

DANCE REVIEW

Controlled Chaos Theory, Via Superheroes

By JENNIFER DUNNING

Stephen Petronio has long been one of the brainiest and hippest of New York's modern-dance choreographers. The combination can be fatal, and Mr. Petronio has sometimes succumbed to mere cheekiness over the 15 years he has worked with his own company. But his new "Strange Attractors," performed on Tuesday night at the Joyce Theater, glows with maturity and a surprising grandeur.

"Strange Attractors" begins with a tangy, slightly nightmarish prelude. It continues with a first part that is lushly romantic like its score by Michael Nyman and put together with subtle, exquisite precision. The second and last formal section peters out a little, in part because the choreography can-

not quite hold its own with the world reflected in the large metal discs hanging over the dancers.

Eight dancers stand in a line at the front of the darkish stage in "Prelude," danced to music by Placebo. Crumpling against one another's bodies and the floor and then rising in a slow continuum of motion, they look physically and spiritually maimed, an impression reinforced by the stylishly bunched black rags they wear, designed by Imitation of Christ. From these first moments Mr. Petronio establishes the simultaneous anarchy and control of "Strange Attractors." There is clearly nothing arbitrary about this feckless-looking lineup.

When a man hurtles out onto the stage in the first moments of the next section, one understands that these cramped and needy-looking specimens are superheroes, a de-

scription that also fits Mr. Petronio's extraordinary dancers. And he has given the dancers choreography that pulls and pushes them through space without robbing them of their crucial individualism and authority.

The title "Strange Attractors" comes from chaos theory and its probing of how apparently random behavior can occur in a world governed by deterministic laws. Program notes define a strange attractor as "a moving and magnetic focal point in a seemingly chaotic field." Mr. Petronio has found the perfect analogy for his own approach to choreography.

The protean empty space between ranks and ensembles of dancers seems the closest thing to a focal point in the first section, drawing and pushing out dancers as it shifts about. They swoop across the stage, the

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Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Stephen Petronio (standing, center) and his company at the Joyce.

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men's stop-on-a-dime precision contrasting pleasantly with the women's wonderful look of rangy awkwardness.

Embedded in the flow are solos and several duets that are strong and interesting enough to stand alone. Another part of that flow is the way the dancers walk or stride purposefully off the stage, an effect that makes for a dramatic but integral close to the first section.

Mr. Petronio works with a reduced movement vocabulary in the next section, danced to gently pummeling music by James Lavelle and Richard File. His dancers might be play-

ful boxers, feinting through intricately worked patterns and staging. A motif of a bowed head, hands joined at the end of curved, drooping arms, is introduced gradually and makes for an ending that is again dramatically effective yet a seamless part of the dance.

The dancers move here beneath two discs whose surfaces contain quite another reading of the world below. Reflected lights travel like rivers through what appear to be dark voids. Spots of color suggest parameters for those voids, through which dance tiny upside-down pale-colored human beings. Designed by the sculptor Anish Kapoor, the set is lushly seductive in a way that the dancing does not match and probably was not intended to. Greedily, one wishes that Mr. Petronio had figured out how to make them one.

"Strange Attractors" was performed, with impressive physical commitment and abandon, by Michael Badger, Ana Gonzalez, Gino Grenek, Kristina Isabelle, Ashleigh Leite, Malcolm Low, Gabrielle Malone and Jimena Paz, with Mr. Petronio joining them, in "Prelude." Ken Tabachnick's lighting, simultaneously stark and rich, was choreography in itself. The sleek costumes for the two long sections were designed by Ghost.

The program will be repeated through Sunday afternoon at the Joyce (175 Eighth Avenue, at 19th Street, in Chelsea).



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

The Stephen Petronio Company in "Strange Attractors" at the Joyce Theater.

Chaos theory forged into human art

Petronio's dance breathtaking

By Octavio Roca
CHRONICLE DANCE CRITIC

Stephen Petronio's "Strange Attractors" is a major new dance from one of the most fascinating dancemakers before the public today. The 2000 piece had its Bay Area premiere Thursday night at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, and, on first impression, it is as beautiful as it is challenging.

The title is a scientific term referring to the moving magnetic focal points in a chaotic field of particles. "Strange Attractors," that is, is about chaos. For all its sculptural, abstract formal beauty, it is about coming together and breaking apart. In other words, about life.

Chaos theory, a field of inquiry in its own right, offers up rich metaphors for creators outside science. At the dull dusk of Greek philosophy, Epicurus marveled at the chaotic way in which atoms strayed away from an orderly fall. Centuries later Karl Marx, of all people, devoted his doctoral dissertation to Epicurus and found in the Greek's thought the springboard for his own curious theory of atoms and persons.

