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CRITIC'S PICK

Review: Stephen Petronio Pledges Allegiance to a Dance Lineage



Ernesto Breton and Jaqlin Medlock of the Stephen Petronio Company in Merce Cunningham's "Tread," part of *Bloodlines*. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

By [Gia Kourlas](#)

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For the choreographer Stephen Petronio, [Bloodlines](#) developed out of a reverence for what had come before him. The initiative, now in its fifth season, was a way to both preserve American postmodern dance and pay homage to his influences. It's accomplished more than that: It has breathed new life into his company.

Bloodlines began in 2015 with Merce Cunningham's "RainForest." Now the Petronio dancers are at even greater ease with Cunningham repertory as seen in the company premiere of "Tread" (1970), its third Cunningham work, presented at N.Y.U. Skirball on Thursday. A playful dance, "Tread" has a set by Bruce Nauman: 10 tall industrial fans placed in a row across the front of the stage. They blow air out at the audience and at times obscure the dancers. It's funny.

But another Bloodlines addition, also from 1970, was even more precious: [Rudy Perez's "Coverage Revisited."](#) At Judson Dance Theater, the 1960s experimental collective, Mr. Perez was a rarity: an artist of color. In "Coverage," Mr. Perez focuses on fluctuating states of conformity and nonconformity with a dancer — the lithe Ernesto Breton — dressed as a construction worker in a white jumpsuit and a blue hard hat.

[\[Read about Rudy Perez and the revival of "Coverage"\]](#)

He tapes a square on the floor and removes his jumpsuit; now in shorts, he has the freedom to jump and run within the space. But it's a tiny space to pledge allegiance to; in the end, he rips the tape off the floor — systematically and without emotion — while the song "God Bless America" plays. Finally, he removes his hat, brings it down across his chest and pauses slightly over his heart; he isn't finished until it firmly rests over his crotch. The affecting "Coverage" is quiet and defiant at once.



The company in the premiere of Mr. Petronio's "American Landscapes."
Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Mr. Petronio capped the program with a new work of his own, "American Landscapes," in which he questions what it means to be an American in 2019. It begins with a prelude: The movement therapist and dance educator Martha Eddy (in a blue jumpsuit) walks onto the stage with Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States" (it's white); Mr. Petronio (in a red jumpsuit) soon follows.

To the Chris Isaak song "Wicked Game," they lean on each other, an image of mutual give-and-take that returns later in the work. At another point, Ms. Eddy, alone, rushes toward the audience while extending her arms and curling them back with increasing speed. What starts out as a simple action shapes into an imploring one.

When the dancers enter the space, the music switches to a spare, almost soothing composition by Jozef Van Wissem and Jim Jarmusch — it's a combination of lute, acoustic guitar and electric guitar. "Landscapes" also features an arresting backdrop of changing images [by the artist Robert Longo](#). In the foreground, dancers, sleekly costumed by H. Petal, etch geometric patterns onto the stage in front of numerous scenes: a barren forest, an exploding bomb, a soldier walking down a street, a torn flag.

"Landscapes" seems to be in conversation with "Glacial Decoy," a luminous 1979 collaboration between Robert Rauschenberg and Trisha Brown that featured a slide show of photographs. (Mr. Petronio danced in Ms. Brown's company.) But "Landscapes" is also a work of Mr. Petronio's own design, full of his recognizable swoops and twists that both fight and fuel a body's momentum.

Within this surging scene are fleeting moments in which the dancers quote aspects of American life and culture. There is Rosie the Riveter; after we see an image of a football player, two dancers take a knee. At times, it can feel obvious, but the meditative nature of the dance saves it from becoming too didactic.

It also ends well. In the bristling conclusion, the dancers rush to the front of the stage echoing Ms. Eddy's swimming arms and then, just as suddenly, pivot while raising an arm in the air with a slightly wilted wrist. It could be the Statue of Liberty. She's hanging on, but just barely.

Stephen Petronio Company
Through Saturday at N.Y.U. Skirball, Manhattan; nyuskirball.org

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