

## The Master of Collapse: Stephen Petronio Specters haunt the end of this company's 25th anniversary season

By [Deborah Jowitz](#)  
Tuesday, May 4 2010

Once dances slip from a company's repertory, they become ghosts—flitting through the memories of those who saw them and those who performed them. Resurrected, they may be stranger or brighter or sharper than recollections of them. How appropriate, then, that [Stephen Petronio](#) brought his company's 25th-anniversary year to a close by opening with a 1986 solo, #3, offering revivals of the 1990 *MiddleSexGorge* and the 1993 *Love Me Tender*, and finishing the program with a premiere called *Ghostown*.

In 1986, Petronio was just ending his seven years as a dancer in [Trisha Brown](#)'s company, and #3, set to [Lenny Pickett](#)'s *Dance Music for Borneo Horns* #5, seemed to be an essay about collapsing and drawing up, with Petronio pinned in a circle of light. The Petronio of 2010 is still a master of collapsing in intricate ways, and he still wears a white shirt, black trousers, and shoes (the dangling bow tie suggests he's been doing this for a while). But now, the man seems engaged in sinuous self-evaluation, as if he's adjusting things deep inside himself. The fact that his feet are drawn close together makes his base appear potentially unstable, considering the constant shrinking and pulling up and torquing that he's doing. When he gazes into his upheld hand, you sense that he's not so much checking himself out in a mirror as acknowledging that, yes, 24 years have passed. I can't remember ever seeing *Love Me Tender*, the solo in which [Julian DeLeon](#) now swims silkily through [Elvis](#)'s caramel song. But the luxuriously physical *MiddleSexGorge* is a palimpsest through which I glimpse other dancers, among them Petronio and his decades-ago partner, [Michael Clark](#), wearing the white pants ruffled with pink petals (by H. Petal) that now clothe [Gino Grenek](#) and [Joshua Tuason](#) in the work's opening duet. During the height of the AIDS epidemic, that dance seemed flung out as a challenge and an affirmation. The marvelous and eerie new *Ghostown* is preceded, without a pause, by *Foreign Import*, made in 2007 for the [Scottish Ballet](#). [Shila Tirabassi](#) and [Amanda Wells](#) move in unison, a pair of sexy, imperturbable angels in [Benjamin Cho](#)'s filmy white ponchos over backless, longish white leotards (the costumes for Petronio's works, like the music, are always fashionable and unusual). To [Radiohead](#)'s "Creep," guest artist Reed Luplau, in black and gold trunks, dances with almost demonic fervor between and around the women, occasionally slipping into their patterns.

*Ghostown* has everything I expect from Petronio—flurries of precisely slashing limbs suddenly softening like metal in a hot fire, movements that suggest ballet run amok, virtuosity gone unself-consciously voluptuous. The music, [Jonny Greenwood](#)'s "Popcorn Superhet Receiver," is as full of haunted moments as the dance. [Jillian Lewis](#)'s variegated and subtly changing



black and white costumes range from floaty white for [Mandy Kirschner](#) to a black bra and trunks for Wells. However, like several of Petronio's recent pieces, *Ghostown* explores new territory. There are specters among its brilliant population. And portents. The piece begins with Grenek dragging himself along on his belly in pursuit of DeLeon. Clusters of

people keep appearing at the sides of the stage, tangling, and then exiting as if pulled back by an ebbing wave; sometimes scraps of netting shroud their heads; often, one person has to be dragged away. Stringed instruments cry out. Grenek sinks slowly into a split. When Wells dances alone, others on stage freeze in position, and pauses often suspend both music and action.

The seething groups suggest sculptural plastiques in the process of reforming. Images of carvings like the Dying Gaul or statuary tableaux of soldiers struggling as one come to mind. You see individuals both striving and yielding within an organism and bursting into solitary throes of dancing, but Petronio also makes you sense unseen forces at work. In *MiddleSexGorge*, when groups of dancers surround and manipulate a partner, you think of elegant orgies. In *Ghostown*, when the superb dancers ([Barrington Hinds](#), [Tara Lorenzen](#), [Natalie Mackessy](#), and [Emily Stone](#), in addition to those mentioned) propel and drag themselves through a transforming landscape of bodies, you think of what Dante perhaps saw in his dreams.

Once upon a time, Petronio's dances struck me as violent—not in terms of drama, but as whirlwinds of nonstop motion. Those wheeling arms! Those kicking-out legs! The willful complexity of several body parts moving contrapuntally. The dancers were riding the storm, becoming it. In the more recent *bud, bloom*, and last year's *I Drink the Air Before Me*, the choreography conveys a feeling of growth, of yielding, of intermittent tenderness. The dancers seem more aware—heated not just by the furnace of their limbs, but by what's changing in the gorgeous, dangerous climate that surrounds them.

**Photo by:** [Yin-Chun Wu](#), The Stephen Petronio Company, *Ghostown*