

DANCE

M A G A Z I N E

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Stephen Petronio: Mixing It Up

For the last ten years, Stephen Petronio's choreography has astonished by its blending of unlikely elements.

by John Gruen

portraits by Jack Mitchell

With his shaven head, strong yet delicate features, and compact body, Stephen Petronio exudes the alertness and vitality of Egyptian sculpture. In the act of dancing he offers the allure of a cat slowly stretching or suddenly darting, every sinew and muscle in perfect harmony and balance. Whether dancing in a tutu, a corset, or a loincloth—Petronio's choreographic subtext has always dealt with questions of sexual identity through costuming—he, more than any other member of his company, retains a dignity that moves beyond choreographic intent or content.

If Petronio's skills as a dancer are never less than mesmerizing, his ways of creating movement can be by turns enigmatic, exhilarating, and, of late, puzzling. Since 1984, when he formed the Stephen Petronio Company, the dancer-choreographer has been on a singular mission: to lend credence to the notion that, in combination, the intellect and the emotions can create movements that produce a sort of spontaneous combustion—a catharsis designed to extract a certain sexual violence from the dancers and induce shock and rapture in the audience.

Through these and other means Petronio has, in fact, achieved considerable success as both dancer and choreographer. As dancer, first with the Trisha Brown Company (he was its first male performer and danced with the company from 1979 to 1986), later as solo dancer, then as dancer with his own company, Petronio proved entirely charismatic and, for someone who came to dance relatively late, technically brilliant.

During an earlier phase of his career, around the late eighties, Petronio was propelled for the most part by punk-rock music that inspired highly inventive phrasing, partnering, and group imagery. There were surprises everywhere, certainly in such potent works as *Simulacrum Reels*, *Middlesex Gorge*, *Half Wrong Plus Laytext*, and *Wrong Wrong*—wonderful lifts, strange pauses, sharp contrasting passages, all fascinating to watch.

And there was Michael Clark, the bad boy of British ballet, who came to dance with Petronio and lent his classically trained fluency and precision to a modern dance vocabulary he instantly made his own. Watching Petronio

and Clark dance together in female corsets was, as the saying goes, something else.

Those were heady days for Petronio, as far as his public and personal lives were concerned. The irrepressible Clark became something of a catalyst for the company as he melded his sensibilities with those of his friend and colleague. The two seemed to possess an aura that gave the Stephen Petronio Company a creative edge and made it highly viable within the spectrum of postmodern dance. Some four years later, when Clark was no longer dancing with the company, Petronio continued to make off-kilter, passionate, raging dances of over-the-edge sensuality.

