

August 17, 1999

For: Stephen Petronio
From: Nicole D'ekle Collins

Per a request from Mollie Mungan, I am enclosing a copy of the essay I wrote on your work, which appears in Fifty Contemporary Choreographers, published this month by Routledge, both in the U.K. and the U.S. Cheers, Nicole D'ekle Collins



Fifty Contemporary Choreographers

Martha Bremser

with an Introduction by Deborah Jowitt

STEPHEN PETRONIO

Stephen Petronio makes dances that are aggressive, stylish, athletic, and highly sexed. His choreography surges with urban speed and power, but the individual movements are often both quirky and oddly juxtaposed. Unexpected tics and pauses texture and gnarl the rhythms of his hard-driving works. The distinctiveness of Petronio's choreography owes a great deal to his own idiosyncratic movement style, a connection that is immediately apparent when the tall, muscular choreographer dances. He has a loose-limbed ease in awkward step combinations, an unusual fluidity that the *Village Voice* critic Deborah Jowitt calls a 'slippery grace'.¹ He is a prodigiously talented performer, as are the nine dancers of the Stephen Petronio Company, who plunge headlong into his vernacular with the abandon of native speakers.

Petronio carefully calculates step sequences that do not flow naturally or easily, that go against the grain of his dancers' co-ordination. Perverse directional changes yank the dancers from the course of their momentum, while ungainly, but interesting, positions misshape their bodies in the weirdest configurations imaginable, as when the torso arches back while the legs turn way, way in. In his choreography, says Petronio, 'a verb follows straight after a verb'.² This description evokes well his action-packed dances, dense with an explosive accumulation of unlikely actions.

Petronio prizes movement that is difficult and odd, and he packs a particular wallop in steps that parcel out activities to every part of the body, so that arms, hands, legs, head, and torso each get their own thing to do. These steps give a rippling, double-jointed look to the dancing that is fascinating. Jowitt describes a typical sequence: 'Up will fly a leg, but at the same time a shoulder will curl in, one portion of the rib cage will shake down.'³ This 'busyness in the

joints' derives, as Jowitt and others have noted, from Trisha Brown, the seminal post-modern choreographer, with whom Petronio performed for seven years. Like Brown, Petronio initiates his movements from any part of the body, in any direction – a whip of the head may initiate a turn, a hinging elbow may lead the way for the next change of direction.

But though one can trace Brown's influence on his work, Petronio has significantly altered the accents and phrasing of Brown's choreographic language. Whereas Brown's trade-mark rhythm, for example, is a swingy purr of hushed, introspective, looping movement, Petronio could be said to have grabbed hold of one end of this terpsichorean rope and given it a great injection of anger and speed: in his hands, dance rhythm is no longer a looping cable but a cracking whip. He has forsaken Brown's cooler fluidity in favour of aggressive coils of movement that drive as hard and relentlessly as the loud, pounding electronic scores that he prefers. (David Linton has composed several scores.) Because Petronio allies a slamming force to the busyness of his choreography, his dancers are frequently described as seeming on the verge of ripping apart from their centres.

As their titles indicate, early works such as *Walk-In* (1986) and *Simulacrum Reels* (1987) were mostly concerned with movement invention, another Brown legacy. In these pieces Petronio announced that his was a fierce new voice characterized by quirky punctuation and illogical interjections. The words themselves – the steps – were also wonderfully imaginative and strange: his striking, hybrid movements deformed the body while at the same time glorifying it in dizzying bouts of virtuosity.

Petronio's works took a new direction as the 1980s turned into the 1990s and he began collaborating with the English choreographer Michael Clark, a self-styled 'bad boy of British ballet'. Until 1991 the two performed in each other's dances – Clark is

a mesmerizing dancer, mercurial and feline – and they also jointly choreographed, though always under one name.⁴

During this period Petronio, like Clark, carefully cultivated an outrageous public image. Media coverage from these years tended to dwell on the *outré* costumes he commissioned from hip fashion designers, as though wearing a women's corset upside down and backwards were reason enough to be considered a maverick. Among the first prominent dancers to sport a shaved head, Petronio was quickly dubbed a 'punk choreographer' by the press. In fact, he is a postmodern choreographer, one whose work not only fits into a clearly discernible tradition but shares characteristics with other choreography from his generation; in both the United States and Europe, for instance, aggression and speed are the predominant themes in 1990s choreography.

Most notorious among Petronio's so-called punk dances is *MiddleSex Gorge* (1990), the piece featuring the corsets (designed by H. Petal; G-strings complete the outfit). A signature work, *MiddleSex Gorge* reveals the dancemaker no longer trusting dance alone to draw an audience. This is choreography burdened with hype and subtext; some steps seem created precisely to show off the men's near-nakedness. In one motif, a dancer repeatedly weaves in and out of the action exposing his bare buttocks in knifelike *arabesques* that aim directly for the spectators.

