

The Value

Words Stephen Greco



of Zero

Photography Christian Witkin



For eons, dancers have been onstage, where they must work hard and long to achieve total freedom: to conjure the boundless within the confines of a box. When dancers can return to nature, the freedom is a given — there are no boundaries, zero confines — and you can see this in their bodies. Petronio has said that when dancers arrive at Crow’s Nest, the new home for the Stephen Petronio Company, he wants them “to feel like they’ve died and gone to heaven.” We asked the choreographer to share some recent passages from his journal about the spot; we also asked him and photographer Christian Witkin to talk about the photographs that Witkin recently took of members of the Petronio Company on the grounds of Crow’s Nest. — *Stephen Greco*





STEPHEN PETRONIO

When you're inside the theater, it's the most controlled environment for you. Ideally, it's the perfect temperature, the perfect surface to dance on, with the perfect spring: so you're in control of the world and it's all about you. When you move into nature, it's about how your instincts can interface with the unknown of the natural, and that's a very beautiful and different thing. So you're out of control, in a way, which can be frustrating, but it can also be really special.

The thing I would say specifically about Crow's Nest is that it's perched so high that the long views are all the way to Massachusetts — it's amazing. So what the front of your body feels, when you're facing that precipitous distance, is a kind of release. Your body reacts in a certain way. It's pretty surprising. We have a kind of perch — a floating house about twenty feet in the air, like a tree house on telephone poles — jutting off the edge of the property. Any dancer I've ever brought there, because you're so high up and facing the long view, faces the diagonal and just goes into this state of bliss. There's something about the pull of the emptiness of that aerial space that really opens your body up.

I would say it's instinctual. Even on the stage, I am always trying to get my dancers to be disoriented so that their incredibly virtuosic instincts come into play. We all know the level of skills that they have, but when you put that into an unknown situation, in nature, it comes out in a way that nobody has expected — neither them, nor I, nor Christian. That's really what we were looking for in the shoot, and what Crow's Nest is about.



CHRISTIAN WITKIN

Stephen and I wanted to integrate the dancers into the environment — such a wonderful, rough property. We had this concept of the dancers huddling and scattering like deer. The dancers were near nude and dancing on a bed of pine needles... and you know that dancers have to be careful about protecting themselves from injury. But they were troopers. Being out in nature riled them up. They were throwing themselves around with intensity, with the freedom of improv.

Christian Witkin is a Photographer and Director based between NY and LA. He is currently working on several book projects. christianwitkin.com

FROM THE JOURNAL OF STEPHEN PETRONIO

"The first night at Crow's Nest was in December, 2016. We come up on Christmas Day to spend our first night in our new world. There's not a stick of furniture, and the vast blankness of the space here is formidable.

Que será, será? This place, which I've dreamt of for so long, though not at all in this incarnation. I imagined a vintage farm — dancing in some puritanical barn, sleeping in a musty loft, around a large open kitchen, firing up the hearth for organic veggie stew. It's a hippie dream from 1972; a glow in the dark communal life, bound together, though not in the nuclear form, which I reject for its role-limiting particularities, but rather a movement towards another kind of family: empathetic, without the assumption or rigor mortis of a predetermined identity.

"Getting here was a monumental act of will. What to do first, in an endless line of things to do next? It's daunting...

Appropriately, Bella slips off to bed in the dancers' wing. The house is piercingly quiet now and, when I climb into the new-sheeted, king-size built-in at the center of our room, Jean-Marc is already asleep. It's pitch black but for the 40-carat stars beyond the glass walls of the master suite. They feel so close I can nearly touch them without effort. In truth, the stars seem to reach into the room to touch me as I try to fall asleep, as I try to fall into this dream.

"When you see a dance on the stage, it's a complete material product of unimaginable, invisible process. We see the moves, grasp the form (sometimes); the sets and music are tangible, and the entirety of it encompasses the labor of so many decisions and a long and arduous process. That finished product can be thrilling to witness: carved from air, yet tangible. How you get there is another proposition.

"The glorification of the untried, the untested, the glamour of the unknown, the beginning, the inkling of an idea: Crow's Nest is an empty space, a quiet space, a gloriously natural and intimate zero in which to begin. The value of zero.

"Simple or mysterious, whatever else it may be, it always takes labor, time, and empty, unquantifiable space that we don't know how to talk about or even really want to see. There's a creative, messy, disorganized, often tedious searching and sniffing, a digging around and chasing that compresses these unknowns to bring about the most polished diamonds."

Stephen Greco wrote the live shows Inside Risk: Shadows of Medellin and Peter and the Wolf in Hollywood. His most recent novel is Now and Yesterday published by Kensington.

Stephen Petronio Company is located in Round Top, NY petronio.io