

Dance Magazine

Still on the Edge

By Valerie Gladstone



Michael Badger, Stephen Petronio, and Amanda Wells

Stephen Petronio set Shila Tirabassi spinning in a circle, releasing her only when she stopped abruptly and shot her back leg out in arabesque. “Perfect,” he said, moving away as she turned on the diagonal, allowing space for Amanda Wells to leap forward in a series of explosive jetés. “Good, good,” he cheered.

His other dancers practiced moves on the sidelines at the Joyce SoHo studio in Manhattan. They had been performing steadily for months, and, back in December, had returned from a six-week tour of England. “That’s it,” he called out as the women finished the vigorous sequence in a sweat. “It’s beautiful.”

He had just begun choreographing *I Drink the Air Before Me*, the evening-length dance that will mark his April season at the Joyce Theater. This year his company’s 25th anniversary provides an opportunity to look back over his career as well as look forward.

Linda Shelton, executive director of the Joyce, watched Petronio develop, starting in the 1980s. She saw him at various downtown venues in one-night performances. Now he has an annual weeklong engagement at her theater. “Stephen is one of the few choreographers with a distinctive style,” she says. “I love the furious pace, his seemingly inexhaustible store of idiosyncratic steps, and wildly inventive juxtapositions of movement. There’s no one like him. People ask who is the next Merce Cunningham or the next Paul Taylor. It’s Stephen.”

Petronio had no idea he would come this far. “In the early years,” he says, “I tricked myself into staying by having a company temporarily. It was so much fun in the studio,” he said, but he couldn’t make ends meet financially. “I constantly told myself that I would stop after the next dance—until I finally just relaxed into the rhythm of that dichotomy.”

To celebrate his anniversary, Petronio, who is 53, decided to expand his troupe to 12 and to choreograph something new rather than offer a retrospective of his works. He was inspired by extreme and unpredictable weather to create *I Drink the Air Before Me*, which has plenty of swirling and spiraling movement to evoke tornadoes and hurricanes—not surprising from an artist known for his fierce, vigorous, quicksilver choreography. He commissioned hip young composer Nico Muhly to write an original score for acoustic instruments, electronics, and voice to be performed live by his chamber ensemble and the Young People’s Chorus of New York City. He asked visual artist Cindy Sherman to design an elaborate costume for him and longtime collaborator Ken Tabachnick (who also happens to be general manager of New York City Ballet) to create the lighting.

“My job is to make things that are just beyond my grasp from last year,” says Petronio, who looks almost as young as his dancers in his loose pants and sleeveless T-shirt. “It’s nice to dream big.”

He takes risks whenever possible, demonstrating a talent for successfully collaborating with big names like Laurie Anderson, Lou Reed, Rufus Wainwright, and Antony Hegarty and visual artists like Sherman and Anish Kapoor. “I’ve always been interested in pop culture, photography, film, and the visual arts,” he says. “Those things formed me. I didn’t have access to dance history. My tools have been more filmic and photographic.” Perhaps for this reason, he attracts a decidedly glamorous audience; in the 1980s Rudolf Nureyev, Jackie Kennedy Onassis, and Andy Warhol attended his performances at The Joyce.

A few days after the rehearsal, at the cozy farmhouse in upstate New York that he shares with his husband, Jean-Marc Flack, Petronio described how he fell into dance accidentally at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts, a liberal arts school he chose as an arts-starved teenager growing up in Nutley, New Jersey. In his sophomore year, a friend suggested he try a contact improvisation class, an experience he compares to being hit with a thunderbolt. From that point on, dance took over his life. He spent the next two years learning as much as possible from the revolutionary co-founder of contact improvisation, Steve Paxton.

After graduating, Petronio headed to New York, where he discovered Trisha Brown, who was already a major figure in the downtown dance scene. Until then, she had not included male dancers as permanent members in her company. But in 1979, attracted to his silky, muscular style, she invited him to join her group, where he happily stayed for seven years. Not surprisingly, his two major influences, Paxton and Brown, also shared an affinity for one another and often performed together. From the beginning, he wanted to choreograph as much as to dance, and Brown encouraged him in that direction.

