

'Garden' party

BY REBECCA BENWITT MOODY

It was lucky for Nutley, N.J., that Steven Petronio came along, because before him, the town's only claim to fame was the invention of the pooper-scooper.

Petronio, a Nutley native, is a New York-based choreographer who in the 1980s was described as "the most in-your-face, rage-filled gay dancer in the age of AIDS," by a Minneapolis Star Tribune reporter. One of the first professional dancers to publicly proclaim his "queer bent" (his words), Petronio was a real upstart, organizing ACT-UP gatherings,

The Stephen Petronio Company

WHEN: 8 p.m. Thursday
WHERE: UCSB Campbell Hall
TICKETS: 893-3535

halting curtain calls to denounce conservative Sen. Jesse Helms and demanding more governmental attention to the AIDS epidemic. His dances reflected his politics.

But that was then, and more recently Petronio has moved beyond the angry wild-child stage and emerged as a

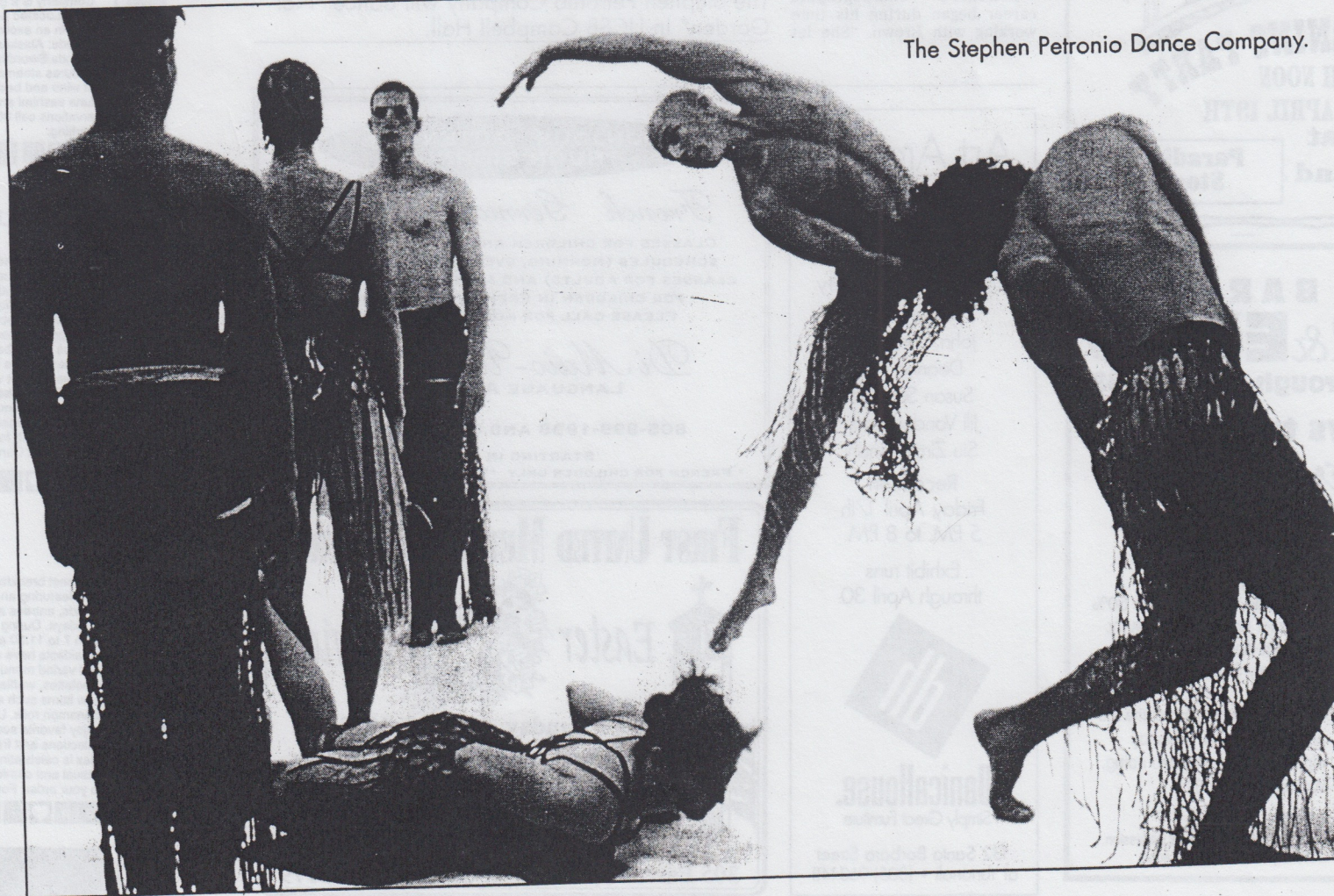
kinder, gentler choreographer. "I got bored with aggression," he noted in an interview in 1995, "and have become a more grown-up, contemplative dance-maker." The metamorphosed Petronio is bringing his company Thursday to UCSB Campbell Hall to showcase his latest creation, the evening-length, "Not Garden."

Critics have responded enthusiastically to the new Petronio, calling him "fearlessly inventive," "audaciously virtuosic" and "breathtaking." During a telephone conversation from his home in New York, Petronio suggested this sort of success is exactly what he always had in mind. "I grew up in a lower-middle-class Italian

family and though there wasn't any art in the house, I always knew that I was creative. What I didn't know was exactly what to do with it though. I just wanted to be fabulous."

