

Nordic Tendencies

Stephen Petronio Company teams up with Faroe Islands artists

Published: Thursday, March 1, 2012 1:32 PM CST

Brian McCormick

Stephen Petronio Company returns to the Joyce Theater with the world premiere of “The Architecture of Loss,” featuring original music by Valgeir Sigurdsson performed live with Nadia Sirota and Shahzad Ismaily, visual elements by Rannvá Kunoy, costumes by Gudrun & Gudrun, and lighting by Ken Tabachnick.

The program also includes “Ethersketch I,” performed March 6-9, by New York City Ballet principal dancer Wendy Whelan; a revival of “City of Twist,” with a commissioned score by Laurie Anderson; and “Intravenous Lecture” (1970), conceived by Judson Dance Theater legend Steve Paxton and performed by Petronio.

The Paxton solo, Petronio said, “is not a re-performance. It’s a solo about censorship where Steve is hooked up to an intravenous feed. The piece has movement and text and a structure for improvising. When I approached him about doing the piece, he told me, ‘You need to make it relevant to yourself.’”

As for the biological authenticity of the work, Petronio explained, “There will be a doctor or paramedic present at every performance. I’m not going to fake that. This piece is absolutely about getting hydrated.”

Ethersketch I,” based on a solo from Petronio’s “Underland” (2003), has similarly been recreated for the NYCB superstar. When Whelan made it known she aspired to work with modern dance choreographers, Petronio called her the next day. Tabachnick, his longtime lighting designer, also works at NYCB, so, he said, “I have known her casually for years. I love her body, her physicality. I love that she’s not cookie cutter. She’s also the sweetest, easiest, most modest person. In the studio, she’s just like any other dancer.”

Whelan joins a celebrated group of artists and designers who have worked with Petronio over the years. He’s learned not to be afraid to ask, he said. “When I first worked with Cindy [Sherman], I hemmed and hawed and finally called, and she said yes.”

A lot of people say no,” he added, but in the case of his latest collaboration, “The Architecture of Loss,” he was, initially, the naysayer.

Two years ago he met the designers Gudrun & Gudrun, from the North Atlantic’s Faroe Islands, whose open knit and fragile designs wrap the work’s 11 dancers. He loved their work, which he described as “open weave, local, smart, sustainable, ecologically friendly, fragile, and handmade.”

But it was wool!” the choreographer exclaimed, recalling his reaction at first. “Never happen. It would be an expensive proposition. Well, two years later, they came back, with Nordic House sponsoring them and paying for the costumes.”

Rannvá Kunoy, a London-based painter from the Faroe Islands, contributed visual designs for the work, ethereal misty washes that tap into the Jungian collective unconscious,” Petronio explained.

The title of the new work is not meant to be literal, the choreographer explained.

The work is a celebration of loss, of the act of losing, of things fading. It deals with some hard questions and themes about disappearing.”

Last year's premiere, 'Underling,' had so much bravado in it, very showing off, crazy physicality — a very vivid show. This work is more tender and gentler, and translucent. It's not about death, but about information being concealed. There is a sense of things drying up, going away, disappearing. But how do you lose things on stage? This is show business, the business of showing things. In this work, we're representing loss, the experience of losing information or blocking information. In one duet, one of the partners is blocking essential information, so you can only see the edges. In another slow duet, one person is collapsing, in small motions, and the other person acts as a guide dog for that collapsing."

Like the costumes, Sigurdsson's music is fragile, "and there is a sadness to it," Petronio said.

My father died during the time I was making this piece," he continued. "It certainly had an impact on me. Death helps you remember why you're an artist, why you take your stand in space."

Essentials:

STEPHEN PETRONIO COMPANY

The Joyce Theater

175 Eighth Ave. at 19th St.

Mar. 6-7 at 7:30 p.m.;

Mar. 8-10 at 8 p.m.

Mar. 11 at 2 & 7:30 p.m.