

Anniversary Season **Stephen Petronio Company** by Nancy Dalva The Joyce Theater, New York City, March 27, 2005 (matinee)

It was Easter Sunday, so I thought I would go see Stephen Petronio costumed by Tara Subkoff of *Imitation of Christ*. You know, the usual subversive, transgressive, glossy, downtown thing Petronio has had going for twenty years, and is celebrating with a retrospective including "Prelude" (2000), "Lareigne" (1995), "bud" (2005), and the disgustingly but amusingly named "Middlesex Gorge" (1990). It turned out I saw something else, though—I saw that underneath the fashion-y, arty affect Petronio has been quietly pursuing something purely formal, first building up a vocabulary of slashing, loping, space eating movements with very little transitional material if any, and later a more compressed, close-to-the-body, gestural kind of choreographic utterance. His newest duet, "bud," which will be part of a longer work, combines the two kinds of movement. It is something new for Petronio, and it is something interesting.

A duet for Thang Dao and Gino Grenek, who wear red underpants—there are always underpants at Petronio, he's the king of underpants and Tara Subkoff is the queen—and half a suit jacket apiece, held on with elastic bondage-y straps. Their movement is co-dependent, in a way Petronio's movement is not. If the work springs from two different ways of moving himself around, there is a successful integration, or fusion, here. Watching the men support each other, follow each other, parallel each other, I realized that what Petronio is doing is the opposite of deconstruction. He is not taking apart something, he is making something up. So, despite the fashionable surfaces of his work, and their clever allusions and occasional literary or cinematic themes and such, the movement is not anything fashiony, or even fashionable. It is made up out of the way Petronio moves, and here he has successfully transferred that idiosyncratic excellence to a fine pair of dancers.



As for the rest, the program was not as strong as, perhaps, would be a program of the most recent work, but the instructive, longish (fifteen year) view made up for that. Ken Tabachnik, now general manager of the New York City Ballet and still the excellent resident lighting designer for Petronio, has a marvelous knack for lighting the dancers rather than the space they are in, so that each Petronio dancer appears like fireworks, or a tracer streaking across the night sky, trailing gossamer bits of costume (Manolo for "Lareigne") or covered in petals, or a stark leotard, or a corset (H. Petal—is that a real name, or a nom de costume, one wonders?—for "Middlesex Gorge.") They move with a low, naturally carried weight, but they catch in the memory in mid-air, in movement, always most interesting visually when all together on stage, yet psychologically arresting individually. Time was, I would have said Petronio himself was the most interesting and the most arresting, but that is no longer the case. I cannot even say how very very much credit is due to him for stepping back in his work, passing on the power, the spotlight, the moves. He danced in "Middlesex" as a member of the ensemble, and in a bow ceded the applause to his duet partner. This was not mere stage graciousness, this was grace, and from a man wearing petal pedal pushers, and, indeed, a corset. A lot has been made about that—the corset, the corsets. If dressing up his movement like that has helped get it out in front of the public, and keeps it there, hooray for corsets. Blessed be the ties that bind, whether elastic and ribbon, or interest and attention, and congratulations to Stephen Petronio for twenty fairly fabulous years.