

kinesthetic idea is a
delicious process,'
Stephen Petronio
says of developing a
new work.

of daily life that influence an artist, consciously or not. While not quite such a detailed exercise, what follows is an intermittent diary of Mr. Petronio's activities as he created "Half Wrong Plus Laytext."

March 15, 1992

Ruled by Ideas

Stephen Petronio's work has been described by critics as full of "savage exhilaration, physical bravado, amazing feats of off-kilter wildness," "kamikaze ecstasy" (whatever that is) and "huge, heat-generating expressive force."

Mr. Petronio is a striking-looking man with a shaven head offset by a gold hoop that pierces the top of his right ear. "Wrong Wrong," he explains, was a piece he and Mr. Clark choreographed last year to Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring"; the two worked separately and then fused their choreography to create a single work. For the new piece, Mr. Petronio plans to extract and rework "his" part of "Wrong Wrong" and combine it with

Susie Linfield, an editor at McCall's, frequently writes about the arts.

...to modern music. I was incredibly attracted to both, and I've been trying to put them together for the past 15 years."

In 1979, Mr. Petronio joined the Trisha Brown Company. Five years later, he formed his own: "I just knew that I had something to say. I didn't perceive of myself as a dancer — that wasn't my goal. Ideas were my goal. Each movement comes from an idea."

Which brings the conversation back to the ideas behind his new work. "For me," Mr. Petronio says, "'The Rite of Spring' is about the innocent state of the world at the time of the birth of modernism. Nineteen-ninety-two is a very different story. You can't be naked and pure and open in that way now. There's a different kind of openness you have to look for, until someone finds a cure for AIDS." He adds, "My work is hard — it's fast and looks very violent. But a lot of the violence is about claiming strength. It's really about power: who has power over me, who I have power over, what I choose to do with my body. Those are the political issues of this decade."

Mr. Petronio says he plans to have "Half Wrong Plus Laytext" open with a three-minute solo performed by a naked woman dancing to the prelude of "The Rite of Spring" and that he may overlay the Stravinsky music with other "texts," including songs by Madonna. But the choreographer warns that by the time rehearsals begin in mid-April he may have thrown out all these ideas and be onto something else altogether.

April 14

A Killer of a Solo

Mr. Petronio and his company — four women and two men — are rehearsing the new piece. Mr. Petronio is working on a solo with Gerald Casel, who joined the troupe in July. The other dancers are stretching, sitting around talking or teaching one another

Stephen Petronio rehearses M

various steps. Everybody is wearing pants and T-shirts. They dance in ba

Mr. Casel's solo is a strenuous, almost nonstop jumps and turns. Petronio is both creating new steps and Mr. Casel through the parts the dancer already knows. Sometimes he talks Mr. Casel through the steps; often, he demonstrates himself, both to show Mr. Casel what he wants and to figure out if something is technically possible. "This jump should be and Mr. Petronio moves out onto the stage performing a jump in which one straight, the other bent at an 80-degree — "your foot should be high on this" Mr. Casel tries it. Mr. Petronio watches from the front. It's better, but not quite right. Mr. Casel joins Mr. Casel again, instructing him to lift his bent leg higher and demonstrates what he means. Mr. Casel watches and tries it again. "That's it!" Mr. Petronio says. They're ready to move on.

Mr. Petronio has Mr. Casel run through from the top. Afterwards, the brilliant psychoanalyst, he dissects what he sees as the trouble spots. "A high leg mistake on the entrance," he suggests. "Try to keep your pelvis back as you ju

Mr. Petronio then begins to choreograph a series of backward jumps, placing his hands on his abdomen as he executes them. "If someone's pushing you there," he says. Mr. Casel follows along, then does the same with himself. "You're being a little too pushy with your arm," Mr. Petronio says. "Don't throw your head so much." "Think casual and generous. There, beautiful."

And so it goes for the next 45 minutes. The elaborate game of Simon Says in whi

DANCE



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

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Petronio demonstrates segment A, which Mr. Casel then mimics, and then segment B, which Mr. Casel also executes, and then choreographer and dancer put A and B together and move on to C.

