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Reviving Rudy Perez's Dance Drama of an Everyman



Ernesto Breton, a member of the Stephen Petronio Company, in “Coverage Revisited,” a revival of a Rudy Perez solo from 1970. An Rong Xu for The New York Times

By Siobhan Burke

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The choreographer Stephen Petronio hasn’t forgotten an image he first saw more than 40 years ago: a photograph of a man in a chair, smoking.

“There was a tear coming down his face, and he had a cigarette,” Mr. Petronio said recently at his apartment in Harlem, describing the photo, which he had seen in Don McDonagh’s book “The Rise and Fall and Rise of Modern Dance.” The man was the choreographer Rudy Perez, pictured in one of his career-defining solos, “Countdown,” from 1966. A participant in Judson Dance Theater, the early-

1960s collective that pioneered postmodern dance, Mr. Perez exuded, in Mr. Petronio's eyes, a potent sense of drama. From that image alone, he wanted to know more.

"There was something emotive about it, and I was very confused about that," Mr. Petronio said. "Because when I came up into the postmodern dance world, meeting Steve and Trisha and all those people" — the Judson founders Steve Paxton and Trisha Brown — "it was not about emotion. It was about motion and the rules of motion. So that separated him in a certain way, and I was very curious."

Mr. Petronio, now 63 and the artistic director of the Stephen Petronio Company, is finally satisfying that curiosity. For the fifth edition of ["Bloodlines," his initiative to preserve essential works of postmodern dance](#), he is reviving Mr. Perez's stirring 1970 solo "Coverage." Beginning April 11 at N.Y.U. Skirball, the roughly 20-minute "Coverage Revisited," performed by Ernesto Breton, appears on a program with Merce Cunningham's 1970 "Tread" and Mr. Petronio's new "American Landscapes."

Last performed in 1991 — and not seen in New York since 1977, when a version was [presented by the Alvin Ailey company](#) — "Coverage" embodies some of Mr. Perez's choreographic hallmarks: [his astute use of stillness and slowness](#), his gift for assembling just-right juxtapositions.

The work opens with its male soloist dressed as a construction worker, in a blue hard hat and white jumpsuit, carefully laying down a perimeter of tape. Inside of that self-imposed frame, he takes on a series of movement tasks, resembling a basketball player one moment, a Fosse dancer the next. Silence is one element in a sonic collage, arranged by Mr. Perez, that also includes bagpipe music, Stevie Wonder and, finally, "God Bless America."

For New York audiences, the revival of "Coverage" affords a rare opportunity to see a Rudy Perez work performed live. At 89, [Mr. Perez has spent most of his life in Los Angeles](#), where he landed in 1978 and never turned back. (Despite being partially blind, he still teaches a weekly class at the Westside Academy of Dance in Santa Monica.)

Though he had built a dedicated following in New York — he was a regular at avant-garde havens like Judson Memorial Church and Dance Theater Workshop — he found greater support for his work, financially, on the West Coast. As he said by phone from Los Angeles, "All the doors opened up for me out here."

Mr. Perez, who grew up in Spanish Harlem and the Bronx, was among the few artists of color to be actively involved in Judson Dance Theater, a group known for embracing everyday movement and rejecting the status quo of modern dance. His mother, who died when he was 7, was Puerto Rican; his biological father, he learned only recently, was Italian or Spanish.

He came to Judson after training in the 1950s with the modern dance matriarch Martha Graham, whose theatrics were not in vogue downtown. "I went from one extreme to the other," he said, laughing.

It was in a class with Merce Cunningham that he met the multimedia artist and Judsonite Elaine Summers, who invited him to perform with her.

"That's how some people got into Judson," he said. "They just needed bodies to do pieces — not dance pieces, just pieces with a lot of people."

Mr. Perez said he gave little thought to being Latino in a mostly white collective. “It didn’t interfere at all,” he said, though he wondered aloud if his fair complexion helped him to fit in. “It was kind of an elitist environment, to tell you the truth.”

He stressed that in those days, for him, dance “was a hobby; it was therapy.” As long as he lived in New York, he also worked from 9 to 5, as a messenger and an IBM computer operator, among other odd jobs.



Mr. Breton rehearsing at Dance Theater of Harlem’s studios: “A lot of the movement is so simple yet effortful,” he said. “There’s something underneath every step.” An Rong Xu for The New York Times

While developing his own minimalist style at Judson and beyond, Mr. Perez didn’t fully part with his Graham roots, he said. He agreed with Mr. Petronio’s description of his work as more emotional and theatrical than that of his Judson peers.

He clarified: Emotional, yes, “but not all over the place — very restrained.”

For the writer Wendy Perron, who danced with Mr. Perez from 1969-70, his early work stood out for its textural contrasts. “He had this instinct for what would work next to each other,” she said. “We’d be doing something rigid and stiff, then suddenly we’d be bending down and picking flowers in a dreamlike slow motion.”

“There was something very sure and magical about what he did onstage,” she added.

Mr. Petronio began “Bloodlines” with the idea of honoring [his closest influences](#), like Cunningham and Brown, with whom he danced from 1979 to 1986. (As part of the project, he has also restaged works by Mr. Paxton, Yvonne Rainer and Anna Halprin.) Mr. Perez, he recognizes, resides on a more distant branch of his artistic family tree. “Although I didn’t know Rudy’s work very well,” he said, “I felt there was an opportunity to explore the fantasy of what I thought his work was.”

Because of budgetary constraints, Mr. Petronio and Mr. Breton, who will perform “Coverage Revisited,” had only a day to rehearse directly with Mr. Perez, in October in Los Angeles. They all acknowledged that the situation was not ideal. (Mr. Breton had some additional rehearsals with Sarah Swenson, Mr. Perez’s assistant.) For Mr. Perez, it’s crucial that the soloist shed any dancery affectation, so that he reads as “just a guy, a man, an everyman — not a dancer,” he said. For a Juilliard graduate like Mr. Breton, that can take some coaching.

At a recent rehearsal, Mr. Breton, 28, appeared to be settling into the complex role of a regular person.

“A lot of the movement is so simple yet effortful,” he said. “There’s something underneath every step.”

Mr. Perez seemed reluctant to share his own interpretation of the work. But he did suggest that for him, “Coverage” deals with a certain duality, as its everyman slips out of and back into his white uniform: between being himself and being, in Mr. Perez’s words, “a conformist.”

“As Americans are,” he said, and in his nonconformist way, said no more.

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