Jean-Paul Sartre, near the end of his life, tried to reconcile Marxism and humanism by placing the meaning of groups — no longer of particles but of people — precisely



Dancers unite and part in Stephen Petronio's new work "Strange Attractors."

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in the fusion of intentions of many coming together as one. Tom Stoppard, in his brilliant play "Arcadia," was not the last to use chaos theory as a way of outlining the exquisite symmetries of human relations.

Those relations, with their sublime dialectics of attraction and repulsion, are Stephen Petronio's subject in "Strange Attractors." In a prelude and two acts, Petronio develops his theme in pure movement. It is a breathtaking spectacle.

An individual's radical departure from a group formation, a couple's teasing nearness without touching, an ensemble's constant flux: These images tell a human tale with bittersweet precision.

A clump of dancers in the prelude stand shoulder to shoulder as

the curtain goes up. They sway to the druggy beat of Placebo and David Bowie's "Without You I'm Nothing," dimly lit but close to the audience, their unity fragile and a little scary. The curtain falls on what seems like the verge of a new order.

The first part proper, which was seen here as a work in progress in 1999, is at once less formal and more coherent. It is set to a Michael Nyman suite that comes off as particularly interesting pages from the British composer's sketchbook. The adagio string writing suggests a ravishing 21st century take on "A Lark Ascending," the faster sections create the illusion of perpetual motion as only Nyman can, and even the silences gain meaning from the surrounding tumult.

And so with the dance. Here and in the new second section, which is set to a forgettable hip-hop score by James Lavelle, the choreography revels in chaos even as it seems to proclaim that some sort of order simply has to exist.

Dancers ricochet in and out of unexpected patterns. A combination of stretches, arabesques and turns by a four-dancer unison unravels as a string of everyday gestures. Ken Tabachnik's lighting only adds to the mystery of the choreography, as do the dancers' inverted reflections in the convex mirrors of Anish Kapoor's minimalist set. This is one strangely attractive dance.

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Creative movement inspired by chaos
makes for one exciting piece of dance

Hot footing

By Richard Christiansen
TRIBUNE CHIEF CRITIC

Stephen Petronio states that the choreography for his "Strange Attractors" was inspired by his readings on the chaos theory of physics.

Well, whatever works. His evening-length work, presented this weekend at the Dance Center of Columbia College, is a smart, inventive, most exciting piece of dance.

Petronio, celebrating the 15th anniversary of his company, is a member of dance's hip crowd. Costumes, in black and gray, come from the fashion collaboratives "Imitation of Christ" and "Ghost." Music consists of sound mix and original, rhythmic scores by avant-garde composers Michael Nyman, James Lavelle and Richard File. Two large reflecting discs used as scenery in the second act are by Anish Kapoor; the sculptor whose giant silvery kidney bean is to be placed in Millennium Park.

None of this sleek design would matter if the dance patterns themselves weren't interesting, and Petronio, who appears briefly with his eight company members in the work's prelude, shows here that he is clearly a creative dance maker capable of sustaining a well-structured, breathtakingly breakneck work of virtuoso

movement.

The prelude, with its line of dancers collapsing and reassembling in ever-changing shifts of their bodies, provides a hint of the swift flow of melding and melting images to follow.

First in a solo, next in a duet and then in a sextet that breaks up into individual segments, the first act sees the dancers swirling and swimming through a series of dazzling combinations. After a brief intermission, necessary if the dancers are not to collapse from their exertions, the surge continues, ending at last in a serene fade-out.

A Petronio trademark is the arching, swooping kick into the air, rather like a tai chi movement. But that doesn't begin to suggest the impact of punching, whirling, racing, diving and leaping in the piece's galaxy of solos and partnerships.

This is one hot choreographer with one sensational company: Michael Badger, Ana Gonzalez, Gino Grenek, Kristina Isabelle, Asleigh Leite, Gabrielle Malone, Jimena Pas and Todd Williams. *Stephen Petronio Company performs at 8 p.m. Saturday in the Dance Center of Columbia College, 1306 S. Michigan Ave. 312-344-8300.*

Dance review



Stephen Petronio appears briefly with his eight company members in "Strange Attractors."

