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A Turbulent Voyage Marks a Magical Ship Captain's 25 Years of Dance

By GIA KOURLAS APRIL 29, 2009

Stephen Petronio's "I Drink the Air Before Me," performed at the Joyce Theater on Tuesday night, begins where none of his other dances have: aboard a ship. Scrim in the shape of a sail is pinned to one side of the stage; the choreographer, with the costuming help of the artist Cindy Sherman, is its craggy, bearded captain, dressed in a nautical jacket, chaps and rubber hip boots over jeans.

During the preshow, Mr. Petronio remains in character, docking his ship by hooking ropes throughout the theater. Grunting at audience members to get out of his way, he eventually climbs onto scaffolding — his crow's nest — where he recites a paraphrase of a folk lyric: "I won't be your man at all if I can't be your salty dog." Soon after, he disappears.



From left, Davalois Fearon, Mandy Kirschner and Shila Tirabassi performing in “I Drink the Air Before Me” at the Joyce Theater. *Andrea Mohin/The New York Times*

Named after a line from Shakespeare’s “Tempest,” the dance is inspired by a raging storm. Like Mr. Petronio’s choreography, the score, by Nico Muhly, evokes turbulent undercurrents in which the frantic sounds of flute and strings are woven with the more tumultuous notes of a trombone and piano. Without being literal, the music and choreography create a sonic, ephemeral wave.

For the work, created in celebration of his 25 years in dance, Mr. Petronio opted for something new instead of a retrospective. His bizarre impersonation of a captain marks a departure, but the bulk of “I Drink the Air Before Me” assembles his usual tools: ferocious speed, rigorous structure and dancers who ravel and unravel like ribbons.

Groups of bodies swell and dissipate like squalls, though while the scene is frequently forceful, the relentless choreography is only part of the picture. Mr. Petronio’s movement also reverberates as an energetic echo, moving past the physical form to etch invisible lines and patterns onto his canvas, the stage. Amanda Wells, arching her back, swirls her legs and arms as if swept by wind. Gino Grenek whips his body across the stage like a funnel cloud. And Shila Tirabassi, a force of nature herself, elongates her reach with every movement to impart sensual fluidity.

When the violent rush of bodies threatens to overwhelm, Mr. Petronio calms things down. The Young People’s Chorus of New York City joins the dancers onstage to sing the work’s choral finale, “One Day Tells Its Tale to Another.” Their innocence softens the fury; the sea is finally still, and Mr. Petronio has weathered a perfect storm.

Stephen Petronio Company continues through Sunday at the Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue, at 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 242-0800, joyce.org.