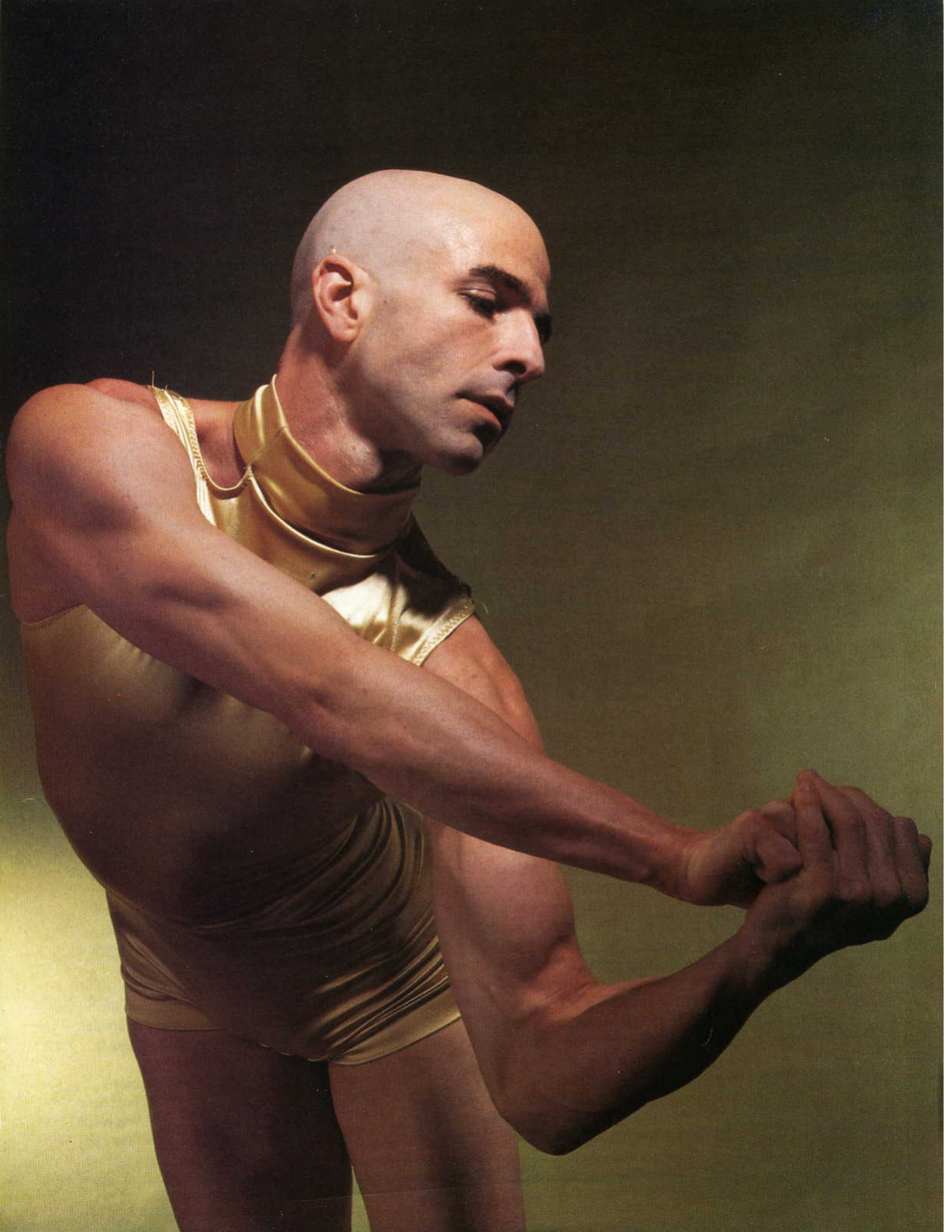
Much was expected of Petronio's weeklong season last October at the Joyce Theater in New York City. On paper, his program looked fabulous: the punk-rock aficionado would be setting two of classical music's great war-horses, Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, called *Full Half Wrong*, and Ravel's *Boléro* (preceded by a recording of Elvis Presley's "Love Me Tender"), called *The King is Dead (Part I)*. Decor would include written text gliding across the stage à la Jenny Holzer, and there would be projections of photographs by artist Cindy Sherman. The inventive designer Manolo would supply the ultrasmart costumes. The program would also include the world premiere of *She Says* to songs of Yoko Ono. It was all most curiosity-provoking.

