



Training: BA from Hampshire College; studied contact improvisation under Steve Paxton

Performance: Trisha Brown Dance Company (1979–86)

Choreography: Founded Stephen Petronio Company in 1984; has created works for Ballet Frankfurt, the Scottish Ballet and The Washington Ballet

A Conversation with Choreographer Stephen Petronio

BY RACHEL RIZZUTO

Lately, Stephen Petronio has been obsessed with the past. Take, for example, the five-year *Bloodlines* series he's initiated for his eponymous dance company. For it, he selects historic works of the choreographers from his personal dance family tree, like Trisha Brown (he was her company's first male dancer), Merce Cunningham (whose artistic collaborations he sought to emulate) and Steve Paxton (his improvisation mentor). The works are then set on and performed by Petronio's eight company members. There's also the memoir he recently published, *Confessions of a Motion Addict*, recounting his nearly four-decade career and occasionally enfant terrible youth—which he wrote while creating a dance inspired by childhood memories.

This month, however, he's firmly in the present. He and his company will take on the role of dance ambassadors, traveling to Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam on a DanceMotion USA tour.

On making it work in the early days of his company "I had a very cheap apartment on St. Mark's Place. I think I was paying \$250 a month. And Trisha gave me the basement of her building for \$100 a month—5,000 square feet. She really instilled in me that it was super-important to pay people. The first dancers were paid out of my checkbook. I think they were making \$5 an hour."

On *Bloodlines* "It's very personal. [Trisha Brown's] *Glacial Decoy* was a first choice because it was a piece that totally influenced me. I walked into her studio as a young dancer, and they had just finished it. I saw Trisha dance it. To bring that work back is to bring her back to me. To see my women embracing this piece—it's exciting. For [Cunningham's] *RainForest*, we had three of Merce's dancers from different generations come in. It was so emotional, to get all of that perspective. At the beginning, I thought this project was a really good idea, but it's actually been life-changing for us."

Why he wrote a book "I was working on a dance that was giving me a lot of intangible problems. It was called *Ghometown*, about creating something that was no longer there. So I began writing down my memories from childhood, because I thought they might somehow make their way into the dance, on some level. Then I began posting them on Facebook, and people began to respond with their stories. Something about my early childhood stories really tripped off theirs. That's the first time anything like that ever happened to me—and I've been putting stuff out into the world for a very long time. Eventually someone said, 'Well, when are you going to publish this?'" **DT**