Like a couturier who can see that a perfect-looking seam isn't, Mr. Petronio notices the smallest detail. An arm is slightly too high, a leg too low, the head tilted wrong. Sometimes it's the emotion that's missing: "It should be really mean, really angry," Mr. Petronio says after one set of jumping turns. "If you have to bash it, that's all right." Sometimes there's a technical snag: "I know what the problem is: Can you prepare the turn in fourth position?" Sometimes Mr. Petronio asks the dancer's opinion. "Can you get this arm up?" the choreographer inquires, to which Mr. Casel replies, "It feels weird." "Well, think of it as an extension of your leg line," Mr. Petronio suggests. Weird or not,

crouching down into a convoluted position. "Not really," she says. They compromise.

Again, Mr. Petronio surveys, suggests, tinkers. "You have to finish that action before going on to the next thing," he says. And, on a difficult lunge, "I think here, if you use your arms first it will help you. No? Try your legs first. Yes! That's nice." One time, he has Ms. Hilton bend down on one knee, her other leg extending straight out, one hand resting on the floor for balance. "Can you turn your knee? Can you arch?" he asks. He gets on the floor, tries it himself, groans. "Oh, God, it's hard," he admits. But he doesn't take it out.

Later, Mr. Petronio explains, "I try to put my dancers in ridiculously impossible situations so they have to solve them unnaturally. Because we've seen so much natural coordination. We all know about that. And also, watching the dancers solve something sets up tension, conflict — it makes good dance."

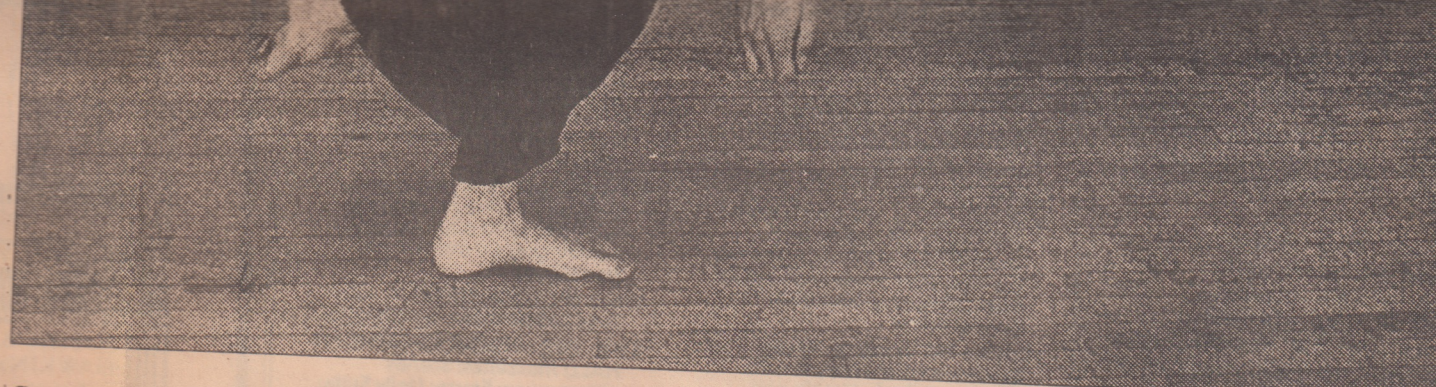
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Mr. Casel's solo will eventually run for just over one minute. "It's really a killer," Mr. Petronio says later, "one big jump after another, one lack of transition after another." After running it through one more time, Mr. Casel collapses on the floor, panting. "I really think you have to do this every day, 'cause it's not going to get any easier," the choreographer advises the young dancer.

Mr. Petronio begins working with Rebecca Hilton, one of his strongest dancers; she will perform the nude, opening solo. "She knows what's happened over the century, so this is a sad piece," Mr. Petronio tells a visitor. Her solo — full of graceful lunges, outstretched arms, mimed tears, slow leg extensions — is far less athletic than Mr. Casel's. "Can you put your foot here?" Mr. Petronio asks,

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April 15

Trying to Provoke

Mr. Petronio and Mr. Casel are analyzing an arm movement. One option is to have Mr. Casel's arm follow the force of his body as he turns; the other is to have the arm slap into the dancer's eye during the turn. Mr. Petronio pronounces the first version "predictable" and the second "shocking," and decides to go with the latter. Later, he explains: "I think it's important to shake people up visually. A lot of choreographers like to reassure you by illustrating the music. But I just don't think that's my job. I think it's important to provoke people, tease them, not

Continued on Next Page

DANCE



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

Rebecca Hilton, front, with Ms. Lawrence, Ellis Wood and Kristen Borg rehearsing the "women's floor work."