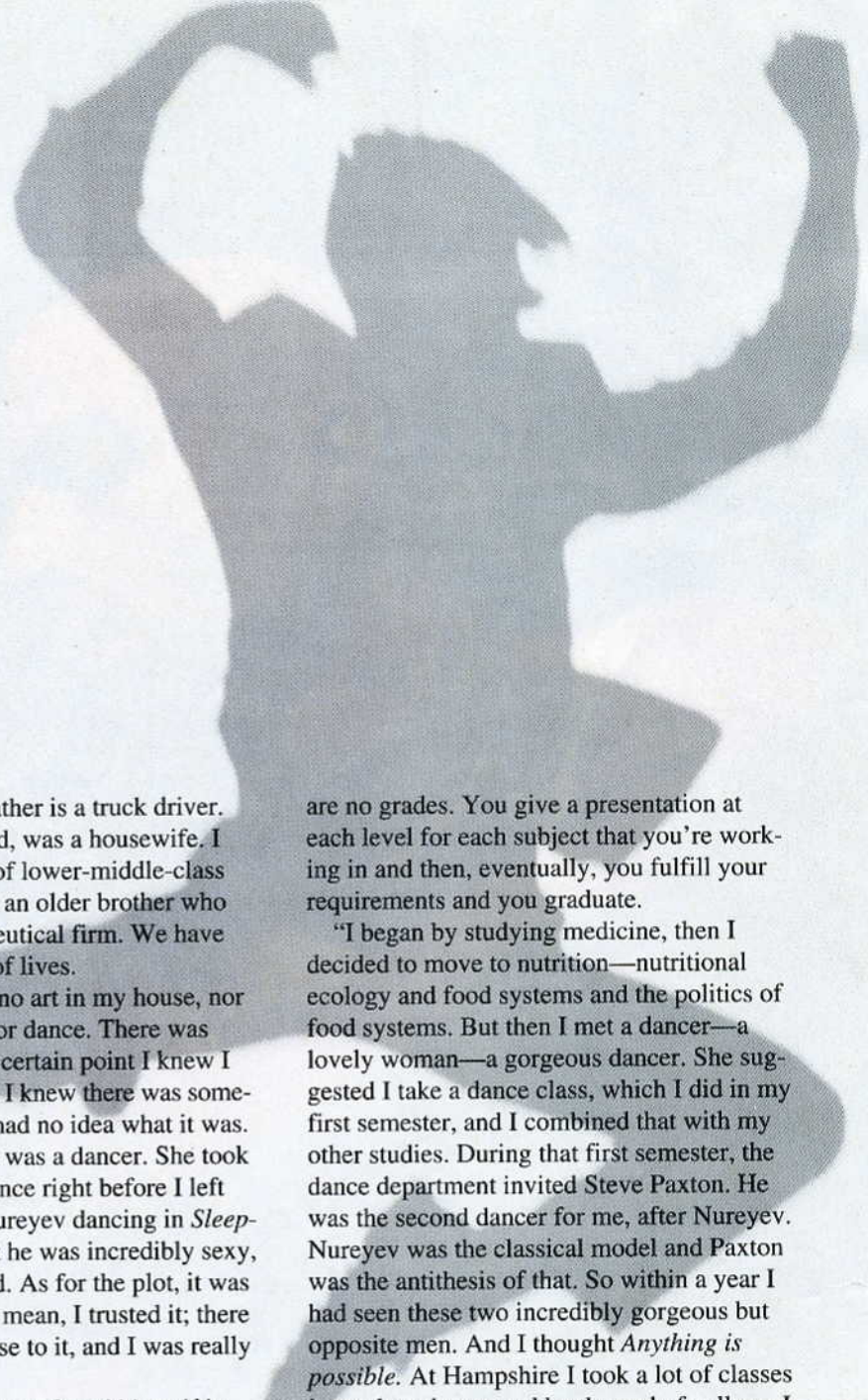
But the dance critics were disappointed. "Something was always missing from the three premieres," wrote Anna Kisselgoff in the *New York Times*. And in *New York* magazine, Tobi Tobias protested, "Petronio's most overt way of cadging a response from his beleaguered audience is to mess around with sexual issues that he presumably hopes will be taboo to them."

Petronio may have been perturbed, but he chooses to ignore his critics. He prefers, instead, to tell of his background, his schooling, his early dancing days, his career, and, most candidly, his personal life.

"I was born in Newark and raised in Nutley, New Jer-

Petronio in a Manolo costume for Full Half Wrong.





Stephen Petronio and Justin Terzi (next page) in *Apollo Object* (1983); photo from Dance Magazine Archives.

sey," he says. "My father is a truck driver. My mother, now dead, was a housewife. I was raised in a kind of lower-middle-class Italian family. I have an older brother who works for a pharmaceutical firm. We have very different kinds of lives.

"There was really no art in my house, nor music nor painting nor dance. There was television. Well, at a certain point I knew I was kind of different. I knew there was something wanting, but I had no idea what it was.