Looking back on his dances from the early to mid ’80s, he first mentions the hilarious and surreal *Adrift (With Clifford Arnell)*, with a nerdy title character who wore a suit and glasses and moved

in a jerky, Chaplinesque way. In #3 he portrayed a cabaret performer, basing the movements on photographs of well-known singers like Judy Garland. It was a precursor of all the riveting solos that were to come. *Broken Man* from 2002 stands out as one of the most affecting in the way he embodies a completely devastated and confused human being, trying to no avail to become whole.

“Things were tough at the beginning,” Petronio says. “It was a question of begging, borrowing, and holding things together with tape until I became comfortable asking for financial support. When I moved from wanting to satisfy myself to engaging others as a way of life, it became much easier to seek support.” As he presented these works at the Danspace Project and Dance Theater Workshop, he began to get a name for himself in downtown dance.

At the same time, the AIDS crisis was looming. Though he participated in the activist group ACT UP, he believed he should do more in the studio for the cause. Out of this conviction came some of his most highly sexual and provocative works.

“I started making movement that came from the pelvis, embracing the reproductive parts of the body,” Petronio says. “It was flung forward, aggressive and slashing.” No work exemplifies this period so clearly as the thrilling and shocking *Middlesex Gorge* from 1990, which he refers to as “my sexual anthem.” With the dancers dressed in corsets, their buttocks bare, and a menacing score by the punk band Wire, the piece caused an uproar in the media.

During these years, he was dating another angry young man, the English dancer/choreographer Michael Clark. They performed in each other’s works, sometimes nude, and choreographed a violent and brutal dance to Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* together. But as the ’90s wore on, Petronio returned to more formal composition and pattern making. The most memorable example, the beautiful *Lareigne*, is based partly on a triplet. Instead of concentrating on the movement of the torso he made it more about locomotion and moving through space.

Like most Americans, Petronio was horrified by September 11 and wanted to choreograph a piece that would capture the impact of that terrible experience on New Yorkers. He began developing various character studies and assigning them to his dancers. When the highly dramatic *City of Twist*, with music by Laurie Anderson, had its premiere at the Joyce in October 2002, audiences saw a whole new side to him: He was still a genius at structure but could also convey the emotions of a dreadful time.

Since then he has followed an almost double path, one year choreographing primarily with architectural space in mind, and the next concerning himself with emotion. An example of the latter is the moving *Bloom*, which is accompanied by a children’s choir singing poems by Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Last year, he made a funny and erotic dance called *Beauty and the Brut*, where a female dancer enacts the lyrics of a song about the mixed emotions of a Frenchwoman being seduced by an awkward American on a beach.

No one shows more enthusiasm for Petronio’s work than his dancers. “Stephen’s committed to pure, exhilarating movement,” says Gino Grenek, “and he allows your individualism to emerge.” Wells says, “We explore the connective tissue, the transitions from one movement to

the next. The question becomes, Where does this movement initiate from? It is a highly intellectual process of remembering where all the movement is derived from. And it's an immense physical challenge to keep things light, clear, and efficient." The objective, says Tirabassi, is "to get our energy to touch the audience in some way."

All of Petronio's dancers have ballet training, and a few have performed with major ballet companies. Petronio has also choreographed for companies such as the Ballett Frankfurt, Lyon Opera Ballet, and Scottish Ballet. "I love the facility and pyrotechnics of ballet dancers," he says. "To dance my work, they have to let go of the rigidity of the spine. Once they do, it's exciting to see the combination of their fluidity and my movement."

Petronio's devotion to the art is absolute, and he has great fun working at it. He does, of course, want other things for his company: a permanent dance home, more consistent work, and health benefits. He also wants to have a summer dance retreat and festival in the country.

Right now, things are good. But one senses that he could master bad times as well. "This coming period in my life is about continuing my daily practice, deepening my creative process, and teaching my language with a modicum of stability." Then he adds, referring to his approach to choreography, "To be engaged with a problem is divinely satisfying."

Valerie Gladstone writes about the arts for The New York Times, Boston Globe and other publications. She co-authored A Young Dancer: The Life of an Ailey Student.