

Newsday

'Adult' choreography for the hyper-hip crowd

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People call Stephen Petronio an "adult" choreographer, probably because his aggressive partnering hints at S&M, and goofiness is strictly absent. But with "Bloom," adulthood, how it emerges from childhood, is the very subject.

The lovely piece premiered Tuesday night before a hyper-hip crowd that included past Petronio collaborators Lou Reed and Laurie Anderson. This time around, Petronio has enlisted the exorbitant talents of singer-songwriter Rufus Wainwright.

Wainwright, who has moved Tin Pan Alley into gay Chelsea, is simultaneously innocent and worldly, given over to feeling and comically self-aware, forthright and prone to innuendo. In the tune "Vibrate," he sings of a useless passion, "My phone's on vi-brate for you." Wainwright's idea of "adult" complicates the child, but doesn't bury him.

His score for "Bloom" deploys three dozen members of Francisco Nuñez's Young People's Chorus of New York City — live — plus himself on tape. With lyrics snagged from two sensuous Walt Whitman poems and Emily Dickinson's "Hope is the Thing with Feathers," the piece layers propulsive joy over the sanctity of a Mass. The children, ages 12 to 18, hum while Wainwright sings the words.

The choreography is also glorious. At 50, two decades into his dancemaking career, Petronio just gets better and better at the Balanchinean art of swift-shifting configurations. In fashion designer Rachel Roy's wonderful quasi-Edwardian concoctions, the eight extraordinary dancers congeal into instant sculptural clusters all across the stage and disperse just as fast.

Sometimes they leave a trace in the fluctuating landscape of something beyond the physical, but they mainly generate kinetic exhilaration. When Wainwright finally arrives at Dickinson's "Hope," the dancers'



PHOTO BY CHRIS WOLTMANN

"Bloom" (pair Elena Demianenko, Jonathan Jaffe with Jimena Paz) has an original score by cross-generational hipster Rufus Wainwright.

flurries are more, well, flurry-ous, but the tone doesn't change. In fact, there is never much of an emotional undercurrent. At the center of "Bloom" and its notion of adulthood, there's no brave and somewhat ridiculous "thing with feathers."

There wouldn't need to be, if it weren't for the score. Petronio doesn't want to do the Mark Morris thing of acting out the words to love songs; he likes the distance that form can create from feeling. Fine, but then why choose someone as emotionally fluorescent as Wainwright?

In the opening duet of "Bud Suite" — the other season premiere, to four previously released

Wainwright tunes — the song gets under the choreographer's skin. To "Oh, What a World" — the singer weary with wanderlust and tender toward life — Gino Grenek and Thang Dao splay and crook their arms as if they were asking questions, then defying the answers. For the only time all night, you notice the dancers' bellies: They seem soft and vulnerable.

When Petronio penetrates past the flesh to the feathers, the dance grows younger and older at the same time.