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ALL ARTS, ALL THE TIME

The Trisha Brown-Stephen Petronio connection

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When choreographers come to New York to make a career, they face every challenge known to young artists: How can I afford the high rents? How can I practice my art? How can I get my name out there?

Stephen Petronio was no different when he arrived in 1979, all fired up about dance after graduating from Hampshire College in Massachusetts. But the difference between his experience and other choreographers is that he met Trisha Brown. Already on her way to becoming a major figure in contemporary dance, she kept her company busy six months of the year and lived in a handsome old building in SoHo.

She not only asked him to join her company -- he was its first male dancer -- she also offered him a studio in the basement of her building, rent only \$100 a month. At 5,000 square feet of raw space, it was a dream come true. He sanded the floors and set out to make a name for himself, giving classes and creating productions for his friends to see, as well as dancing for Brown.



"I worked 24/7," says Petronio. "I put on shows regularly, often with elaborate sets. They became a hot ticket. Trisha came a lot. She never said anything negative about my work -- she's just talk about what she liked. That's how she coached me." For him, the highlight came when she brought the artist Robert Rauschenberg, her longtime collaborator, to one of his shows.

Like all good things, the living arrangement eventually came to an end. After illegally taping into the building's electricity and other services, he ran into trouble with the management. "But by then, I had my feet on the ground. I wouldn't have made it without those four glorious years. I can never thank Trisha enough."

Their work has echoes, as well. And the troupes of both choreographers can be seen next week in Southern California.

-- Valerie Gladstone

Photo: Stetronio Company in "Underland." Credit: Julie Lemberger