

Dance

Stephen Petronio

3 stars Queen Elizabeth Hall, London

Judith Mackrell
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All the elements in Stephen Petronio's *Island of Misfit Toys* conspire to create a seductively creepy piece of American Gothic. Cindy Sherman's set takes its appalling inspiration from the Victorian toybox. Three giant dolls loll at the front of the stage (one with its face broken off, the others joined at the hip) while a line of decapitated dolls' heads grin blindly from the back wall. The score, assembled from Lou Reed's song catalogue, begins with his setting of *The Raven*, which is a cue for Petronio to sit upstage smoking maniacally as he watches his own invention unroll.

This, it turns out, is a dance of traumatised decadence, a vision of Manhattan twentysomethings shipwrecked by a culture of infantilised excess. The eight dancers look like precociously sexualised kids in pyjamas and jailbait gingham smocks, and their movements flip between wanton display, twitching confusion and clinging appeal. Petronio's triumph here is to evoke transgression within expertly polished dance. Individual movements glow with a burnished glamour - which makes their modulation into dysfunction all the more chilling. Group sections are structured with steely control and sometimes invention.

Island of Misfit Toys is the latest addition to Petronio's *Gotham Suite*. *City of Twist*, set to a score by Laurie Anderson, is an earlier and less interesting piece. The seven dancers display a more adult poise and Petronio celebrates the casual community of their city by having couples and groups emerging almost at random out of disparate moves. Two people join hands across a crowded stage, or sit out a phrase in sociable exhaustion. As the mood turns bleaker - closing with a woman railing against her solitude - the frailty of this human contact is powerfully underlined. Yet en route, Petronio's choreography and Anderson's score make only patchy claims on our attention. Between the vivid high points are sections of slackly imagined, recycled material that make this particular view of New York disappointingly generic.