

Dance

Come Here, Look Back, Move Forward **Stephen Petronio Company Marks Its 30th Anniversary**

By BRIAN SEIBERT / APRIL 4, 2014



Stephen Petronio, left, and the hip-hop producer Clams Casino, who has contributed a score for “Locomotor,” a new work choreographed by Mr. Petronio. Credit Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

The choreographer Stephen Petronio does not like to go backward. He says that moving in reverse — say, on a train — makes him feel mentally disturbed and physically ill. Nevertheless, there is a lot of backward in his life these days.

At 58, he has written a memoir. A lovingly rendered account of an Italian-American childhood in suburban New Jersey, it is the story of a bookish boy not quite at home in that world. In college, he discovers improvisational dance. He becomes the first man to join the dance company of Trisha Brown. He finds his own troupe and develops a movement language, an unmistakable style: breakneck, baroque and erotic. “I think of myself,” he writes, “as a formalist with a dirty mind.”

The memoir is packed with sex and drugs and celebrities; the pages are peppered with literally boldface names. Mr. Petronio becomes a father. He gets married to two women and twice to one man. He makes many dances. By the end, he's gone clean and sober, but one habit remains unkicked. The title of the book is "Confessions of a Motion Addict."



Dancers in the troupe rehearsing. Credit Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

On Tuesday at the Joyce Theater in Manhattan, his company begins its 30th anniversary season. Since 2012, Mr. Petronio has been the Joyce's first artist in residence. Interviewed in the studio and office that come with that position (along with a salary), he spoke with both mortification and pride of having lasted this long.

There's only one older work on the program: "Strange Attractors (Part I)," a piece from 1999 that's typical Petronio in its tension between chaos and order but unusual in its romantic stretch. The two other selections are new and forward looking — except that both draw on memory, and one is all about traveling in reverse.

Since the 1980s his company has specialized in the headlong motion he calls "dipping into the future." But in his new "Locomotor," the dancers hurl themselves backward — fast. The effect is like high-speed rewind, and the thrill of watching it includes fear. It was frightening for the dancers to learn, Mr. Petronio said, demanding novel skills of orientation on the fly. In a recent rehearsal, the guest artist Melissa Toogood, a former Merce Cunningham dancer trained to do anything, asked, "How is that possible?"

The direction of travel isn't the only backward element. Inspired by the theory that backward motion stimulates reminiscence, Mr. Petronio has studied "Locomotor" with bits of past dances and evocations of former company members, the ghosts he always sees in the movements he developed with those dancers.

"It's like a dream I had when I was a child," he said of his concept. "I'm in my neighborhood, looking for my house, but everything's slightly rearranged."

Childhood memories also figure into the other premiere, a solo for Mr. Petronio called "Stripped." Like choreographing, performing is an addiction he hasn't yet given up. Two years ago, to honor his early mentor Steve Paxton, he performed Mr. Paxton's "Intravenous Lecture," which requires dancing and talking about censorship while hooked up to an IV.

"I don't know if it was the saline dripping into me," Mr. Petronio remembered, "but for the first time in my career I danced with zero pain." He added, "So that's my new secret."

"Stripped" doesn't involve open veins, at least not physically. Set to Philip Glass's *Étude No. 5*, the solo is itself a kind of practice piece. Mr. Petronio loads himself with 30 gestures, as well as a series of emotional states, some recalled from his youth, and with these materials, he enacts his choreographic process onstage.

For "Stripped," the artist Janine Antoni has sewn a collection of men's ties end to end. This "costumed intervention," wrapped around Mr. Petronio's head, links with the Petronian theme of identity and surface, but Ms. Antoni's interventions go beyond costume design.

Mr. Petronio is an inveterate collaborator. "Locomotor" features a score by the rising hip-hop producer Clams Casino, who happens to be his cousin. Many of the boldface names in his memoir belong to the musicians, fashion designers and artists he's commissioned: Lou Reed, Cindy Sherman. But none of those collaborators has done what Ms. Antoni has: invited him into her world.

In their first collaboration — for Mr. Petronio's 2013 piece "Like Lazarus Did" — Ms. Antoni performed as a living sculpture. Her suggestion that the stage be covered in honey for the work's final solo, an evocation of birth, was theatrically impractical. But she and Mr. Petronio have since pursued the idea in a video, exhibited with her installations, called "Honey Baby." In the process, they blurred the roles of choreographer and visual artist, and for subsequent performances and objects, those roles have stayed blurred.

As a choreographer, Mr. Petronio said, he has always envied visual artists for the permanence of the things they make. His creative involvement with Ms. Antoni gives him a taste of that permanence, but also, and even more important, something else. Five or so years ago, he looked at the movement language he had created — a rare achievement in dance — and thought, "Now what?" He and Ms. Antoni shake each other up.

One thing that hasn't changed is his belief in having a dance company. "It is seen as passé," he said, "because the financial structures that supported companies are disappearing. But there were

companies before there was a structure to support them. The structure got built around the artistic need, the depth of research possible with a family of dancers.”

Although in the early years Mr. Petronio’s troupe earned 90 percent of its income performing, it has had to adjust to new circumstances, and just before the Joyce selected him as artist in residence, he was considering closing up shop.

For now, his company survives. The death of Cunningham and the retirement of Ms. Brown have prompted thoughts of the future. What if his legacy were a physical place, where others might have time to create movement? There is no place yet, and he is not yet done, but getting ahead of himself is Mr. Petronio’s style.