Petronio calls this piece more politically engaged than his previous works. In a profile written when the work had its premiere, he stated, 'The body is the last bastion of freedom. . . . My politics is the action of my body.'⁵ In other words, the personal had become political, and never more so than in 1990, the year that the United States Congress passed a law requiring the National Endowment for the Arts to consider standards of decency when awarding grants. The so-called decency test – upheld as Constitutional by the Supreme Court in 1998 –

threw down a kind of gauntlet for artists, even those not previously concerned with such issues.⁶ Petronio was not the only dancemaker to create more provocative work in response to this notorious ruling: the increasing influence of the so-called 'religious right' in national politics, and the group's hostile attacks on the arts and on artists, especially those concerned with explicitly gay or lesbian subjects, mobilized many choreographers to forsake formalism for activism.

Petronio continued to test the decency test in 1992's *Full Half Wrong*, a savage and sensual dance set mainly to Igor Stravinsky's epoch-defining *Sacre du Printemps*, a ballet score that, alongside Vaslav Nijinsky's raw, explosive choreography, created a *succès de scandale* when it was first performed in 1913's Paris. *Full Half Wrong* aptly mirrors the violence and brutal beauty of the score, but Petronio undercuts his achievement by projecting ponderous epigrams onto the back wall of the stage. Inspired by the aphorism-based installation art of Jenny Holzer, a key figure in the United States art scene of the late 1980s, these deadpan observations on sex and sexual truisms – 'women don't have penis envy/men have Venus envy' is one – seem sophomoric next to Stravinsky's colossal music.

Petronio's concepts work best when they surface as choreography, not as written commentary or titillating costume design. In an interview with Suzanne Scott in 1992, he noted interestingly that one way he translates sexuality into movement is by initiating a step from the pubic bone. 'It doesn't look like sex,' he observed, 'but you get a very visceral feeling.'⁷

In the same article, Petronio asserted, 'I am trying to make movement that speaks of the time I am living in.' He has unquestionably succeeded at this. His fast, tough, cynical dances speak of a culture defined by speed, impersonality, and violence. Fractured and dangerous, his choreography takes place in a world that can be exciting

or pleasurable but never perfect. Even his fascination with sex and violence should be viewed in the context of broader cultural currents in the 1980s and 1990s: at the same time that these subjects were being attacked by politicians waging a 'family values' crusade, they were acquiring a new legitimacy as topics for serious academic study. In recent years studies of eroticism and 'histories' of the body have proliferated, heavily influenced by such philosophers as Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault.

Petronio's best work has a Baudelairean quality in which the beautiful and the noisome inseparably intertwine. His dances are not quite flowers of evil, but they are often flowers with menace. The critic William Harris has aptly described the simultaneous discomfit and fascination provoked in watching Petronio's creations: 'His dances are not easy to watch, and also not easy to forget,' he writes.⁸

In his more recent pieces, such as *Drawn That Way* (1996), *ReBourne* (1997), and a solo for himself, *I Kneel Down Before You* (1997), Petronio has returned to his initial interest in pure-dance experimentalism. The anger has subsided, though aggression remains; the pace is still furious, the dancers as tough as ever – they all look as though they lift weights – but the music has become less of an assault, and so has the dancing. A cynic might note that Petronio's self-conscious softening, the new theme of his interviews, reflects the late 1990s zeitgeist as much as his earlier persona did that at the decade's start. But his renewed commitment to choreography without hype indicates a positive direction: this is Petronio at his best. His work is most interesting for its imaginative, seemingly inexhaustible arsenal of new, unusual steps, hybrids in which modern dance and even ballet technique look as though they've taken a trip through an insane asylum. His vocabulary is as unique as any among his generation of choreographers. Set in motion by his splendid dancers, it's a feast of *fin de siècle*

virtuosity characterized by defiant energy, depraved pyrotechnics, and a marvellous appetite for risk.

Nicole Dekle Collins

Notes

- 1 Deborah Jowitt, 'Conversation Pieces', *The Village Voice* (New York), 2 June 1992.
- 2 Quoted in Sarah Woodward, 'Naked Truth', *Mirabella* (New York), October 1990.
- 3 Jowitt, op. cit.
- 4 Gia Kourlas, 'A Star is Re Bourne', *Time Out New York*, 11–18 September 1997.
- 5 Ellen Cranitch, 'Moving Over', *City Limits* (London), 11–18 October 1990.
- 6 For an account of the US Supreme Court decision and a brief legal history of the decency test, see Linda Greenhouse, 'Justices Uphold Decency Test', *The New York Times*, 26 June 1998, p. A17.
- 7 Suzanne Scott, 'In Step with the Times', *Sunday Times* (London), 25 October 1992.
- 8 William Harris, 'Dancing Out of Control', *The Village Voice* (New York), 31 January 1995.

