

Stephen Petronio's dance of discovery

By Debra Cash
Special to the Globe

Stephen Petronio splices together the legs of Elvis Presley, the arms of Judy Garland and Ronald Reagan's head.

Dance preview

The dances of Petronio, 32, jumble images together in a kinetic version of the files of magazine clippings and photographs that he says spur his choreographic ideas. Many of Petronio's dances are performed at dizzying speeds; they look as if 30 years of Life magazine were thrown together into a Waring blender.

This unconventional choreographic process seems to work. Petronio, who danced for seven years with unparalleled experimenter Trisha Brown, won a Guggenheim this year, just four years after he founded his eight-member company. "When you splice or drop found things into your natural process, it tricks you into something you wouldn't ordinarily do," the choreographer explained in a phone interview recently, halfway through the New England Foundation for the Arts-sponsored tour that will bring him to Northeastern University's Alumni Auditorium this Saturday. "Once you begin to develop a vocabulary, you realize you can do certain things well, and you do them over and over again. But choreography is not about the emulation of the old, it's about discovering the new." His process, he says, is also a way to throw "curve balls" at his dancers — so that they have to address new challenges rather than anticipate his preferences.

Petronio's roots in the American dance's avant-garde wing are deep. During his first semester at Hampshire College, he met and began working with Steve Paxton, known to many as a founder of contact improvisation. When he met Trisha Brown, he says, the one thing that impressed him most was that her explorations were taking her in similar directions, "but she was memorizing it. It was a major influence on me to see her working so hard to catch and retain the things an improviser would let go."

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The furious "Simulacrum Reels," with music and settings by David Linton and Justin Terzi and with costumes by Yonson Pak, "approaches a kind of electronic speed," Petronio says. "I tried to see how many ecstatic and grotesque images I could pack into it, and still make it legible. It turns out that it's like the Olympics. One year you got 30 miles an hour, and you're convinced that's as fast as a human being can go. The next year you go 60. The limit changes all the time. The body can be trained to do pretty much what you ask of it."

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He was 22 when he joined Brown's company in 1979. "Of course, things changed over the years I was in her company, but it was extremely satisfying to work next to a master. To go and warm up and execute someone's work to the best of your ability is a difficult job, but it's a simple, focused meditation. You think about your body and the images you're trying to portray. The experience is very unified. But ultimately that wasn't enough for me."

In Boston, Petronio's company will be performing the works that made his reputation. "#3," a virtuosic eight-minute-long solo that lucidly introduces and defines his "splicing" technique, is, he says, based on a collection of images of public speakers: politicians, ministers, entertainers and, of course, pop icons such as Elvis and Judy



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For "AnAmnesia," Petronio invented not only movement but the title as well, splicing together "amnesia," referring to memory loss, and its opposite, "anamnesis," meaning easily recalled. The work is built on such contradictions: One of the images on Terzi's backdrop is the face of Eastern European constructivist painter Szczuka, unknown and unfamiliar, perhaps, but made heroic by the size of his image. "I was looking at classical pas de deux partnering at the time," Petronio explains, "not the lifts but the grips and grasps and clasps that made those connections possible. The funny thing is that the lift may be elegant, but the grasp is tense and brittle."

"One of my loves as a choreographer is to reveal and discover something new or subtly renewed about movement," he says. "I think that's about keeping an open mind."