Petronio went to Hampshire College in 1974, an experimental school in Amherst, Mass., which had offered him a full scholarship. "Back home I used to dance on the plastic runners in our hallways and in front of the mirror to Elvis, but it was at Hampshire that I took my first dance class," he said. "It was in improvisation and I got totally addicted."

"I'd actually been studying pre-med there," he added, "but was so captivated



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by dance. I got into that instead.
I'd found myself ... and became
The Dancer immediately."

If at first Petronio's folks
weren't pleased by his decision
to dump doctoring for dance,
they eventually accepted it.
"They balked for a minute, but
then calmed down and were
fine," he said. "Unfortunately,
my mother passed away before I
really made it, but my father is
over the moon about my suc-
cess. He comes to everything
and is always in the front row
with a suit and tie."

After college, Petronio moved
to New York and joined the
Trisha Brown Company as its
first, and at that time, only male
member. "It was a miracle real-
ly," he said. "During the audi-
tion I danced at a level I would
only reach in later years ... a
very cosmic experience. I
killed. Unfortunately, at the first
rehearsal, I reverted back to my
real level. But she kept me any-
way."

In a Los Angeles Times inter-
view last year, Petronio com-
mented on his experience as the
token male in that company. "It
was hard not having any men to
look at. I was like a bull in a
china shop. I sweated, I burped
and had hair everywhere and
here were these delicate,
sophisticated women. I learned
a lot though ... some of my best
secrets are from women."

Petronio's choreographic
career began during his time
working with Brown. "She let



BEATRICE SCHILLER

The Stephen Petronio Company will dance "Not
Garden" in UCSB Campbell Hall.

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me use her basement," he said, "and I started giving concerts in 1979. In 1984 I started my own company."

The Stephen Petronio Company has since presented work across the United States, Canada, Europe and South America and has been featured in Michael Blackwood's documentary "Retracing Steps" and in PBS' "Alive from Off-Center" program. In addition to choreographing for his own company, Petronio has created dances for Frankfurt Ballet, Lyon National Opera Ballet, Berlin Deutsche Oper and Maggio Danza di Fierenza, among others.

Petronio's latest production, "Not Garden," was inspired by the work of a fellow Italian. "I was trying to decide what to do for my millennium piece and was reading 'Dante's Inferno' at the time," Petronio explained. "He addressed the social morality of his time in an interesting way and I thought, 'Pretty chic. I'll use this.'"

"Not Garden" is a three-section journey through a 20th-century landscape of historically influential people and events. Movement, music, text and images ranging from Hitler to Madonna are interwoven throughout "to produce a vision of this century's sins," Petronio said. "It's a tribute to the anti-heroes ... the outsiders who have shaped our world more than we know."

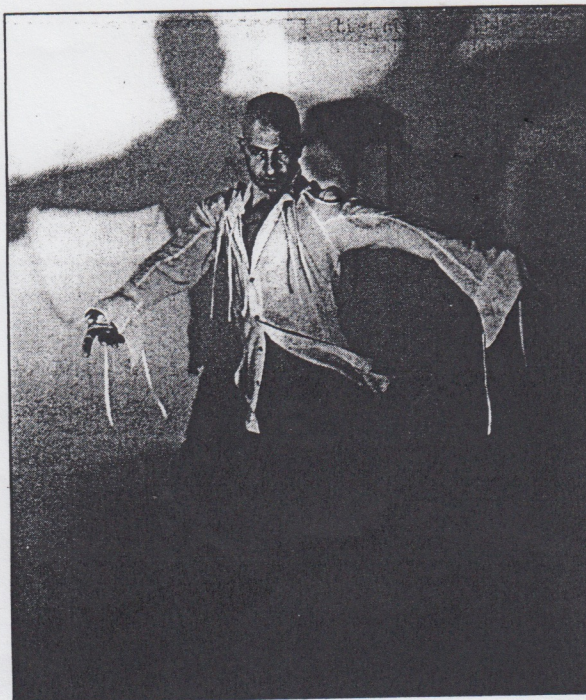
"There's absolutely no story," he added. "I make abstract physical landscapes, or physical models of behavior, based on ideas which are never literally portrayed."

Part One, "Call to the Gate" is a short introduction to the evening featuring music by Diamanda Galas, while Part Two, "The Pit" functions as the nucleus of the work. The movement style in this section is speedy and aggressive, with lots of the unusual partnering work that is typical of Petronio's choreography. Part Three, "The Final Round," is described as "a formal meditation in movement ... a collective rite of passage, based on the symmetry of the curve."

"Not Garden" is the first full-evening production Petronio has created for his company and he seems pleased with the results. "I broke into tears during a recent dress rehearsal," he said. "Watching the dancers, I thought, 'I made them?' It was so satisfying. I want to be thrilled on that intuitive level always."

(The Stephen Petronio Company will perform "Not Garden" at 8 p.m. Thursday in UCSB Campbell Hall. Tickets, which are \$10 to \$16 for students and \$14 to \$20 for general admission, may be purchased by calling 893-3535.)

Rebecca Benwitt Moody is a Santa Barbara-based free-lance writer.



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The dancer and choreographer Stephen Petronio.



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