



Chaos Becomes Calm: Petronio Pursues Poseiden - I Drink the Air Before Me

by [Wendy Goldberg](#), May 2, 2009

[The Joyce Theatre](#) 175 Eighth Avenue (at the corner of 19th Street) New York, NY 10011

Chaos, one name for the Greek Goddess of Air, clashes with powerful Poseiden in Stephen Petronio's world premiere of 'I Drink the Air Before Me'. The piece begins playfully enough with Petronio impersonating a salty sea captain drifting through the audience, muttering about angels, storms, praying and dying. Various dancers casually practice lunges and horn pipes, as they warm up. A sail on the stage is lowered with heavy ropes and pulleys dangling over the audience's head. Petronio climbs the scaffold crow's nest, signaling the journey his craft is to take.

The light comes up on three figures - a woman in a black cape posing like the Statue of Liberty, then pirouetting, bookended by two men who move swiftly about her. One of many recurrent themes is established - geometric shapes - particularly the triangle, as now three more male dancers move in unison, their black coats flapping about like frantic geese.

The Stephen Petronio language has much in common with the language of poetry and music. Like both, he uses rhythm, repetition, and emotion to create themes, and movement. Like poetry, he also uses shape, texture, mythological and cultural symbols, and a surprise bag of tricks as found in free verse. Like music, he uses harmony (when the dancers move in unison) and dissonance (when they clash), and soloists versus group configurations.

His work is dense, deep, quick, and quirky, replete with personal moves and gestures beyond the bounds of standard dance. It requires intense focus during the performance, and grinding thought afterwards to put it together. One's reflective rumination is, however, richly rewarded.

A female dancer on stage establishes another theme early on, with a contemplative movement of her head, her arms pulled back, then stretching forward with her hands together in a prayer like motion: the supplicant's gesture to the warring gods. Then four dancers enter and stretch like taut piano strings being tuned. This echoes the music which is played live on stage by pianist /composer Nico Muhly, with chamber ensemble on the opposite side of the stage, and the Young People's Chorus of New York City, whose haunting, lyrical voices flood the theater.

A male dancer, back to the audience, takes on a Christlike pose as six dancers enter in black coats, creating wave formations with their slow arc like arm motions. A woman enters and turns slowly, as the rest heave up and down around her and the flute and percussive piano play staccato. Three men blow onstage like billowing sails, and women in grey rush on and flare out signaling the frenzy to come.

In this next section, the dancers rotate from gyrating, lurching contortions, to freezing poses, as they begin to clutch and carry each other through the chaos. The action quickens as three tumble and twist together, then separate, another dominant theme of extreme contrasts in this work. The dancers cut the air, with the movement stemming from their arms, now their torso,

now their head. Hips jut out and forward, and beauty is gone as gyrating struggles ensue. The dancers pull each other to their limit, into taffy like shapes as the frenzied violence picks up steam.

Jarring, jutting, and jangly movement explodes into a mechanical like contraption that has come alive as the dancers contort their bodies, smash together like exploding atoms, and careen apart into smithereens. Feet are flexed, the dancers pivot, brake, and swivel like wobbly screws. The movement is married to the music, the atonal strings sound as if they are being sliced by metal, as the dancers seemingly devoid of human spirit, morph into misshapen robots and plutonium puppets.

The flutes become forceful, and the dancers carve and push the air, creating shapes between each other as well as with their bodies. Lunges ensue followed by turning on one foot, with the other raised impossibly high. Emotions erupt here, fists are raised, the stage is filled with many triangular shapes, the light becomes golden, the dancers pull each other in conflicting directions.

Now they begin to move in unison, fluidly, then separate wildly, stretching out each others' souls, lifting each other in possession. When they fuse, their movements are contorted and oppositional. When they split apart, they move in unison. The struggle inherent in any relationship, and the need for personal freedom is excruciatingly clear. Chaos ensues, with high kicks, and spasmodic moves as if they're all inside a giant, complex gizmo that's gone awry. The pace quickens, the dancers dart across the stage, blasting through the space, like potent bullets.

Some order appears as they begin to move along a thin line, like an Egyptian Frieze, a hint of civilization, but they descend into shredding the air into tattered ribbons. A male dancer holds a female up, her scissor legs cut the air, as she flies upside down above him. The two form a cross as the other dancers prance with quick little steps, and the male and female duet takes on a sensitive, sensual tone. Many couples form, females on the males' hips, struggling, and pulling on each other as the males turn quickly.

Then, like a formation of leaping dolphins, they burst joyously through the air, while some freeze, others dart as if through breaking waves. A mystical moment occurs when they all come on stage, the Chorus as well, bells peel, and a wave of calm triumphs over the chaos. Their movement exudes a gentle fluidity, and symmetry, as one dancer touches her face and moves with swan like grace to conclude the piece.

Like an exotic creature who can survive at unfathomable ocean depths, Stephen Petronio stretches our boundaries of what we think is possible. Though he makes us work hard as we explore his domain, and the sights may seem initially grotesque, the sheer awesomeness of his imagination and scope is fantastic. Discover Stephen Petronio, and see for yourself!