

Melting Away

"Intravenous Lecture," "City of Twist," "Ethersketch I," "The Architecture of Loss"

Stephen Petronio Company

The Joyce Theater

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By Martha Sherman



Stephen Petronio is in his stride. After 25 years of performing on the Joyce stage, he comfortably owns it. He also owns and honors the legacy of his mentors, Steve Paxton and Trisha Brown. In an evening of four works, he offered a re-imagined early work of Paxton's; a short but stunning exercise in movement for ballet star Wendy Whelan; and two of his own masterworks, the first, a decade-old classic, the second, a rich new work in its premier showing.

A mature dancer, Petronio is still the best interpreter of his own movement. He opened the evening with a combination dance, homage, and conversation. In "Intravenous Lecture," based on Steve Paxton's 1970 improvisational piece, Petronio danced attached to a saline feed that created an unsettling boundary of how far he could take the movement. He told Paxton's original story of censorship, and then enacted his own censorship story, rife with menace and homophobia.

Moving around the stage tethered to the IV feed, Petronio postured, collapsed, and wriggled his images into a straightforward narrative. He talked about what he'd learned from Paxton ("his spherical world, moving in all directions at once,") and Brown ("silky, slithering, mercurial.") Once radical movement ideas are now entirely familiar, but they were offered with tenderness, not satire, as the audience chuckled in recognition. Less successful were the images in service of his story; most were clichéd – for "censorship" he made scissor motions with his fingers; a pornographic t-shirt image was acted out as he knelt and wagged his tongue. Happily, the remainder of the program was much more nuanced and subtle.

"City of Twist" and "The Architecture of Loss" formed the core of the evening. Each featured sharply etched solos and intersecting bodies. In "City of Twist," the dancers played with Petronio's angled elbows and knees, scissoring arm movements, and swooping high arabesque legs. Gino Grenek's long experience dancing with Petronio showed in the crispness of his windmill arms and propulsive limbs (when he relaxed with a cigarette in a retro image, the smoke that hung in the air could have been his own influence hovering over the stage.) The dancers all offered cunning, disciplined performances, though some stood out. Tiny Natalie MacKessy's sharp energy lit her solos, and also an extended trio. Davalois Fearon closed the work with an intense solo. Angry and fluid, hers was the image that best evoked the title of the piece: a raglike costume twisting around her shifting body, and the image of bright city lights flashing behind her.

In a star turn between the two group works, Wendy Whelan performed a version of the 2003 solo, “Ethersketch I,” beautifully danced but frustratingly brief. Her perfect dancer’s form embraced Petronio’s technique, what he described as “painting with energy in space... how we define and inhabit our world, how it crumbles.” She traded her magical port de bras for the sharp angle of Petronio elbows, then used slicing pirouettes to frame the space -- and melt away. Those who heard her acceptance speech at the 2010 Bessie Awards, were glad to see a resolution to her offer to the assembled choreographers there: “Call me; I’m available.” More of her would have been even more satisfying.

The world premiere of “The Architecture of Loss” closed the program, and was its highlight. In a storm of motion, the cast of 11 dancers created complex patterns in a raw, bleak setting. Both Petronio’s musical and design collaborators were Icelandic. The dancers were clad in uniquely ragged, hand-knit costumes in black or white by Guðrun & Guðrun, a design team from the Faroe Islands. Composer Valgeir Sigurdsson blended piano, strings, percussion and electronics; the live music felt cool and haunting. Behind the dancers, three large white screens wept soft grey designs. And then there was the dance.



Petronio’s voice was clearest here -- no exercises, no narrative save fluid and integrated dance. Barrington Hinds burst across the stage from an opening trio, using the angles of his limbs and powerful muscles to counter the pale, throbbing gray of the surrounding “architecture.” The duets, especially, pulsed with ragged energy, one partner framing the other. Julian de Leon and Joshua Tuason mirrored each other then swooned together and levered each others’ bodies over shoulders and back to back. The stage was swollen with moving bodies in their textured costumes, some like chain mail, some gossamer. In the final image, the expressive backs of all eleven leaned and shifted in pairs and trios, with two women sentries on either edge of the stage, before they, too melted in black, all as transitory as Petronio had warned.

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Top: Stephen Petronio in “Intravenous Lecture” by Julie Lemberger

Bottom: Joshua Green and Amanda Wells in “The Architecture of Loss” by Steven Schreiber