

NY Culture

Beyond Fierce: 30 Years of Dance

The Stephen Petronio Company's 30th Anniversary

By Lizzie Simon | April 10, 2014 11:09 p.m. ET



Jean Stone, Marja Samsom, Kirsten Hawthorne and Valerie Foley *Benjamin Lozovsky/BFA*

In the weeks leading up to choreographer Stephen Petronio's 30th anniversary season gala, the company surpassed its fundraising goals, and one practicing Kabbalist on the board kicked in a little extra to get the total to an even \$101,000. "It's an auspicious number in Kabbalah," explained a company representative.

Three hundred guests attended his show on Wednesday night at the Joyce Theater in Chelsea, followed by drinks and lively snacks at Spice Market. Mr. Petronio has always had a strong following among fashion- and art-world people, and there were many in the crowd. Painter and board member Joa Baldinger, said that the abstract and emotional nature of the choreographer's work drew them in. "You feel your bones in his work," she said. "It charges your memory and your presence at the same time."



Kate Valk and Stephen Petronio at Mr. Petronio's 30th anniversary season gala. *Benjamin Lozovsky/BFA*

Fashion designer Narciso Rodriguez said Mr. Petronio asked him to create costumes for his world premiere, "Locomotor," after running into him at Cindy Sherman's Christmas party. "I find it so inspiring to work with dancers, to create a frame for their strength, their athleticism, their personalities. More projects should be like this."

The score for "Locomotor," was created by Michael Volpe aka "Clams Casino," who used a collection of sounds he'd recorded with his [iPhone](#) in his travels as well as noises he made in his home studio. "A lot of it is just me banging on stuff in my house."

The 26-year-old music producer, known for his work in instrumental hip hop with rappers like A\$AP Rocky, is Mr. Petronio's second cousin and has never worked in contemporary dance. "I never expected to do anything like this," he said.

While Clams has a natural warmth and exuberance, he couldn't be pried open on certain matters, like the origin of his nickname, and the source of one particular sample in the score, a giant, foreboding, lion-like roar. "I can't tell you what that is but it's not an animal," he said.

Mr. Petronio was equally tight lipped. "I'll never tell you what that is," he said. "All I will tell you is that we talked a lot about 'forward and backward.'"



Karen Erickson and Arden Wohl *Benjamin Lozovsky/BFA*

A survey of the guests only enhanced the mystery. Emily Stone, who danced in the piece, said that the performers referred to it as "the dragon's breath" but weren't apprised of its source.

Filmmaker Jennifer Elster guessed that it "came from the bowels of our innards."

Classical TV executive director Stephen Greco initially thought the roar was "spontaneously generated" by the people seated in the rows behind him. "But I think Ms. Elster is on track with 'bowels.' Stephen's work is always so visceral. I wonder if he'll get drunk enough tonight for me to get the answer out of him."

The second world premiere in the program, "Stripped," is a solo choreographed and performed by Mr. Petronio. For the piece, artist Janine Antoni created a helmet from 140 feet of men's ties, sewn end to end, which was wrapped around Mr. Petronio's head, entirely obscuring his vision for the better part of the dance. "We're calling it a costume intervention," she said. "I obstructed his senses and asked him to dance, an impossible thing."

It had felt important for Mr. Petronio to perform a solo in the company's 30th season.

"When I hit 50 I stopped dancing for a while because the memory of how I used to dance was too painful for me," he said. "But there are things I can do now that I couldn't then. When you're young it's all about how fierce it feels. Now it's about how deep it feels, and I'm really enjoying that."