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Watching Mr. Petronio, the thought occurs that, no matter how open-minded a choreographer may be, no dance company is — or perhaps can be — truly democratic. Mr. Petronio respects his dancers and encourages them to suggest solutions to technical problems, but he is the final arbiter of every detail, no matter how small. At one point, working on another solo with Becky Hilton, he asks her to perform a rather awkward-looking lunging step. Like a model forced to wear an unbecoming dress, she protests: "They'll think I have bad technique." "No they won't," Mr. Petronio insists. "They've seen my stuff before. The step is beautiful. You're such a good dancer, you should —" "Fall over?" she asks. "Well," Mr. Petronio

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"I want to see the variations in different groupings this afternoon," Mr. Petronio announces. "Let's have a look."

There are — unfortunately — almost endless combinations. Mr. Petronio experiments with different sets of dancers. Some dance their variations, some the base phrases; some go back and forth between the two. He tries having them dance in unison and having them dance against each other. He tries having dancers enter and exit at different times, which creates different patterns. It is slow, tedious work. He is looking for that one magical combination, but he's getting a confusing mess. "Oh, God, I'm troubled," he says with a sigh at one point. "Would one of you be willing to do the A phrase and one the B phrase together? This might be a total bust, but . . ." It is.

Then, suddenly: "I know what has to happen — Gerald, can you do the phrase in the middle? And Kristen and Ori, can you switch from variation to base whenever you want?" Mr. Petronio watches for a few minutes. "That's got a lot of potential," he says, somewhat relieved. He later explains to his visitor, "I thought this would be a lot easier. I like all the variations as solos, but . . . I'm hoping a

solution will hit. Generally when I make a piece, I make a ton of material. But that's just movement. It's the *composition* that will make it a dance."

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April 16

Jumps and Turns

Mr. Petronio is rehearsing a duet between Kristen Borg and Ori Flomin. It seems more dissonant than romantic — a fast series of whiplash jumps and turns. It ends, though, rather traditionally, with Ms. Borg running offstage and Mr. Flomin following her, arms outstretched — although in this case, his hands are curved like claws.

"I need tension in your hands," Mr. Petronio says, demonstrating. He wants Mr. Flomin to express anguish, yearning, passion

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But the trio isn't working either: "God, I never expected a trio to be so boring," Mr. Petronio complains. And then something happens, something good. He asks the men to lie down on the floor and, almost by chance, Mr. Casel sits up — but sits up by executing a series of graceful spine ripples — and Mr. Petronio seizes on the movement. He asks both men to repeat it. "I can't believe you can both do this!" he exclaims. "Ah, it's beautiful!" Now that he has a workable movement, he builds on it — "I need one more thing from you guys. When you get on your hands, hop

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DANCE



Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

Rehearsing the "women's floor work."

forward." They try it, and the choreographer looks pleased.

Later, Mr. Petronio tells his visitor that despite the technical problems and the slow pace of the work, "I hope I'm being informed, consciously and unconsciously, by all that stuff I've been thinking about."

Earlier, Mia Lawrence, who has danced with the company for five years, was asked if Mr. Petronio has discussed "all that stuff" with her. "Not really," she said. It doesn't bother her, though: "I think there's a real danger in articulating too much too soon, because you can lose something that's non-verbal in the phrase. It's movement, imagery, energy."

Kristen Borg, who has danced with Mr. Petronio since 1984, also hasn't heard much about the work's intellectual underpinnings. "Ideas? It's not really important for me to ask those questions," she says.

April 20

Finally, the Music

Although Mr. Petronio has choreographed parts of "Half Wrong Plus Laytext" to "The Rite of Spring," he conducts most of his rehearsals without music. He is, obviously, far removed from those classical choreographers who seek a symbiotic relation between music and choreography. "The music always comes last for me," he says. "If you choreograph to the music, all you can do is visualize the music. That's the earmark of a good traditional choreographer — and I'm not that, nor do I aspire to that."

Most dancers, especially ballet dancers, will tell you that repeating a piece's steps, combined with its music, will produce a "muscle memory" — a quasi-conscious absorption of the choreography into their bodies and brains; subsequently, hearing the music will provoke an almost Pavlovian response and immediately remind them of the steps. (Darci Kistler of the New York City Ballet said last year, "I haven't done 'Mozartiana' in three years, but in 20 minutes it's all back — you just listen to the music.")

