



Punk Prince Shows His Softer Side Dance

BY JOY GOODWIN

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The choreographer Stephen Petronio, a self-made dancer from working-class Jersey, is well-known as a punk prince of downtown dance, a formalist who sports tattoos. But in Tuesday's program at the Joyce Theater, Mr. Petronio, now 51, showed his softer side.

Make no mistake — the five dances on the program were well stocked with Mr. Petronio's signature fast-whipping turns. And there were lots of cutting-edge costumes, including what looked like a bejeweled dog collar for one shirtless male. But overall, the mixed bill continued in the more mellow direction Mr. Petronio set forth in last year's "Bloom" and "Bud Suite."

As a matter of fact, a well-oiled performance of "Bud Suite" was the highlight of Tuesday's program. The soaring Rufus Wainwright melodies that underscore "Bud Suite" are a far cry from the darker, more kinetic punk and rock tunes that Mr. Petronio is known for choosing. Yet the lush, swelling music seems to give his always-lateral movement a new flow and sweep. Instead of seeming earthbound, the dancers had the gliding look of skaters.

In one especially lovely section, four women wearing deconstructed tutus and long-sleeved white shirts moved gloriously, fanning out in unexpected directions that filled the space satisfyingly. At times, they were as lyrical as cygnets, executing pretty, silky turns. Other movements — say, the sudden sharp jutting of a hip — cut a sharper image under lighting (by Ken Tabachnick), crisp as a magazine photo shoot.

Indeed, the dancers moved so fluidly through "Bud Suite" that the self-important costumes (by Tara Subkoff / Imitation of Christ and H. Petal) proved a distraction. There seemed little organic to the dance in the image of one half of a suit jacket attached by straps to a man's bare torso.

Likewise, the H. Petal costumes for Mr. Petronio's new "Without You II," having its world premiere, felt like a stunt, with the army green underwear and dog tags appearing to have little to do with the dance.

"Without You II" opened with Michael Badger in a pool of light, moving vigorously through torquing turns to a remix by Americruiser, elements of which included a Placebo song, the flute melody from Debussy's "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun," and a lot of driving drums. As the solo progressed, Mr. Badger spent more time on the floor — crawling on his elbows and toes, or eking out strange backbends. The movement was slinky, but never sexual — it had Mr. Petronio's usual clinical formality.

Eventually Elena Demyanenko joined him onstage for a duet marked by scissory kicks and lateral partnering. Even when dancing together, the two performers had little affect, using each other's bodies strictly for hoisting and balance. With little development, the dance finally petered out — a movement study of modest dimensions.

Smaller still were two tidbits that padded out the program — an excerpt from a 2003 work, "Underland," and a preview showing of an excerpt from the forthcoming "This Is the Story of a Girl in a World." Neither provided

much excitement or edge — making one yearn for the un-mellow Mr. Petronio of old.

That choreographer was represented in the final work on the program — a revival of "ReBourne" (1997), set to score of Beastie Boys songs radically remixed by DJ Miracle Two Fish. Moving in front of a black scrim divided by a slender column of yellow light, the company's eight hard-driving dancers, dressed in brightly-colored leotards and unitards with fins of fabric clinging to the backs of their necks, reconfigured their bodies and limbs in unorthodox arrangements, as if they were beads in an off-kilter kaleidoscope.

Ten years on, "ReBourne" feels like a somewhat dry clinic on the essential elements of Mr. Petronio's style: the cool academic eye, the apparent stress on the dancers' joints, the maverick spinning, the low-to-the-ground lifts and leaps. The music, which remains at one dynamic level throughout, directed attention away from itself and toward a succession of structural shifts in the choreography, as the piece was "reborn" again and again.

Near the end of "ReBourne," Mr. Petronio floods the stage with bodies — a riot of movements and colors. It's a strong gesture, and these are fine, forceful dancers. (On them, fast-flying turns look fresh as the day they were invented.)

But these dancers are instruments only of architecture, not of emotion. After the curtain falls, you may find yourself pining for "Bud Suite," where, amidst the blur of his splendid moving parts, Mr. Petronio's choreography bursts through to the heart.