"A cousin of mine was a dancer. She took me to see a performance right before I left for college. It was Nureyev dancing in *Sleeping Beauty*. I thought he was incredibly sexy, strong, and organized. As for the plot, it was very foreign to me. I mean, I trusted it; there was some sort of sense to it, and I was really fascinated by that."

He can be said to have found himself in college. Because his family was very poor, he would need a scholarship, especially after he had chosen the most expensive school available—Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. It was an experimental school that was attached to four other colleges in the Connecticut River Valley—Amherst College, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, Smith College, and Mount Holyoke. Fortunately, they gave him a scholarship.

"The way you get through Hampshire is by creating a system for yourself and putting yourself through it, which I did. There is an examination system, like at English schools, where you pass through four levels. There

are no grades. You give a presentation at each level for each subject that you're working in and then, eventually, you fulfill your requirements and you graduate.

"I began by studying medicine, then I decided to move to nutrition—nutritional ecology and food systems and the politics of food systems. But then I met a dancer—a lovely woman—a gorgeous dancer. She suggested I take a dance class, which I did in my first semester, and I combined that with my other studies. During that first semester, the dance department invited Steve Paxton. He was the second dancer for me, after Nureyev. Nureyev was the classical model and Paxton was the antithesis of that. So within a year I had seen these two incredibly gorgeous but opposite men. And I thought *Anything is possible*. At Hampshire I took a lot of classes in modern dance, and by the end of college, I was doing *just* dance."

After graduation Petronio came to New York City, and within weeks he had met Trisha Brown. "I had become very interested in the Judson Church people—Trisha, Lucinda Childs, Laura Dean, Yvonne Rainer," he says. "I was interested in them because they did not have a classical model. Again, I took the premise that anything is possible.

"Anyway, I had met one of Trisha's dancers, and she suggested that I come to an audition, but I missed it because I was much too shy. Well, Trisha herself called me and said, 'Where were you?' So I had a private audition and she took me into her company."



He has mixed emotions, looking back on his years with Brown: "I must say, dancing with Trisha was not natural for me. Still . . . I thought Trisha was a genius, and being next to that kind of thinking and that kind of body was incredible. I was twenty-one and the first man in her company, and I always felt like a bull in a china shop. Even after I became very accomplished in her style, I always thought there was something wrong about my dancing there. But I danced with Trisha for seven years, and I have a great love for her. When I decided to leave her company, it was hard to go. But I knew that by staying I could not really develop my own sensibility."

The first dance he made was inspired by a reproduction of a painting by Ben Shahn of a bunch of boys in the Depression playing handball against a very gray wall. It was called *The Wall Piece*. "It was kind of an intellectual work," Petronio recalls. "After that I got into a very structural period. Very abstract. Just walking around. No technique. It was an interesting phase. After that I got very interested in virtuosity. All my first dances were me showing the dancers every step. But that became kind of a trap. Once I let go of that, things began to heat up. That is, I didn't show the dancers what to do, I *told* them what to do."

In 1986 he made *Walk In*, which premiered at Dance Theater Workshop. Petronio describes it as a long, thirty-five-minute dance that had everything in it that he had been exploring about movement.

"To me, movement has got to be provocative intellectually. It's got to be provocative

sexually and sensually. It's got to be pleasurable. I'm a great believer in pleasure. I'm not into doom and gloom. There's enough of that in the world. The reason I want movement to be sexually provocative is because I'm a sexual person and that's part of the fabric that I work with. There was a point when I was making a meal of that, but now it's just part of what I do. I'm not making any kind of statement about anything but what I feel. The point is, I am what I do."