When asked how, in the absence of musical landmarks, he remembers the changes Mr. Petronio keeps making in his solo, Gerald Casel says, "You just have to do it over and over. Usually there's a logic to why he's repeating something or taking something out, so it makes sense to your body, too. Basically, each of Stephen's movements has its own rhythm. Without music, it becomes more true. The movement speaks for itself — it's not ruled by an outside meter."

Ms. Borg and Mr. Flomin are working on the duet again. Mr. Flomin still doesn't have his exit down right. "You just want to go for her," Mr. Petronio almost pleads. "Let your body follow your brain." Finally, in desperation, he refers to a narrative character: "Think of yourself as a cartoon villain," he suggests. Mr. Flomin tries it and looks hopefully at Mr. Petronio. "You look more like Snoopy," Mr. Petronio says.

There is one segment that the company practices almost every day. It is referred to simply as "the women's floor work" because it is performed completely on the floor — that is, the women dance lying down or sitting up, but they never stand.

earth's rejuvenation. At a previous rehearsal Mr. Petronio had said of the women's floor work, "I've been thinking about sacrifice for love, and how irrelevant that is in the 20th century. You don't have to die for love — even in this epidemic — in fact, quite the contrary. I'd like to make a much more sex-positive statement than 'Rite of Spring.'"

April 23

First Run-Through

Mr. Petronio is choreographing a solo for Mia Lawrence. He demonstrates each step individually, then she copies him. She can do everything he can do, only better.

Sometimes a step works on its own, but not when combined with its predecessor. "How does this feel?" Mr. Petronio asks, as he jumps straight up and executes a change-movement, crisscrossing his feet while in midair. "I haven't done it in context," she says. She dances a few previous steps and then tries the jump. Impossible. "O.K., forget it," Mr. Petronio says. And sometimes Ms. Lawrence does something by accident — such as take a

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step backward after a turning jump to regain her balance — that Mr. Petronio incorporates into the piece.

He asks Ms. Lawrence to run through the solo with music. Unlike Becky Hilton's, it is more typically Petronian: angular, harsh, athletic. Ms. Lawrence doesn't move through space so much as attack it. Her arms and legs are like scissors or knives. She is serious and concentrated, and smiles only when she makes a mistake.

For the first time, Mr. Petronio asks to see a run-through of the whole piece — or at least as much as is ready. There is Ms. Hilton's opening solo, which melds into the trio, which fuses into a six-person segment, which is followed by the Borg/Flomin duet. Each piece looks stronger, better, *different* when placed in the context of the others. Previously isolated fragments have suddenly become part of a coherent whole.

April 25

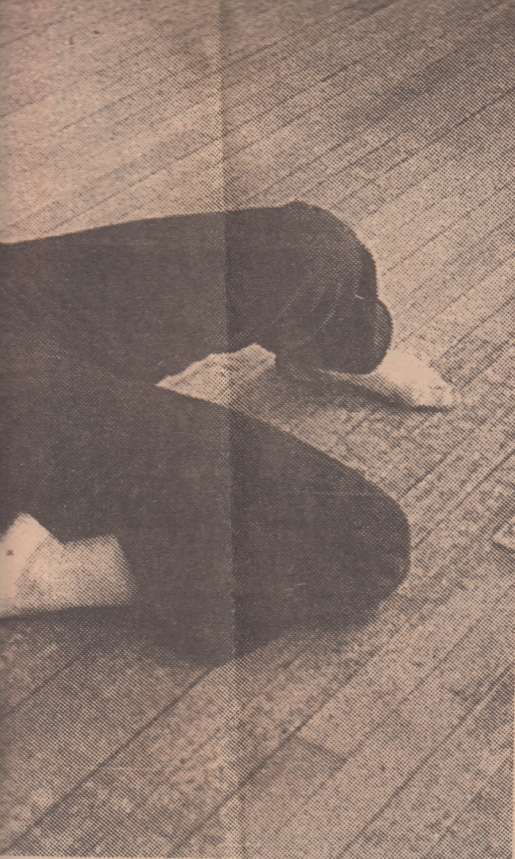
A Life of Its Own

Mr. Petronio has 12 rehearsal days before The Kitchen opening. When asked how much of the piece he considers done, he says, "The first 15 minutes are complete. For the second half, the phrases are made, but they're not composed. I'm much less finished with this piece, two weeks before the performance."

