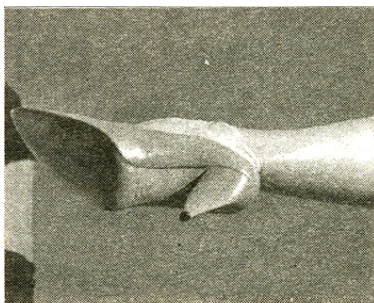


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STEPHEN PETRONIO COMPANY | TUES.-SUN., MARCH 22-27

STEPHEN PETRONIO'S BEEN gleaming hot on the international dance scene since his breakout gig as modern maven Trisha Brown's first male dancer. At the helm of the Stephen Petronio Company since 1984, he's a burgeoning nova of startling movement, bridging topical relevance with a dynamic grace toward his audience. There's some innate, canny trust and advocacy that aligns Petronio's work with people's smarts and receptivity. It's tough to name; it means you sense but will probably never quite see all a Petronio piece has to offer.

The Petronio Company's Joyce Theater season concludes a 20th anniversary that's ranged from a premiere for London's Dance Umbrella Festival's own anniversary in '03, to last year's commission for the Sydney Dance Company to Nick Cave music and the company's participation in this January's opening of Copenhagen's sleek new Royal Theater. The Joyce bill finds a pair of definitive, early-90s works back in the company's active repertoire; elegant and hard-hitting, *MiddleSexGorge* and *Lareigne* provide vivid background for newer audiences who've discovered Petronio through his recent, evening-length pieces: 1998's Dante-esque *Not Garden*; *Strange Attractors* and its super-heroic transformations to Michael Nyman's strings and piano score and James Lavelle's drum 'n bass; and the ambitious *City of Twist/Island of Misfit Toys*, which Petronio opened with a daunting solo, transposing that lightning eloquence onto a suite of solos by his dancers before culminating with *Island's* lurid ensemble venture.

Completing works of such scope, in a time when dance-world vicissitudes have forced other prominent companies to scale back, has had Petronio alternating annual Joyce programs that premiere his full works, with those combining work in progress and segments from the company's touring program. The opener to *Strange Attractors* returns to the Joyce stage; it's a concise marvel of punk nerve disrupting a classical frieze. The world premiere of *bud*, a male duet to Rufus Wainwright's choral pop, brings a glimpse of the company's latest project, *Bloom*. Danced by Gino Grenek, whose ardent and impeccable extensions startled in his *City* solo, and Thang Dao, the bounding bandit-in-pajamas who personified *Island's* troubling horde, the new duet flows and ebbs about the stage with a grating intimacy and sets a fresh mark of beauty and unease among Petronio couples. That the program then delves into his trove of volatile accomplishments is both outlandish and edifying, with Petronio's lean eight-member company dancing the early pieces with fierce precision and bravado.

"I remember the feeling that fear and faith needn't contradict one another," said Stephen Greco, Bessie Award committee member and *Dance* magazine contributor, while discussing the early-90s works on the phone. "Stephen is an utterly masterful technician in terms of manifesting those contradictory body languages: the fears and pleasures of eros, self-regard, the future. He's also that rare artist whose vision and means have deepened and [grown richer] over the years. Stephen does something New York needs, something that's heroic, neo-Romantic."

When the word "brash" is applied to *MiddleSexGorge* and *Lareigne*, Greco responded that "brash is such a comely word to describe what Stephen does. He never trades just on brashness; he uses it as a portal to get to further places. He has a lot of insights on the body, adding the bad-boy impulse to get our attention. He's a cultural critic as well as a sensitive artist." Greco termed *Strange Attractors* "quite a masterpiece," and defined Petronio's overarching accuracy in terms "not only of shape and structure, but by the measure of dramaturgy."

Choreographer Ralph Lemon, whose *Come Home Charlie Patton* at BAM last season culminated his acclaimed *Geography Trilogy*, commends "the severe movement investigation" of Petronio's work. Lemon recalls Petronio on stage with Trisha Brown, saying "his dancing was lovely because there was a certain amount of natural naivete to it, yet there was something very crucial about the way he moved—Trisha didn't just pick a guy; she picked Stephen."

"And his work remains remarkably natural," Lemon continued. "It continues to be transgressive, especially now with so much in dance moving away from pure movement concerns. He's a kind of slap in the face of what's considered modern today. Regardless of what we as artists say we're trying to do, there's always a vital attempt to engage. From my point of view, Stephen has gone through lots of opinions on that: from those early days as a luscious dancer, to transgressor, to movement genius. And now on to this new phase of terrible beauty he's bringing to us."

The Joyce Theater, 175 8th Ave. (19th St.), 212-242-0800; Tues.-Sat. at 8, Sun. at 2 & 7:30, \$40.

—Alan Lockwood