

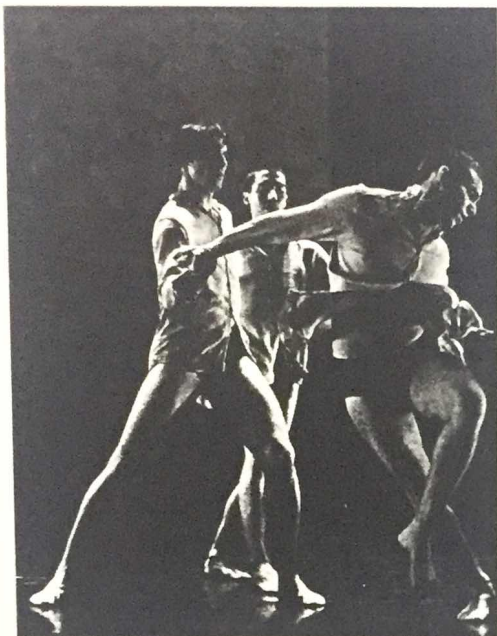
STEPHEN PETRONIO COMPANY

JOYCE THEATER

DECEMBER 15-20, 1998

REVIEWED BY ROSE ANNE THOM

In the solo that opens *Not Garden*, which received its New York premiere at the Joyce, Stephen Petronio presents himself as a postmodern Pierrot. Costumed all in white, with floppy sleeves hanging over his wrists and pant legs



Tom Brazil

Fluid—Philip Gardner, Todd Williams, and Ori Flomin in *Not Garden*.

drooping around his ankles, Petronio flings his limbs puppetlike; he unfurls them randomly from his torso as if they were a succession of New Year's Eve party blowers that then curl back into the body as if the flow of air were suddenly stopped. Petronio slinks and slides and slithers with a fluid articulation that undermines a first impression of inspired improvisation. When his arms and legs suddenly extend and stop with breathless precision into a photographic image suspended in the air, the contrast is stunning. Petronio's turns metamorphose into startling leaps without warning, then deflate just as unexpectedly into precocious, sensual noodling.

The impact of this solo is greatly enhanced by Diamanda Galas's vibrant singing of "Ave Maria." The familiarity of the music grounds and substantiates the impulsiveness of the solo. In the subsequent sections of the work, which are performed by the five men and five women who make up Petronio's excellent company, the accompanying music is less complementary. David Linton's score for Act I with clusters of sound—crushed glass, buzzing static, whistles, eruptions of percussion instruments—replacing

rhythmic or melodic invention fails to support the dancing, much of which is built on movement ideas established in the solo.

Another distinction between the solo and the group choreography that follows is the intrusion of set designer Tal Yarden's text on the latter. Projected onto a scrim before the dancers and a screen behind them are words—names of famous and infamous twentieth-century people, then events—and eventually paintings of scenes and objects by Stephen Hannock. These inevitably draw our attention from the dancers and lure us into authenticating their connection to the dancing.

When the choreography transcends the barrage of sound and visual apparatus, the imagery is memorable. The group choreography is begun by three men on a diagonal line, who, with heads bowed and arms held tight to their torsos, deliberately raise themselves from the ground, rotating with a steadfastness that is mesmerizing. The other dancers appear and disappear randomly, sometimes coalescing into richly designed units. Restating Petronio's propellant circle of the arm, they also echo the dynamic extremities of his explosive technical virtuosity. A sequence for two couples initiates partnering with an ambiguous intimacy. Todd Williams's solo rivets attention through the amazing speed and clarity of his dancing. As Act I concludes, the dancers' interaction has become violent; their final plunge to the floor is apocalyptic.

The smoky aftermath of Act II accompanied by the human chanting and bird calls of Sheila Chandra's score is subdued and perplexing. Costumed completely in black, Petronio mysteriously reappears. He is then supported by two vertical ropes as he takes a precarious lunge forward. His dancers search the skies and wander off, leaving a solitary woman standing. ■