

## Stephen Petronio and Company Come to The Joyce

by Susan Reiter on Feb 27, 2012

Stephen Petronio's season looks like a fascinating mix, with his latest cutting-edge dance—infused with a Nordic sensibility—counterbalanced with a pivotal work from a decade ago. For the first time, he is adding someone else's work to the company's repertory: a 1970 structured improvisation by seminal Judson Dance Theater innovator Steve Paxton. And he has brought in a surprising guest artist: New York City Ballet principal dancer Wendy Whelan will perform a solo excerpted from his full-evening *Underland*.



Photo: Sarah Silver

It should make for a meaty and diverse evening. Petronio's choreography features limbs unfolding with whiplash intensity, and elegantly juxtaposes disciplined control with wildness and abandon. You get caught up in the eye-catching movement and also drawn in by the emotional urgency. As his 11 dancers rehearsed several sections of his new *Architecture of Loss* last month, it was hard to know where to look; each is such a strikingly individual—and riveting—mover. In a duet with Joshua Green, Amanda Wells arched backwards and sank with luxuriant leisure. As further sections unfolded, the dance resonated with wariness and unease, each encounter seeming to skirt tragedy. Unexpected patterns and spacing further removed one's sense of the safe and familiar.

Petronio regularly collaborates with top-tier, innovative talent, and *Architecture of Loss* is a distinctly Nordic collaboration. The music, composed for Petronio, is by Valgier Sigurdsson, founder of the Icelandic record label Bedroom Community. Petronio met him through Nico Muhly, with whom both have worked. "He gave me a selection of 12 or 13 pieces, and I picked nine," Petronio said during an on-the-run, post-rehearsal phone interview. "He allowed me to order them. He's been very easy to work with—a delightful collaborator." Costumes are by Gudrun & Gudrun, a design team from the Faroe Islands. "I went to a party at my husband's fashion showroom, and they were there, wearing their designs—and I just freaked out. They do these beautifully loose-weaved sweaters made with all-natural fibers grown organically on Faroe Islands. They're hand-knit there by local people. They said, 'We'd like to commission you.' I started laughing and said, 'It's very expensive.' They came back with a producer"—so *Architecture of Loss* became a co-production between his company and Nordic House.

An additional Nordic connection was made with Rannva Kunoy, whose paintings Petronio describes as being "like misty, barely-there atmosphere." Ken Tabachnick's visual design incorporates her artwork into his slow-moving video projections. The dance's title, Petronio said, "is a really good way of describing what I do; I build things and they disappear the minute they appear. There's a certain pleasure in that—as well as a certain sadness. That was my taking-off point for this piece."

In counterpoint to Petronio's most current work, there is his return to the stage in Steve Paxton's *Intravenous Lecture*, which Paxton performed with a saline drip connected to his arm as he spoke and moved improvisationally. This was a reaction to censorship; a project for NYU had been canceled when he proposed using

nude dancers. “I met Steve when I was 18, when he came to Hampshire College as a guest artist. I took Contact Improvisation class with him; that was actually my entrée into the dance world,” Petronio said. “I’ve always followed and loved his work. Even though it’s startling and surprising every time, I understand his movement on a very intuitive level.

“This piece is basically a structured improvisation. There’s no documentation of it. Steve basically gave it to me and asked me to tell my own stories, do my own improvisation. I’ve been looking at videos of Steve, and he’s in my body. I haven’t been dancing for a number of years. So in a way, I feel like I’m back at the beginning again, which is really exciting. I’m putting the piece into the context of my life—censorship in my life, and in my art.”

Whelan and Petronio had known each other for years—they met at a sample sale, he recalls—running into each other at parties, staying in touch on Facebook. Whelan was interested in working with a broader range of choreographers (she announced, “I’m available” during her acceptance speech at last year’s Bessie Awards), so when Petronio suggested getting together in the studio, she was game. “I’ve always liked his energy a lot; that was mostly what drew me,” she said by phone last week. Given the vast and varied repertory she was carrying during NYCB’s recent season, they opted to work on an existing piece rather than begin something new. So Petronio adapted a four-minute solo, now titled *Ethersketch I*.

“It got to a point where I couldn’t sleep at night, because I kept going over the solo!” Whelan said. “So I had to turn it off for a while. I got it in my body to a point where I knew I was safe to let it go. Then, once my season slowed down, I could look at it again—and keep myself up at night thinking about it! I’ve been struggling with it intellectually—with the momentum of the movement. It’s been hard to figure out what is the best way for me to fit into it. It’s really a tongue twister, for my body. It’s like figuring out a puzzle, for me, physically.”

Petronio said admiringly, “She’s totally adventurous. This was totally new for her; she was thrown in, it was intimidating—it’s a whole new language. She has gotten right in. I know she was feeling a lot of pressure, but she just kept smiling and kept working.”

**Stephen Petronio Company, March 6–11, Joyce Theater, 175 8th Ave. (at W. 19th St.), [www.joyce.org](http://www.joyce.org)**