

Stephen Petronio Company

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Reviewed by Eva Yaa Asantewaa

(Photo by Frank Thompson, Courtesy Petronio)

The curtain rises on a backdrop lit in designer Ken Tabachnick's hazy, Antarctic white. Almost imperceptibly, this frigid expanse becomes a serene sky-blue, and a dancer's body is washed in the softest gold. So begins Stephen Petronio's latest romp, *Beauty and the Brut* (right), and the "mmmm" rumbling deep within your chest might well continue through the end of his other premiere, *This is the Story of a Girl in a World*.

With killer collaborators like Rufus Wainwright, Lou Reed, Laurie Anderson, Diamanda Galas, Cindy Sherman, and Tara Subkoff, Petronio makes works that are heady with a glossy beauty, punch drunk with feeling—where bluebirds fly over your shoulder and tender boys grow up to be powerful women—and kind of stuck in a movement trance state that frequently leaves this observer ambivalent. Superb performers like Michael Badger, Shila Tirabassi, Julian De Leon, and Davalois Fearon bring highly energetic, supple bodies to Petronio's lush and piquant, ballet-infused aesthetic. Although there's pleasure to be had throughout, I often ask myself, why do I see so much rapid twirling and head rolling and spring-loaded, slashing extensions no matter where I find myself in any given dance?

In *Beauty*, the global positioning is handled best by Fischerspooner's accompanying score: a woman disjointedly relating a silly conversation with a lecher on a beach. In *BLOOM* (2006), taffy-pull bodies render "the thing with feathers": Dickinson by way of Wainwright by way of the exuberant, yearning Young People's Chorus of New York City. The same spongy filigree fills the "Candy Says" section of *This is the Story*.



Petronio can make a dance stage as much fun as a video game, with bodies popping and squiggling across the backdrop, small bunches of dancers overlapping one another unpredictably and animating every sector of the space. However, choreography can be an ongoing quest for the best language to address the fresh hell of each moment. If this is what primarily interests you as a dance viewer, you might find Petronio's vocabulary somewhat limited if attractive.

Still, Petronio can be irresistible, drawing us into an emotive celebration of all that he holds dear. In *This is the Story*—a suite partly set to the rich, vulnerable croon of Antony Hegarty, transgender lead singer of Antony and the Johnsons—he pays tribute to the idea and image of Woman. Throwing caution to the winds, the "Bird Gerhl" trio—featuring Mandy Kirschner, Amanda Wells, and Tirabassi—starts the dance off at an emotional peak. Just as you wonder where he could possibly take this climax, Petronio delivers the wonderful Fearon in "For Today I am a Boy" with a loose, man's suit jacket moulting off her shoulders to reveal the emerging feminine being. On seeing Fearon's performance for the second time—after last season's preview—I realized that her skimpy inner clothing was a dancer's leotard. It moved me to contemplate the tenacity and courage of artists in our society—dancers, in particular.