

Petronio's latest work inspired by Dante's 'Inferno'

BILL FARK
STAFF WRITER

Modern dance has come a long way since Isadora Duncan first deserted classical ballet for her own brand of movement, and it is still evolving. Stephen Petronio, who performs with his company Saturday at UC San Diego, is among those who hurries the form along.

"I always go headfirst," Petronio said in a telephone conversation from backstage in San Francisco. "I started late in dance, and I had so much catching up to do that I've never slowed down."

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■ STEPHEN PETRONIO COMPANY

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Mandeville Auditorium, UCSD campus, La Jolla Village Drive at North Torrey Pines Road, La Jolla

Tickets: \$20; \$18, seniors; \$16, students

Information: (619) 534-6467

up in New York and New Jersey and at Hampshire College. I got serious after I saw Nureyev.

"I started studying with Steve Paxton, a former Merce Cunningham dancer, who knew all the modern techniques," he said. "Lots of dancers learn Graham or Cunningham, or Limon. I learned them all, including Erich Hawkins, who

had been married to Graham but split off on his own."

Petronio is modest about his own talent as a dancer.

"I wasn't very good, but I had a good eye for movement and staging," he said.

Others disagree. Trisha Brown chose him as the first male dancer in her company. Seeking a larger canvas for his choreography, Petronio formed the present company in 1984.

"I look for dancers who are willing to work beyond the usual — those with brilliant technique, who share my philosophy," he said. "They're eager to look both ways and enjoy the challenge. My method works; dancers stay with me a long time."

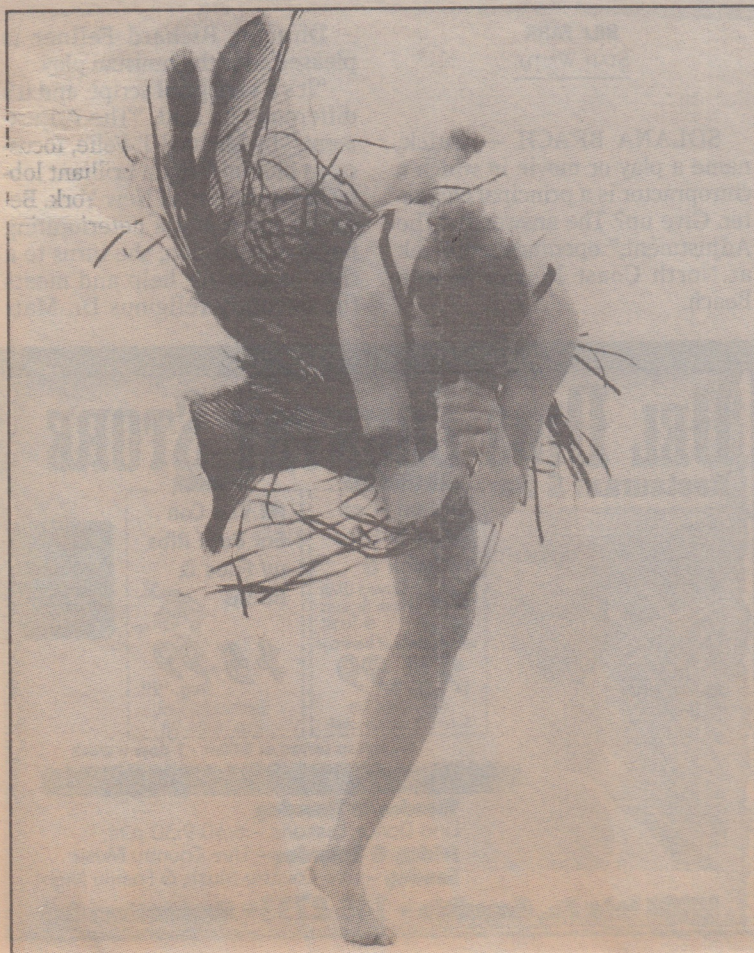
The greatest challenge Petronio has offered his dancers to date is "Not Garden," a new work the company will dance in La Jolla.

"It's almost finished," he said, adding that the performance in San Diego is not a preview performance. "We've been dancing it here, and after San Diego, in Santa Cruz and Santa Barbara."

"I started thinking about it after reading Dante's 'Inferno,' but it's not a narrative piece. No updated 'Inferno,' just a reflection on the end of the year, and the end of the millennium, a journey through the landscape of the 20th century."

Petronio has created the work in two sections. The first part opens with his solo, performed to an intense techno-percussive score by Stuart Jones.

"We go from a spiritual place to highly technical," he said. "I use the traditional elements — earth, water, air, fire — in a contemporary frame. Who were the worst offenders against these? Who were the most onerous characters in the century? We live in a time that's unsettled, much like



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A dancer performs in Stephen Petronio's latest work, 'Not Garden.'

that of Dante. What happens if we apply his images to the modern world?"

The title of the piece, "Not Garden," is derived from an older source, the Garden of Eden, from which mankind was driven. Petronio uses a cavelike space as a metaphor for the world. It is peopled with prisoners who have been bound in such a way that they can only look straight ahead, and see activity behind them as shadows.

"What if these people assume

that the shadows were real?" he asks. "We are coming to the end of a century which has arguably seen more cataclysmic change than any since the beginning of recorded time. An 'Information Age' in which the idea of a cave still exerts a powerful influence on our thinking."

Petronio laughed suddenly. "I'm likely to be pretty ambitious, and sometimes naive. It's a big question that I'm trying to answer, and I'll let my work speak for me."