The Chicago Tribune
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the village VOICE

Medals, Please, for All These Dancers

PLUNGING TOWARD APOCALYPSE

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

» Stephen Petronio's marvelous dancers perform as if gearing up for an unknowable apocalypse. They have to be the strongest, the most tireless, yet dodgy and fluid enough to slip between crevices. In the Prelude to his *Strange Attractors*, last week at the Joyce, they're shoulder to shoulder, melting into one another in tender desperation. But squint your eyes, and they resemble volatile matter bubbling around a central figure, Petronio. And in the two main sections of the dance, they're almost constantly hurtling about.

The title refers to a moving magnetic point in a "seemingly chaotic field." In one reiterated motif, dancers form a line or lines stretching away from us; from those lines, they burst out singly, then in pairs, and return to repel others. The impression throughout is one of unpredictable contagion. Part I's dazzling opening solo for Michael Badger introduces the style we'll see all evening multiplied by eight. His busy feet punch out balletic steps; little beats stud his springy, ground-covering passage. Yet his body is always canted, one limb pulling against another, one arm hauling him into a seesaw tilt, a leg swinging into a wide circle. This dancing is both beautiful and awkward, decisive yet buffeted by unseen forces. It's a surprise when he defines a position. His gray silk pajamas (by Ghost) and Michael Nyman's music—sweet, even saccharine at times—seem to slide about him.

Part II is more severe. The same patterns predominate, but the dancers wear tiny black

trunks and skimpy turtlenecks, and two metal discs by Anish Kapoor hang above them, reflecting Ken Tabachnik's lights. The score by UNKLE belts out a strong backbeat. Now the valiant performers bend their elbows and punch the air, yet still recall Part I's plunging slipperiness and the Prelude's nuzzlings and meltdowns. It ends enigmatically: One man and one woman stand like Adam and Eve discovering shame. Throughout the piece, Petronio's use of space is complex and thrilling. Small events develop magically within or behind larger ones. However, his typically remorseless pace leaves no room for dynamic variation, for the dancers to grain the movement, for us to breathe. ▮



Light fantastic... the Stephen Petronio Company in *Strange Attractors* at the Queen Elizabeth Hall Photograph: Neil Libbert

Dance
Stephen Petronio Company

Queen Elizabeth Hall,
London

★★★★☆

Stephen Petronio's choreography has always looked quintessentially urban. His dancers move as if blind, urgent impulses are hurtling them through space, sometimes propelling them into violent collisions, sometimes sending them along lone, driven trajectories. However, in *Strange Attractors*, which is Petronio's latest and most grown-up piece, it's as if that energy is at least taking weekends in the country.

This two-part show begins very strangely with a brief, dangling prelude in which the dancers are moulded together in a kind of collective, primitive embrace. They huddle

in skewed but beautifully sculpted formations, though it's hard to tell whether they're meant to be damaged survivors of some traumatic event or a loyal family, for after a few minutes they simply abandon the stage. The long pause that follows makes you wonder if Petronio hasn't lost the plot, but eventually the opening phrases of Michael Nyman's commissioned score bring the eight principal dancers back, and for the next 30 minutes the stage is filled with confidently fluid, unfettered dance.

Nyman's music is far more spacious and lyrical than Petronio's usual choice of score, and with the men dancers wearing silky grey pyjamas and the women in little black frocks (designs by Ghost), the look of the company is far more serene than the old days of pink corsets and bondage gear. Also, where the choreography used to scorch the floor in fierce bolts of movement, it now curves in on itself in deftly organised formations. The dynamic of the dancing is fast – the dancers' limbs still whirl and jab with fearless momentum, their hips and heads moving in whiplash counterpoint – but the moves are contained within long balanced phrases, which suggests a fury held in check.

During certain passages the dancing is so very tightly

contained that you start to wonder whether the piece is heading anywhere, but the final third of this section is simply beautiful. Elements in the music – a violin solo with a Vaughan Williams shimmer and some darkly romantic piano – elicit a kind of rapture from the choreography, with some of the dancers smiling as if surrendering to the pure pleasure of moving.

In the second half everything shifts. James Lavette's acerbic score immediately sharpens the dancers' focus, and they become even more reckless in their moves, launching into split-second jumps and catches, and dancing so hard that their bodies judder with the aftershock; yet the tightness of the ensemble isn't lost and the stylishness of the company performances is undiminished. In *Strange Attractors* Petronio's interest seems definitively to have shifted from the individual to the stage, and this is elegantly emphasised by Anish Kapoor's magical stage design. Simple but luxurious lighting bathes the space in pinks and blues, while two hanging hemispheres of reflective metal not only bounce back the light in glittering points but also reflect diminutive images of the dancers, a whole stage world contained within their polished gaze.

Judith Mackrell

The Guardian