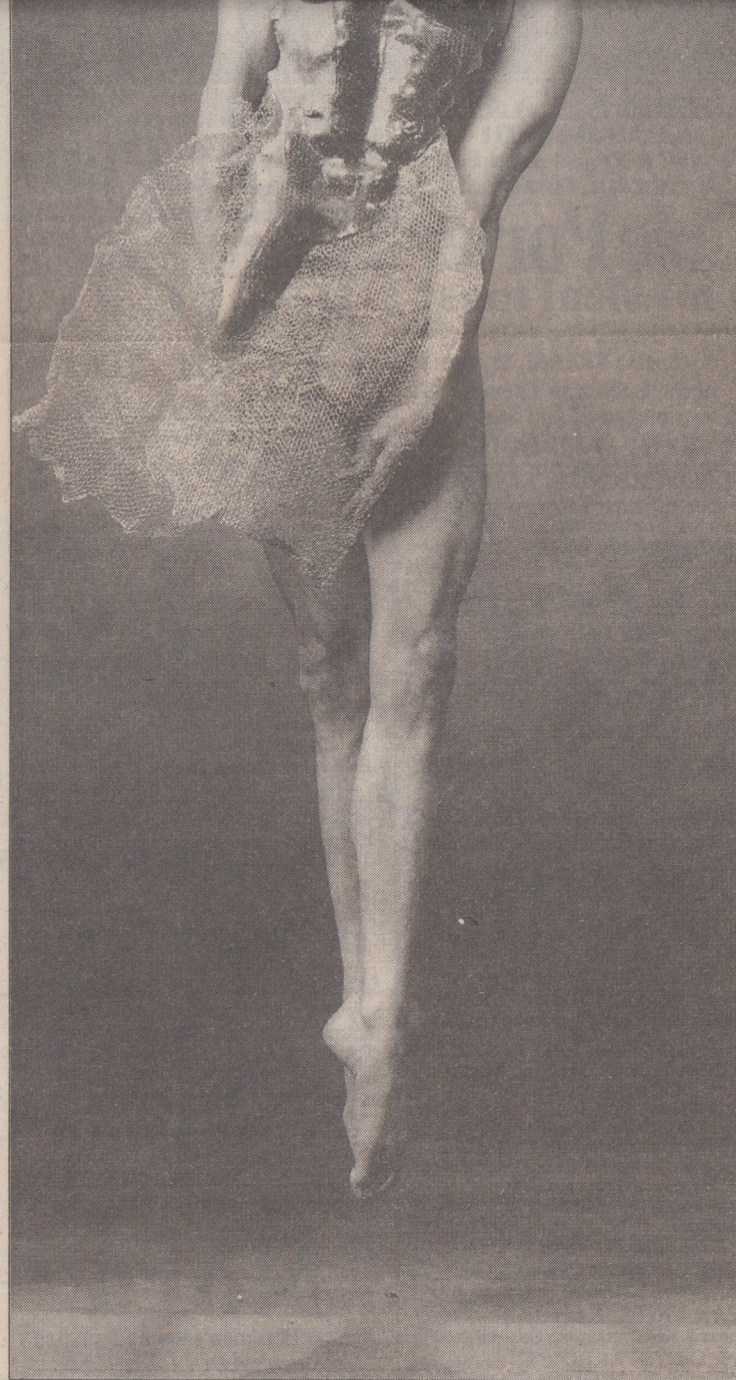
At first, it wasn't easy going. "There were no men to look at, and that was hard. I was like a bull in a china shop. I sweated, I burped and had hair everywhere. Here were these delicate, sophisticated women, and this crass New Jersey boy."

But, says Brown, Petronio was ravenous to dance. "I remember one time when Stephen asked me for a solo and in explanation, he said, 'I have art fever, Trisha,' and he does."

The solo was in "Set and Reset," one of many Brown made for him, and Petronio recalls his art fever rising. "I would go home at night and toss and turn all night because I was so excited. I was coming into my own as a dancer, and Trisha was in the middle of this great body of work."

Petronio, too, was beginning to create dances, in a basement studio space provided by Brown. "There's no training ground for contemporary choreographers," he laments. "Ballet has a system to do that. Modern dance doesn't, but it went from hand to hand

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ANNIE LEIBOVITZ

REMEMBERING THE FEELING: "It was like a major gong on the head that I had a body and didn't know anything about it," Stephen Petronio says of his introduction to dance.

STEPHEN PETRONIO COMPANY, Schoenberg Hall, UCLA. Dates: Friday and Saturday, 8 p.m. Prices: \$9-\$30. Phone: (310) 825-2101.