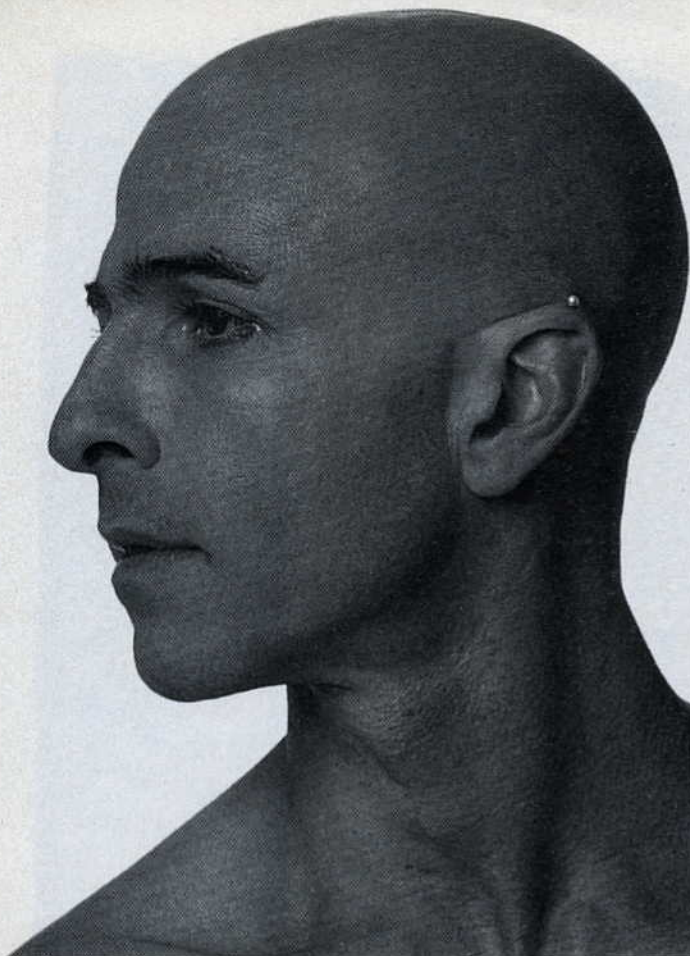
Another major event around that time was meeting Michael Clark. Petronio's company was on tour in Glasgow and Clark came to a performance. "He came back afterwards," Petronio recalls. "Michael is a superstar, and one of the great dancers of the century. It was wonderful being on the same stage with him—dancing with him in unison, which brought out our differences. And wearing those corsets."

"I don't like to talk too much about the meaning of costumes in my pieces. The one thing I will say is that there is something about the stiffness of the corset that was interesting to me, because, if the goal of the body was to be as free and virtuosic as possible, then to put it into something constricting is really quite interesting. Also, corsets are generally made by men to be worn by women. Well, in my piece only the men wore the corsets, and they were worn backward and upside down. I found them really enjoyable to dance in."

Petronio has no hesitation about discussing how he choreographs and what he expects of

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Petronio in a studio portrait (above) and in a Manolo costume for *The King is Dead* (Part I).

dancers: "Every step that I make is a constraint. That tension is really important to me—to make something a little too hard, a little too fast. And when you see a dancer rising to that challenge—even if he can't meet it—that intensity is gorgeous and beautiful. I'm interested in the drama of someone struggling to expand. It's a lovely thing to see, and it touches me very deeply. Every time I make a dance, I think the dancers will never be able to do this. Then they do it! Then the next year I think, Well, watch this! And again they do it. And I'm standing in the wings just crying, because they're just doing it—doing the impossible!"

"So that's how I make my dances. The movements push the outside bounds of one's kinesthetic understanding—you're pushing past your physical limits—and it looks shocking. Those are the movements I like to see."

What about his life away from dance? "Well, I live in Brooklyn, in a very Italian neighborhood. My home is a bungalow, and it's hidden from the street. You have to go through a series of alleyways; it's surrounded by gardens on all sides and I have a big backyard.

"And I have a daughter named Bella. She's four years old. She's half-Italian and half-Jewish. Her mother was one of my first friends in New York. We met and we decided to have a child together. It was very carefully thought out. It's a very lovely thing in my life—incredibly lovely." □

John Gruen is a Dance Magazine senior editor.

