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The speed of sex

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After nearly 30 years, Stephen Petronio — known for his fast-paced, homoerotic choreography — finally brings his dance company to Dallas



FAST AND FURIOUS | Stephen Petronio, shown here dancing in one of his own pieces, has long united his passions for music, dance and gay rights.

A lot of choreographers are known for their style (modern, classical, experimental) or the dancers they work with, but for Stephen Petronio, musicians fuel his muse. And we're not talking Mahler versus Tchaikovsky — Petronio makes dances that rock 'n' roll.

"I made a dream list of musicians I wanted to work with," he says, and set out to do just that. The results include pieces set to the music of Laurie Anderson,

Lou Reed, Nick Cave and perhaps most unexpectedly, Rufus Wainwright (for which he included two same-sex duets: Two men who move as one, constantly in touch, and two

women, just broken up, who never touch).

So which comes first: The movement or the music?

“I am musically driven, but it depends,” Petronio concedes. “I love music and I think I understand rock on a cellular level, so I don’t have to think too much about it. [Interesting music choice is] a special thing I can bring to contemporary dance. I *have* done classical music, but I like to make movement to something contemporary of our time.”

Petronio’s company makes its Dallas debut at the Winspear on Nov. 16 — a shocking absence from the dance scene considering Petronio’s reputation and longevity.

“The bad news is, I haven’t been there [before], but the good news is, I have a new city to discover,” he says. “I’m very happy to be coming.”

Among the pieces Petronio will present is *Underland*, a piece he created nearly a decade ago but has not been able to revisit.

The piece was commissioned by the Sydney Dance Company in 2003. They asked Petronio to create a dance for them, and he agreed to meet their deadline on one condition: “I said, ‘Get me Nick Cave.’ I knew he was Australian and what an amazing person,” Petronio says. To his surprise, the company agreed.

A cult hero in the U.S., Petronio calls Cave “the Goth poet laureate of Australia. So many people had such strong ideas about Nick Cave’s music — many people get married to it — you have to fight people’s expectations. But the advantage is you have a cultural landmark.” Still, going to Cave’s home turf to create a dance for Australian audiences was “either the smartest thing I’ve ever done or the stupidest.”

It may have been the smartest. But until last year, Sydney Dance had exclusive license rights to the piece; when the license expired, Petronio jumped at the chance to tailor it for his own company.

“I love what I did — I love the music so much,” he says. “I’m a very instinctual artist and this is one of my favorite works. But my works are deeply influenced by the bodies I work with. I could never make *Underland* for another company. The subtlety and airiness would be lost. The Sydney dancers are ballet trained, so that can move their feet very fast. The beating of the feet is breathtaking to watch. To bring it back home to my dancers ups the ante.”

Indeed, fans of Petronio know his style already for its athleticism and speed; dancers have been known to move so fast they risk bumping into one another.

“The goal is to always pass your abilities in your personal language. My nature is very quick — I’m a New Yorker — and my mind was always faster than my body; one year you’re moving at 20 beats per second, then the next you’re at 28.”

Petronio, who has long been active in causes — he talks about the old days being arrested with ACT UP, and recently did an “It Gets Better” video — has embraced gay sensibilities frequently in his work, and has since the beginning. It just comes naturally, he says ... though he’s better with men than with women.

“I find I understand partnering between two men better than I do between two women — with the men, I care much less about [the dancers’] feelings so I push them more!” he laughs.

Having produced such provocative work for so long, you might expect Petronio has been pleased to watch the liberalization of attitudes about sexuality, even in dance. You'd be wrong.

“When I was making *Middlesex Gorge*, it was all about sex and aggression and control and the human body as the ultimate work of freedom. It was erotically driven when the AIDS crisis was [at its peak], and I was trying to bring human sexuality to the surface — I wanted it to be part of the fabric without being about my boyfriend,” he explains. “But my husband and I just got married [in New York], and some people are pretty pissed off about it still! Have things changed? I would love to think we've progressed, but I'm not sure.”