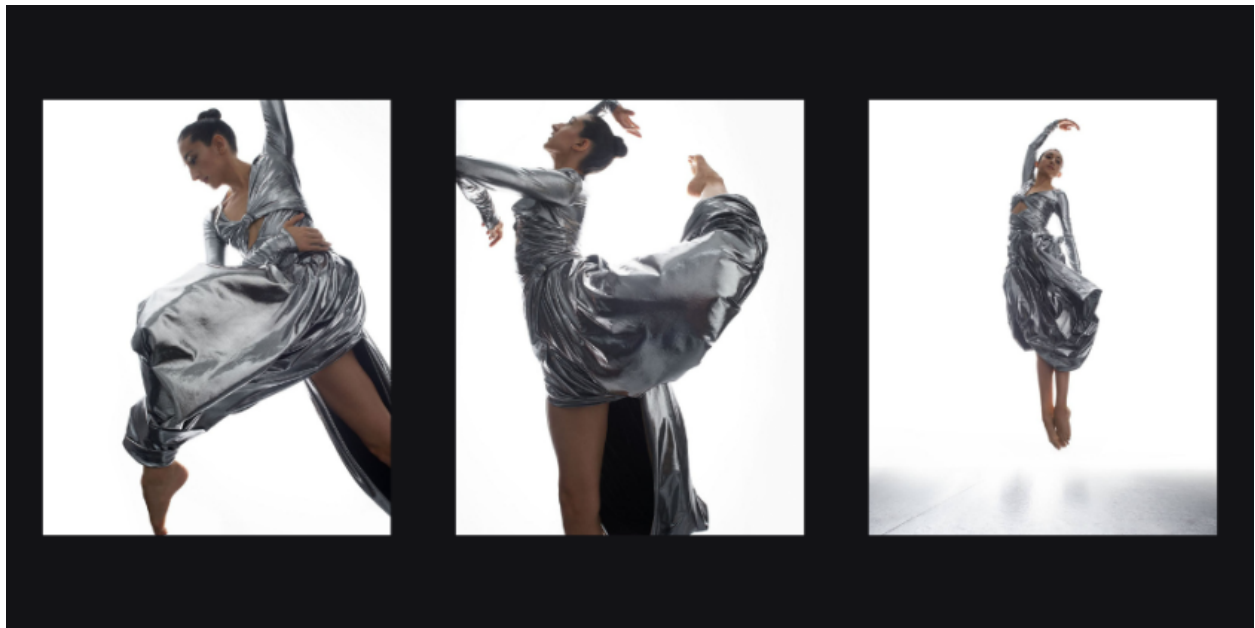


IMPRESSIONS: Stephen Petronio Company in “Breath of the Beast” at NYU Skirball



By Sarah Cecilia Bukowski

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Larissa Asebedo; photo by Sarah Silver

Choreography & Concept: Stephen Petronio

Original Score & Performance: Jennifer Koh

Dancers: Larissa Asebedo, Liviya England, Jaqlin Medlock, Tess Montoya, Ryan Pliss, Nicholas Sciscione

Guest Artist: Jerron Herman

Understudy: Deniz Erkan Sanack

Costume Design: Michelle Rhee

Lighting Designer: Ken Tabachnick

Production Manager: Joe Doran

Stage Manager: Jessie Ksanznak

Sound Engineer: Paul Vazquez

With over forty years of dancemaking under his belt, [Stephen Petronio](#) treads the boundary between renegade and establishment. Long recognized for his cutting-edge movement language and slick aesthetic, his company has shifted from a single-choreographer model toward a repertory platform to showcase the historical lineage and emerging future of modern and contemporary dance. As a choreographer, Petronio clearly still has creative energy to spare — a fact that allows his own oeuvre to span past, present, and future.



Stephen Petronio; photo by Sarah Silver

The choreographer's latest creation, "Breath of the Beast," lets us into his world in an intimate (if sometimes contrived) look at his creative process. Joining the company's six superb artists are

guest artist [Jerron Herman](#) and violinist [Jennifer Koh](#), who plays her commissioned score live on stage. Petronio himself acts as our emcee for the first portion, which operates almost as a lecture demonstration or prelude to a more formally-staged work. While this format draws the audience into personal dimensions of the artist's worldview and methods, it does little to illuminate the merit of the work itself, which stands firmly on its own.



Jerron Herman; photo by Adrian Mccourt // Jennifer Koh; photo by Juergen Frank

A casual opening finds dancers trickling onto the silent stage in practice clothes. The stage itself is in its “practice clothes” too, with the grid descended upstage and the house and work lights still on. Herman takes the space first, drawing out juicy slides and wide arm swings as he explores spiraling dimensions guided by the weight of his head. As the dancers accumulate, they noodle around to warm up their bodies and mark snippets of material alone and in pairs. Their relaxed tone and alternately playful and introspective demeanors bring into focus the depth of their kinesthetic knowledge and the rigorous precision of their craft.

Petronio bursts on the scene to break the spell and charge the group with fresh energy through improvised games of “reading” and copying movement. This “playback” method is the keystone of Petronio’s creative process, which he explains as a sequence of improvising, interpreting, building variations, and remembering through his body and the dancers’ bodies. The word “collaboration” is never used, though the individual creative voices and physical idiosyncrasies of the artists are undoubtedly essential to the process of fleshing out improvised material into fixed choreography.

In addition to the nuts and bolts of his process, Petronio also dives into his motivations to frame (or justify) his work's non-narrative yet highly emotive tone. "Breath of the Beast" draws particularly from traces of pandemic-era affective states and spatial restrictions that illuminate the dimensions of dance as a source of solace, pleasure, and community. The choreographer channels his frustrations — narrated in a long list of "things that get under my skin" — through the dancers to find solutions, temporary or otherwise, to metaphysical and quotidian problems. And with that, the grid rises, the house lights dim, and we venture forth into the dance.

Larissa Asebedo; photo by Sarah Silver



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Notable Quotes:

“Now clad in Michelle Rhee’s slinky silver costumes, the dancers fully inhabit a dazzling spectrum of daring boldness and intricate delicacy.”

“They’re angels descended to earth, conduits for our shared humanity, and radiant artists in their own right.”

“With over forty years of dancemaking under his belt, Stephen Petronio treads the boundary between renegade and establishment.”