

ARTFORUM

Stephen Petronio

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Left: Stephen Petronio, *I Drink the Air Before Me*, 2009. Gino Grenek. Photo: Sarah Silver. Right: Stephen Petronio, *Candy Says*, 2008. Performance view, Joyce Theater, New York, 2008. Left to right: Julian De Leon, Elena Demianenko, Amanda Wells, and Michael Badger. Photo: Frank Thompson.

*On the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of his dance company, choreographer Stephen Petronio has created a new work. *I Drink the Air Before Me*, featuring costumes by Adam Kimmel and Cindy Sherman and a musical score by Nico Muhly, premieres at the Joyce Theater in New York from April 28 to May 3. Here Petronio discusses the foundation of his company and the development of his latest piece.*

I MOVED TO NEW YORK CITY IN 1978. In my first year, I lived in thirteen different places. I finally landed in an apartment on Saint Mark's Place, where I lived through the 1980s and '90s—until about six years ago, when I was evicted for subletting. Now I live in Putnam County. The charm of the East Village wore off.

I started my company because I needed a social construct and responsibility. I wanted to create something where people would expect me to show up every day—and indeed I *have* shown up almost every day for twenty-five years.

Dance is a social form—that's the best thing about it; it's why I like to collaborate. For me, it's all about multidisciplinary collaborations: There always has to be a new composer, visual artist, or fashion designer. The more variety, the better: in the audience, on the stage, and at the party afterward. Otherwise, in the theater, dance becomes a very esoteric thing that no one really cares about—including me. When dance only exists in reference to itself, it is diminished in some way. I like to mess it up with lots of different kinds of people.

I began dancing quite late, in college. I thought I wasn't good enough because most of the girls had started at, like, age three. I took an improvisation class to relax. I met Steve Paxton and fell head over heels in love with contact improvisation. I followed him around, then met Trisha Brown, who introduced me to the whole New York art world.

Everything was Scotch-taped together in the beginning, and everybody worked for free. We'd perform in basements, advertise with stencils on the streets of SoHo, it was all fun, hands-on, and by the seat of the pants. Not much has changed: I still carry my boom box to rehearsal sometimes. A lot of it is still about the generosity of friends, favors.

With this twenty-five-year-anniversary piece, I wanted to include Cindy Sherman, so I asked her if she would be up for creating a "look" for me—I'm making a comeback for this piece. It's our third collaboration. The beauty about my career is that I can ask people to do things. Rufus Wainwright did his first choral score for me, and I'm so proud of that I can't even tell you.

Nico Muhly did the score for this one. There was this period a couple of summers ago where I was obsessed with his music, which I'd come to via Lou Reed and the musician Antony. I walked into the gym one day and there was a guy who looked an awful lot like Nico Muhly half-undressed. Of course I charged up to him—I'm not shy—and asked, "Are you Nico Muhly?" He was totally shocked. Apparently, I was very aggressive. I was just this crazy man accosting him at the gym, after all. I told him about my anniversary, and he told me to call him, and it all came together. These cold calls still work—it just depends on whom you're calling.

This new piece was inspired by extreme weather. It's a natural topic for dance. Movement is a temporal medium; it's ephemeral. You think you can count on something, and you can't. The title, *I Drink the Air Before Me*, comes from *The Tempest* ("I drink the air before me, and return / Or e'er your pulse twice beat"). The idea of moving quickly through space, between two beats of a heart, sounds like something to which to aspire. I've been in love with speed since the beginning, so it seemed very appropriate to move with "gusto" through a space.

I know what to expect when I go into the studio to make a piece. After twenty-five years, the “impossibility” of investigating undiscovered movements becomes like a friend; you get used to the stress and the tension and grow comfortable with that feeling.

There is definitely a “Petronio Technique.” It has to do with the flow of energy through your body out into space: There’s lots of sequencing, spiraling, figure-eights. To discover movement, I set up problems for myself. I have a wicked eye. I’m very sympathetic, so I can absorb people very quickly, whether on the street, at a party, or in the studio. I’m a “trash collector” when it comes to gathering information and ideas. Anything I see that moves—and some things that don’t—is fair game. I don’t have classical training, but I can quickly absorb classical vocabulary (though not the syntax). I’m a thief, always squirreling away movement.

— *As told to David Velasco*