



Stephen Petronio | Interview

By Matthew de la Peña on Mar 6, 2013



Stephen Petronio

It seems like everything's been asked of Stephen Petronio. When I suggest this to the enigmatic choreographer over the phone, he genially says, "See if you can get something new out of me!" The artistic director of the Stephen Petronio Dance company and former Trisha Brown dancer brings his troupe back to the Dance Center after more than a decade.

Is there one thing in particular you hate being asked?

No. I'm very chatty. If you rub me the wrong way, I'll tell you. *[Laughs]*

Fair enough. So, you became the first artist-in-residence at the Joyce Theater recently. How's it been, settling in?

Amazing. Probably from the outside you think I'm an established choreographer and how

exciting that is, but every year it's really hard to make it work. Whether the economy's up or down, left or right, if we're touring or not; [the company's] still a not-for-profit organization. To have the support of the Joyce is a big deal, both financially and emotionally. The money frees us up to do more work, which is fantastic. And I have an office for the first time in my life. Normally I'm running all over town meeting with people and trying to get stuff done. Now I have meetings in my office and I walk over a few steps to the studio. It makes a giant difference.

Sounds like a small luxury, but I'm sure it's—
People don't understand how amazing it is.

Originally, you created *UNDERLAND*, which you're bringing to the Dance Center, for Sydney Dance Company in Australia. Have you made adjustments since debuting it in the U.S.?

Major. It was made for 20, originally. That was my assignment. They had 20 dancers in the [Sydney Dance] company and they wanted me to include everybody. I honed it down to the lean version for my company. In many ways, it's much more effective. Where there are groups of five there are now groups of three and two. It's a more crystalline version of it.

You were pre-med in college before transitioning to dance. What was the deciding factor?

I come from a poor Italian family and I was the first child to go to college. The only thing I could do to save face was go pre-med. From my perspective, that was the way to move out of the class that I perceived myself to be in. I took a dance class as a way to offset all the studying I was doing. Then came the thunderbolt. It hit me and I was like, "Oh my God, I didn't even know I had a body!" I continued to dance and study medicine till halfway through. It became so clear that dance had chosen me.

You were the first male company member of the Trisha Brown Dance Company. Have you been thinking about Trisha lately since she retired?

Of course. I saw her last show. I did a talk with John Rockwell and Wendy Perron of *Dance Magazine*. I was asked to do this talk so that Trisha wouldn't have to appear in conversation, but I didn't realize that she wasn't going to be there. She wasn't there because she's not able to be there. I didn't know that till a couple weeks before. It was very sad for me to be talking about somebody that I love so much, who's still very present in my mind. I found it disorienting and sad. I missed her warmth. To speak on her behalf was a cold dose of reality for me.

An article in the *LA Times* talked about the first time you and Trisha met, how she offered you the studio space in the basement of her building.

She got me started. She gave me the basement and she basically said, "There's a wooden floor down there. If you sand it, you can have it." I had, like, 5,000 square feet for four years. That was the leg up that I needed. It was like a workshop theater. That, for me, was an incredible researching resource. Trisha always brought her friends, famous artists and funders and was extremely supportive. I feel very lucky and I owe a lot to her. To be a

21-year-old dancer next to that genius, it was an incredible lesson. I was just this stumbling, fumbling kid. [*Laughs*]

People have said you have an edgy image. One critic described you as “the bad boy of dance.” Coming from Newark that has to be a compliment, right? Flaunting the Jersey attitude?

I’m very proud of my Jersey roots. I grew up in a town where Annie Oakley lived and Martha Stewart lived. I was born in Newark, but I was raised in Nutley. I’m superproud of my roots, I’m superproud of my family—all the Italians piling in the theater every time I have a show and practically passing out sandwiches to each other.

Many of the same people almost always mention that you have tattoos.

At the time that I got tattooed, they were less common. It used to be a big deal that I shaved my head. There are articles in the *Times* about the fact that I had a shaved head back in the ’80s. I didn’t start getting tattoos till I was up towards 40. I felt like, well, it’s not like I’m going to do a movie where I have to have no tattoos. It was my story.

Recently, Illinois has been clearing the path for same-sex marriage. In a promo video, you talked about marrying your now-husband.

We got married in California, first in that three-month window that opened up years back. I’ve been in love with him for many years. I’m Italian; I wanted to be married. When I saw that opportunity, I said, “Let’s go.” We went and had an amazing time. When [same-sex marriage] came around to New York, we did it again for legal reasons. My father was dying, basically, and his affairs weren’t in order. We took care of the will, and our lawyer said, “You should absolutely get married in New York because it’ll make everything easier,” God forbid if there’s an illness or worse. So that was my excuse and we got married again. I’m very happy that we did. I would keep doing it wherever we lived. I like the idea of doing it.

In a 2010 interview with *Advocate*, you said you grew tired of being a “gay poster boy” in the '90s after gaining a certain level of recognition. You mention being an artist “who is gay, rather than a gay artist.” As you see it, how important is the distinction?

I just don’t want to be marginalized in any way. Not that I feel like I’m assimilated, either. I talk about being queer all the time. I feel like it was an important mission, especially during the ’80s and ’90s, to use my public vehicle as much as I could to promote my sexual agenda because it hurt to be invisible. I would use that, sometimes, at the expense of my art. When I began to feel like I was expected to be that way, that doesn’t feel good as an artist. I wanted to do whatever I felt. I didn’t feel like I needed to fulfill anyone’s expectations. I mean, I don’t dress like everybody else, I don’t dance like everybody else, I don’t fuck like everybody else. I don’t blend in that well. I don’t have traditional looks, I don’t have traditional ideas. I’m not *that* guy.