

Dance**Stephen Petronio, Joyce Theater, New York — anarchic and beautiful**

A premiere illustrated how other choreographers have affected Petronio's work



Stephen Petronio's 'Hardness 10' © Sarah Silver
Apollinaire Scherr YESTERDAY

In modern dance — a world so tiny that everyone knows each other's mother — the modernist ethos of originality doesn't have a chance.

Even so, Stephen Petronio is unusual in making his influences so public and so palpable. A few years ago, the 62-year-old's ensemble began tracing his "bloodlines" — performing the work of artistic kin alongside his own dances.

This year the honour goes to Merce Cunningham. His spare six-person *Signals*, from 1970, smacks of the fun and cruelty of a game. In this case, the trick may also be on the dancers. The choreography's extreme demands — a long balance with one leg stretched in the air, say, followed by the torso's sudden plunge to the floor — leave the performers utterly exposed.

On opening night, Petronio's brave, young virtuosic troupers betrayed a sober terror. The pleasure came later, in noticing how Petronio's deep investment in Cunningham, as well as in the work of Judson Dance Theater mavericks Yvonne Rainer and Steve Paxton in recent years, has affected this mature artist's choreography.

The season premiere, *Hardness 10*, began with a favourite Judson activity: walking. These pedestrians, however, moved in diamantine formations that split and reassembled to charge the space. Eventually dancers peeled off for rash, voluptuous solos. As in Cunningham, two distinct tempos took the stage at once.

The dance for seven featured Petronio's trademark contrasting of slashing limbs with velvety pliés. But to the bouts of slicing and sinking he added spells of stillness familiar from Cunningham, though with human forbearance replacing Cunningham's alert animal hush.

With past Petronio pieces, when hints of drama did not come to fruition I felt disappointed. But like a Cunningham or Trisha Brown piece, *Hardness 10* rejects the mounting arc of drama for constant impersonal change. The gloomy Nico Muhly score for intermittent bells and electric viola da gamba (played gorgeously by Liam Byrne on a platform upstage) was similarly even-toned.

Assured of the dance's continual ephemerality, you could relax and get absorbed in the action onstage as it grew more tangled and anarchic yet remained always sombre, strange and beautiful.

★★★★☆

To March 25, joyce.org

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