Biographical details

Born in Nutley, New Jersey, United States, 20 March 1956. **Studied** pre-medicine before taking up dance; studied contact improvisation with Steve Paxton. **Career** Danced with Trisha Brown Company, 1979–86; began choreographing in 1979; founder, artistic director and choreographer, Stephen Petronio Company, from 1984; has also choreographed for Frankfurt Ballet, Rotterdam Dance Company, German Opera Ballet (Berlin), Charleroi Dance Company (Belgium), and Lyon Opéra Ballet. **Awards** include a Guggenheim Fellowship and a New York Foundation for the Arts Award; National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, 1985–88, and Advancement Program Grant, 1994; New York Dance and Performance Award ('Bessie'), 1986; American Choreographers Award, 1987.

Works

Adrift (with Clifford Arnell, 1984), *The Sixth Heaven* (mus. Pat Irwin, 1984), #3 (mus. Lenny Pickett, 1985), *Walk-In* (mus. David Linton, 1986; revised version, 1992), *Simulacrum Reels* (mus. David Linton, 1987), *AnAmnesia* (mus. Peter Gordon, 1988), *Surrender II* (mus. David Linton,

1988), *MiddleSex Gorge* (mus. Wire, 1990), *Close Your Eyes and Think of England* (1990), *Full Half Wrong* (mus. Stravinsky, Mitchell Lager, 1992), *She Says* (mus. Yoko Ono, 1993), *The King is Dead, Part I* (mus. Elvis Presley, Ravel, 1993), *Extravenous* (1994), *Lareigne* (mus. David Linton, 1995), #4 (mus. Diamanda Galás, 1996), *Drawn That Way* (mus. Andy Teirstein, 1996), *ReBourne* (mus. Beastie Boys, Sheila Chandra, 1997), *I Kneel Down Before You* (solo; 1997), *Not Garden* (based on Dante, 1997).

Further reading

Interviews with Sarah Woodward, 'Naked Truth', *Mirabella*, October 1990; with Suzanne Scott, 'In Step with the Times', *The Sunday Times*, 25 October 1992.

Articles Tobi Tobias, 'Stephen Petronio', *Dance Magazine*, April 1985; Stephen Petronio, with David Allan Harris, 'The Stephen Petronio File', *Drama Review*, Summer 1985; Amanda Smith, 'Stephen Petronio and Dancers', *Dance Magazine*, July 1986; William Harris, 'Petronio's Mind-body Splits', *Connoisseur* (February 1987); Perry Bialor, 'Man-Made', *Attitude*, Spring 1990; Sally R. Sommer, 'A Duet is More Than Two People Dancing', *Dance Ink*, May/June 1990; Louise Levene, 'From Corsets to Cassocks', *Dance and Dancers*, December 1990; Catherine Brownell, 'Petronio and His Political Body', *Dance Theatre Journal*, Spring 1991; Tobi Tobias, 'Déjà Vu', *New York Magazine*, February 4, 1991; Deborah Jowitt, 'Conversation Pieces', *The Village Voice*, June 2, 1992; John Gruen, 'Stephen Petronio: Mixing It Up', *Dance Magazine*, June 1994; William Harris, 'Dancing Out of Control', *The Village Voice* (New York), 31 January 1995; Tobi Tobias, 'Second Sight', *New York Magazine*, February 20, 1995.

Books Allen Robertson and Donald Hutera, *The Dance Handbook*, Harlow, Essex, 1998.

PILOBOLUS

Pilobolus, sometimes called Pilobolus Dance Theater, and once upon a time known as Vermont Natural Theater, has been as pervasive an influence on American dance theatre in the latter part of our century as was Denishawn during the earlier part.

In impact, this small ensemble – more or less consistently limited to a core company of four men and two women – recalls the popularity held by the St Denis and Shawn enterprise during the 1920s. In kind, the mixed bills put on by Pilobolus are similar to the 'high-art' vaudeville fare of the Denishawn troupe. In tone, Pilobolus are more artfully outrageous, somewhere between naughty and nice, where the Denishawners were lofty and decoratively exotic. Both aesthetics, however, can be said to centre on the sensual projection resulting from the direct display of the dancer's body.

Indeed, with over 25 years already to its credit, Pilobolus has proven itself to have even greater staying-power than Denishawn. Since its very modest beginnings in 1971, when the burgeoning group was little more than one three-man work entitled *Pilobolus*, this innovative and hard-to-categorize entity has remained popular with its public and influential over its fellow practitioners in dance theatre. The influence of Pilobolus on various kinds of choreography in the 1980s and 1990s may be hard to name – Pilobolusian? Piloboluslike? – but it is not hard to recognize: intriguingly massed clusters of bodies and/or gymnastically levered processes of partnering or grouping. A few other distinguishing Pilobolus characteristics, such as artful nudity, and a taste for surreal twists of visual logic, also tend to be emulated, though to a lesser extent.

The most common misinformation regarding the troupe is that its founders were gymnasts. In fact, the original trio grew out of Alison Chase's dance composition class at New England's Dartmouth College, an all-male institution where dance was not a major subject and where the future Pilobolus founders were athletic collegians, not college athletes. Moses Pendleton was an English literature major and a cross-country skier; Jonathan Wolken was a philosophy and science major who fenced, did folk dancing, and played the banjo; and Steve Johnson was a pre-medical student who pole-vaulted.