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Photo: Jamie Kraus

Homecoming: Stephen Petronio Company's Final Season at the Pillow

By Brendan McCall

"Editor's Note: The writing and editing process for this piece began before the [tragic death of Jacob's Pillow Production Manager Kat Sirico in a workplace accident](#). Jacob's Pillow has cancelled the rest of their 2025 season."

After 40 years of virtuosic, sensual, and breathtaking contemporary dance the Stephen Petronio Company (SPC) took its final bow last month at Jacob's Pillow, one of the nation's most historic homes for groundbreaking choreography. While this homecoming in the Berkshires was the end of his company, Petronio affirmed that it was not the end of *him*.

For newcomers to SPC, the program was an exciting introduction to the company's range and diversity; and for fans, a reminder of Petronio's intrepid choreographic vocabulary—elegant, technical, erotic—as well as the scope of his subject matter. This final engagement perfectly illustrated the tremendous legacy Artistic Director Stephen Petronio and his colleagues have contributed to the contemporary dance canon. Many generations of SPC dancers, supporters, mentors, and friends were in the audience, including Petronio's beloved teacher Tara Stepenberg, making this unique and emotional event.

The evening began with *Broken Man* (2002), a dance with haunting music by Blixa Bargeld and a deconstructed costume by Tara Subkoff. During the week, a rotating cast of dancers interpreted the solo, one that Petronio originated on himself while recovering from a foot injury. The brilliant Liviya England plumbed *Broken Man*'s emotional depths this night, her limbs piercing the space in multiple directions inside Ken Tabachnick's cool, stark, confining lightscape, framing the work in a kind of poeticized examination alive with an undercurrent of sorrow.

Petronio shifted into a more playful and wry tone with *Bud* (2005). Set to the music of Rufus Wainwright, this homoerotic duet also

featured alternating casts (I saw the talented Isaiah Newby and Ryan Pliss). Clothed in bisected suit jackets and bright red spandex shorts (also by Subkoff), the dancers fluidly intertwined in luscious partner-puzzles. The energy of *Bud* was affectionate and highly sensual with a tireless range of movement invention and depth of beauty, strength, and intimacy. A balance of pride and dignity, *Bud* was a welcome balm to the many examples of “toxic masculinity” we see all too frequently in the outside world.

In *MiddleSexGorge* (1990), Tabachnick's harsh lighting and Wire's industrial techno beat slash through the smoky stage. Pure sexuality and power blurred, the dancers executing Petronio's labyrinthine choreography with clean, tough muscularity. Intricate unison phrases, duets, trios, and breakaways unfurled with relentless speed, the movements suggesting conformity and submission. H. Petal's costumes—particularly the men in white corsets perched above their dance belts which accentuated their strong legs and buttocks as they leap and lunge—fleshed out Petronio's continued queering of sex and gender onstage. As dancers grappled and embraced each other's sweat-soaked flesh, Nick Sciscione intermittently disrupted their angular lines and patterns with his sybaritic solos, prancing topless through the fray satyr-like.

After intermission, the entire company served a delightful rendition of Yvonne Rainer's *Chair-Pillow* (1969). The title says it all: the ensemble executed a series of simple gestures with pillows and chairs to Ike & Tina Turner's “River Deep, Mountain High,” a prime example of the new approach to dance Rainer and her post-modern peers heralded in the sixties. *Chair-Pillow* = pure fun.

But then, Petronio walked away from his chair and engaged us directly with text. Was this an interlude, or the start of *Another Kind of Steve* (2024)? As he skated through the space, his arms and spine embodying spherical forms, Petronio declared himself to be “the bastard child of Trisha Brown and Steve Paxton” before listing personal details—his height and weight, his age and sexual identity. As his monologue grew more heated, Petronio's gestures became more frantic, yet pinched with interludes of gallows humor:

“People keep asking me,

‘Why are you closing now?’

I said—

I wanted to time the closing with the downfall of Western Civilization.”

The program concluded with SPC's poignant *American Landscapes* (2019), a group work evoking this country's quintessential mythologies—the cowboy, the frontier explorer, the rugged individualist. Unlike the constant quicksilver motion glimpsed earlier in the program, *American Landscapes* featured more moments of dancers suspended in stillness, fading into the landscape onstage. Robert Longo's projected charcoal drawings further undergird the dance, with images of an American flag fading into an astronaut, then a young Black baby, and eventually into images of protest marches through the streets of American cities. Pictures of soldiers in residential neighborhoods combined with the dancers standing with their raised fists onstage ask: How do we stand up? How do we effectively engage with America's history? Petronio's art chose not to answer definitively; however, he did suggest a way we might all keep our sanity when he confessed:

“When I move, I disappear. And to disappear is the most delicious feeling in the world. And now, I'm about to get my wish.”

Now that Stephen Petronio Company is gone, may we all find similar pleasures in our own lives.

[Stephen Petronio Company at Jacob's Pillow](#), July 23-27, 2025.

Home Page Image Description:

A man wearing a white corset leans on a woman wearing a black unitard to his right. He extends his left leg, which a second woman wearing a black unitard holds above her shoulder while sitting on the floor

Article Page Image Description:

Three groups of dancers appear onstage in front of projected images of planes. To the left, a woman extends her right leg high while a man nearby bends his knees and has his arms out from his waist. On the floor, in the middle, three figures lie on their right sides. Closest to us and on the right, a man squats deeply with his arms extended diagonally while a woman bends her knees behind him, holding his wrists high.

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