

Even Unplugged, Stephen Petronio Company Rocks Out

IN **VANTAGE POINTE - JANE FRIES** / BY **JANE FRIES** / ON JUNE 23, 2016 AT 6:25 AM /

photo credit: Grant Friedman

by Jane Fries for The Dance Journal

After 32 years of making dances, acclaimed New York choreographer Stephen Petronio says it's his dancers who inspire him to continue creating new work. It's easy to understand why, because in Stephen Petronio Company's "Unplugged" performance at Christ Church Neighborhood House on Tuesday the troupe's eight dancers went for broke, and it felt like nothing could have stopped their bodies from moving. The dances selected for the performance (the company's first in Philadelphia) were presented stripped down, without their original costumes and lighting designs. The spotlight was on the inexhaustible ways the body can move, and the audience was drawn into the gorgeous physicality of the dancing. Petronio's postmodern lineage was particularly clear in seeing the dances sans their usual theatrical decoration; his non-narrative, pure-dance choreography pushed further down the path forged by the likes of Merce Cunningham, Steve Paxton, and Trisha Brown.

MiddleSexGorge was choreographed by Petronio in 1990, during the height of the AIDS crisis, when Petronio was literally laying his body on the line, getting arrested and hauled into a police van while protesting with the activist group Act Up. He channeled his anger about the devastation wreaked by the disease and the fight for recognition of the gay community into a work of art: *MiddleSexGorge*, a major landmark in Petronio's choreographic career. Set to music by British rock band Wire, the dance matched the music in punk energy. The lyrics repeatedly asked "Are you hot?" and the dancers answered resoundingly in the affirmative. The entire company (four women and four men) took the stage with big, slicing, slashing arms and legs. They pulled the movement in close, under control, and then let loose, hurling body parts furiously through space, only to regain control again. The movement was abstract, it was wild and sensual, and it communicated the visceral spirit of the moment when Petronio created it.

Also on the program, *Non Locomotor* (2015) juxtaposed a single, compact female dancer against three long-limbed male dancers. The performers attacked the movement with strength and vitality, and their circular running patterns, accented with soaring leaps and high-flying legs, were thrilling to witness. They converted their initial

locomotive action into internalized energy as the dance developed – a movement initiated by a dancer's toe could transfer up the leg, undulate through the torso, and exit the body through the swing of an arm. Duets emerged where the motion traveled freely from one body into the other. The original electronic music contributed by Clams Casino propelled the energy of the dance. Davalois Fearon, the female dancer, was especially spellbinding to watch. Her gestures, large and small, seemed completely natural – as if she were not performing at all.

Stephen Petronio has been on the scene in Philadelphia recently with a collaborative installation involving visual artist Janine Antoni and postmodern dance “godmother” Anna Halprin at The Fabric Workshop and Museum called **ALLY** (running through the end of July). His company's “Unplugged” performance was planned as a complement to **ALLY**, in order to bring his choreographic work closer to Philadelphia audiences. Petronio introduced the two works on the program himself and took questions from the audience. The vibe was friendly and informal – an insider's view of what goes on in the company. The evening's excellent dancers included Davalois Fearon, Kyle Filley, Gino Grenek, Jaqlin Medlock, Tess Montoya, Nicholas Sciscione, Emily Stone, and Joshua Tuason.