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DANCE

Agent provocateur

Stephen Petronio dusts off his corsets and gives us some sex and rock & roll **By Gia Kourlas**

When Stephen Petronio began working on *MiddleSexGorge* in 1989, Ed Koch was the mayor of New York and the AIDS crisis was in full bloom. The choreographer became so immersed in AIDS activism that he considered quitting dance. In between rehearsals and getting arrested for civil disobedience, he watched a news report covering Ayatollah Khomeini's death. "There was a massive sea of people passing his body, hand over hand, across the crowd," Petronio recalls over lunch. "I began to think about control and power: When do you give up control of your body, and when do you take control of someone? Those ideas were all mixed up in my mind."

In *MiddleSexGorge*, which Petronio revives for his 20th-anniversary season, the subtext is sexual and the partnering work speedy and startlingly aggressive. "That dance was so hard," he says. "People were crying at rehearsal. It was like playing a very violent game of Twister." Set to music by the British art-punk band Wire, the exhilarating dance features men in corsets and little else. It may seem bizarre now, but at the time the sight of men in corsets caused a stir: "Try to find a dance," Petronio says, rolling his eyes, "that doesn't have a corset in it."

It was and still is a sexy dance. And Petronio, both outspokenly gay and extremely open about his then-romantic involvement with Michael Clark, the British choreographer and dancer, could have taught a course in how to create buzz. It paid off: The night *MiddleSexGorge* celebrated its New York premiere at the Joyce Theater, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and Rudolf Nureyev were in attendance. But for Gerald Casel, a longtime com-

pany member who is helping teach the dance to a new generation, the drama in *MiddleSexGorge* was always rooted in the movement, as well as the original cast, which featured a bevy of downtown stars,



MR. SKIN Stephen Petronio performs *MiddleSexGorge* at the Joyce.

including Susan Braham, Rebecca Hilton and Mia Lawrence. "They were my heroes," he says. "I don't really want to just teach the steps—I want to capture those people."

The choreographer's Joyce season also includes *bud*, a new duet set to music by Rufus Wainwright, and 1995's *Lareigne*, another im-

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portant work that ushered in a different artistic course for Petronio. "How provocative can movement be without blood eventually splashing onstage?" he asks. "I started to focus on form instead. That led me in a whole other direction."

The mid-'90s was also when he began to enlist well-known figures in art, music and fashion (Cindy

Sherman, Laurie Anderson, Lou Reed and Tara Subkoff) to collaborate with him. "Fame has a certain allure," he says. "I was born in the '80s. I choose living collaborators that set a high-water mark in a culture that I am interested in." But Petronio is also pragmatic: "What are you more interested in reading about when you read about dance?" he asks. "I could talk about structure and movement, but that just goes right by most people. In the '80s and '90s, I learned that if I talked about my sexuality, people would read it. Maybe it wasn't helping the cause of dance, but my audience was widening. I thought it was important to talk about my sexuality. Whether it was stupid or whether I was squandering the place I was achieving as a choreographer, I don't really know and I don't really care."

But his efforts to expand his audience didn't lead to fame for himself; as is the case with many successful choreographers, Petronio hit a wall. "Until the mid-'90s, I felt that the kind of dance I did was going to break through to the mainstream," he says. "But funding started falling out, and the idea that anybody else besides Mark Morris or Paul Taylor was going to break through became a joke. I realized I should just make work that I wanted to make."

Now 49, Petronio is a devoted practitioner of Kabbalah, though he swears he isn't attracted by the star power. He recently bought a 300-year-old house with his partner, Jean-Marc Flack of Showroom Seven, in Carmel, New York. It's a new kind of domesticity for Petronio, who never imagined he would live anywhere but in Manhattan. "The other day, I was shoveling snow off my roof in Putnam County

with my big snow boots on, and that night I was at this fabulous party for a certain celebrity who was on the cover of a magazine," he says. "For me, both worlds are really exciting. They're extreme."

Stephen Petronio Company is at the Joyce Theater Tuesday 22 through March 27.