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Most dancers, especially ballet dancers, will tell you that repeating a piece's steps, combined with its music, will produce a "muscle memory" — a quasi-conscious absorption of the choreography into their bodies and brains; subsequently, hearing the music will provoke an almost Pavlovian response and immediately remind them of the steps. (Darci Kistler of the New York City Ballet said last year, "I haven't done 'Mozartiana' in three years, but in 20 minutes it's all back — you just listen to the music.")

When asked how, in the absence of musical landmarks, he remembers the changes Mr. Petronio keeps making in his solo, Gerald Casel says, "You just have to do it over and over. Usually there's a logic to why he's repeating something or taking something out, so it makes sense to your body, too. Basically, each of Stephen's movements has its own rhythm. Without music, it becomes more true. The movement speaks for itself — it's not ruled by an outside meter."

Ms. Borg and Mr. Flomin are working on the duet again. Mr. Flomin still doesn't have his exit down right. "You just want to go for her," Mr. Petronio almost pleads. "Let your body follow your brain." Finally, in desperation, he refers to a narrative character: "Think of yourself as a cartoon villain," he suggests. Mr. Flomin tries it and looks hopefully at Mr. Petronio. "You look more like Snoopy," Mr. Petronio says.

There is one segment that the company practices almost every day. It is referred to simply as "the women's floor work" because it is performed completely on the floor — that is, the women dance lying down or sitting up, but they never stand.

Parts of this dance are extremely sensual: At one point, the women, perched on their hands and knees, arch their backs like cats; at another, while facing the audience, they slowly extend their legs and spread them far apart — all quite fitting for a piece that purports to comment on the century that introduced psychoanalysis and popularized sexual liberation. But there's another, anguished aspect to the floor dance: its long, painful balances on heads, necks and shoulders; its quick contractions; its clenched, inward-turned feet. And these movements, too, reflect Mr. Petronio's attitudes toward our century: the century of Auschwitz, the A-bomb and AIDS.

The narrative of "The Rite of Spring" tells of a virgin whose sacrifice leads to the

ask those questions," she says. "How does this feel?" Mr. Petronio asks, as he jumps straight up and executes a change-ment, crisscrossing his feet while in midair. "I haven't done it in context," she says. She dances a few previous steps and then tries the jump. Impossible. "O.K., forget it," Mr. Petronio says. And sometimes Ms. Lawrence does something by accident — such as take a

'I think it's important to shake people up visually. A lot of choreographers like to reassure you.'

step backward after a turning jump to regain her balance — that Mr. Petronio incorporates into the piece.

He asks Ms. Lawrence to run through the solo with music. Unlike Becky Hilton's, it is more typically Petronian: angular, harsh, athletic. Ms. Lawrence doesn't move through space so much as attack it. Her arms and legs are like scissors or knives. She is serious and concentrated, and smiles only when she makes a mistake.

For the first time, Mr. Petronio asks to see a run-through of the whole piece — or at least as much as is ready. There is Ms. Hilton's opening solo, which melds into the trio, which fuses into a six-person segment, which is followed by the Borg/Flomin duet. Each piece looks stronger, better, *different* when placed in the context of the others. Previously isolated fragments have suddenly become part of a coherent whole.

April 25

A Life of Its Own

Mr. Petronio has 12 rehearsal days before The Kitchen opening. When asked how much of the piece he considers done, he says, "The first 15 minutes are complete. For the second half, the phrases are made, but they're not composed. I'm much less finished with this piece, two weeks before the performance, than I've ever been before. But I'm very impressed with how unpanicked I am. Last year I was terrified."

How crucial is it that the audience "gets" the ideas behind the piece? "It's very important that the idea of the women's floor dance be about open sexuality. And I think that's physicalized: the sexuality is in your face. But some of the other ideas are important just to me — what I want the audience to see is how the idea has styled my body, not to understand the idea itself."

How closely does the piece now correspond to what Mr. Petronio envisioned in March? "Well," he says, "no matter how much you plan, the piece always turns out drastically different. But that's the beauty of it: It has its own life. And the piece isn't finished until you see it. *That's* when it's done — when the audience goes home and thinks about it." □



A Dance Is Born

Creating a work is often an elaborate game of Simon Says, as dancers (like Mia Lawrence, right) struggle to follow their leader — in this case, Stephen Petronio.
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Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times