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## Upstart With the Marks of Experience

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO

THERE is something ridiculous about asking Stephen Petronio how he wants his dances to live on when he's no longer around to look after them. This svelte, handsome choreographer is only 54. Vibrant tattoos snake along his arms, an enduring stamp of his rebellious punk roots.



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times  
The choreographer Stephen Petronio  
in rehearsal at the Mark Morris Dance  
Center.

But it's a short road from subversive upstart to established presence. On Monday the Stephen Petronio Company will perform at the Joyce Theater's spring gala before wrapping up its 25th anniversary season with a weeklong stint there beginning April 27.

Mr. Petronio has racked up a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Bessie Award; commissions from the likes of Lyon Opera Ballet and William Forsythe's former company, Ballet Frankfurt; numerous international tours; and a Who's Who of collaborators, including Cindy Sherman and Rufus Wainwright. His company of nine is beginning plans to find a permanent home, a center for collaborative arts. Tattoos or no, he's at that midcareer point when questions of legacy sneak into the conversation.

"There are some touchstone works that really caught a cultural moment," he said over lunch in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, after a company rehearsal at the Mark Morris Dance Center. "I would like them to take their place in history the way a painting takes its place in history. If we can't preserve our form, it will disappear."

It's strange to begin grappling with safeguarding your art while still honing your voice. But dance, more than any other form — and especially modern dance, that idiosyncratic tradition — compels questions of mortality early on. Like the people who make it, it is forever disappearing.

Meanwhile technological innovations and the visual art world's growing interest in presenting and collecting performance are shifting perceptions and stirring debate about preservation. Ms. Sherman, for instance, said

she was of “mixed mind” about how best to serve ephemeral art, though she emphasized the importance of putting performance “on equal terms” with visual art.

“But it’s different when something is choreographed for performers as opposed to an artist-performer who is making a personal expression,” she wrote in an e-mail message. “Something is lost — but perhaps something can be gained.”



Frank Thompson/Stephen Petronio Company,  
via Associated Press

A 2005 performance of his piece “MiddleSexGorge,”  
featuring Thang Dao and Elena Demianenko.

One of Mr. Petronio’s touchstone works is “MiddleSexGorge,” a 1990 dance that will be performed at the Joyce along with a premiere, “Ghostown”; “Foreign Import,” (2007), a trio created for the Scottish Ballet; and “#3,” a 1986 solo that Mr. Petronio himself will dance. “MiddleSexGorge” was created while Mr. Petronio was working with Act Up, the activist group dedicated to fighting AIDS. He sought to respond choreographically — and non-narratively — to the experience of being arrested during demonstrations.

“His work has a certain sensibility that speaks to me about something in the ’80s and ’90s and beyond that’s important,” said Deborah Jowitt, the historian and Village Voice critic, noting that when he began choreographing, those “were very difficult, troubled times, difficult for artists.”

With its relentless waves of whiplash movement, postpunk score by Wire and outré H. Petal costumes (including bare buttocks and pink corset tops for the men), “MiddleSexGorge” epitomizes Mr. Petronio’s style, as well as his pointed politics.

“It came out of such an amazingly alive period of understanding that thrust of the pelvis and that slash of the arms and that anger, that sexual anger about control and loss of control and all the issues we were fighting for in the late ’80s in terms of recognition of the gay community,” he said. Teaching it to a new generation of dancers is “changing the way they dance the new work, and I like that a lot,” he said. “It’s like going back to speak Latin before you speak French.”

Unlike many younger choreographers Mr. Petronio proudly claims both a technique and a language. (“Movement-based dance has gone in and out of style about six times in my career,” he said.) These are taught by Mr. Petronio and his dancers at the Pop Up School, a series of roving workshops.

At a master class at Peridance Capezio Center below Union Square, Mr. Petronio observed as Julian De Leon taught the students a phrase. Occasionally he interrupted, emphasizing fundamentals of anatomy or

philosophical and emotional impulses. As Mr. De Leon corrected the students and Mr. Petronio in turn corrected him, it was hard not to think of this fraught transmission between bodies as a game of telephone in which miscommunications were inevitable. What would it be like if Mr. Petronio weren't in the room?

"We can hold our arms out and make it look like it does in the video," said Shila Tirabassi, who has been with the company since 2001 and also serves as rehearsal director. But one tweak by him, she said, "can totally recreate the same step."

These crucial tweaks happened continually in the Fort Greene rehearsal of "MiddleSexGorge." "The sequencing of energy, the spiraling and torquing of energy in the space, the figure eights that live in the body, the spirals that surround the spine — those are universal principles of motion," Mr. Petronio said later. "They are codified, and they can be communicated."

But how to communicate the nitty-gritty of these principles? When the dancer Amanda Wells suggested consulting the video over a moment in "MiddleSexGorge," Ms. Tirabassi wrinkled her forehead. "Can you even see it in the video?"

Documentation has its limits. Still, the Merce Cunningham Trust is putting its faith in what it calls digital Dance Capsules; that plan, unveiled shortly before Cunningham died in July, has spurred discussion among other companies.

"My board is certainly talking about it now," said Mr. Petronio, who owns the rights to his work but declined to identify his heirs. "And I think it's actually helping to stimulate the solidification of the organization so that preservation can happen, if we choose."

Meanwhile there are dances to be choreographed. "It's a difficult balance," said Nancy Umanoff, the Mark Morris Dance Group's executive director. In a field with "so little money, do you focus on preserving what you have or investing in an artist who can still make work?"

Surveying his dancers as they powered through several decades of his work, Mr. Petronio sighed. The future seemed a long way off, nothing to fret about just then. "There's something beautiful about letting it all go," he said. "Worst-case scenario, that will happen anyway."