

Stephen Petronio Dance Company presents: **Mixed Repertory 2004**

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Stephen Petronio Dance Company in *Island of Misfit Toys*. Photo courtesy of Driscoll Horton PR.

Anybody curious to observe one of the finest American choreographers of his generation in a period of serious transition should catch the Stephen Petronio Dance Company in the course of its current stateside tour, which will conclude March 23-28 at New York's Joyce Theater. The concert Saturday (Feb. 6) at San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theater - the sixth time Petronio has been presented in this city by San Francisco Performances, an enviable gesture of loyalty - was one of those affairs which provoke arguments. But they are the right arguments, the ones that debate matters like the right of the artist to rearrange his priorities when the times demand such a rethinking.

The program opens with Petronio's solo, *Broken Man*, and moves on to *City of Twist*, unveiled two years ago and shown in some cities last year. After intermission, comes *The Island of Misfit Toys*, which, like its predecessor works here, was made by Petronio after the cataclysmic events of 9/11 and premiered last fall during London's Dance Umbrella. As Petronio moves into the 20th anniversary season of his own company, critics have already lined up about the recent dances. The Brits love *Island* and dismissed *City*; many of the Americans, who have seen both, feel the other way. I wondered Saturday whether the opposing views represent more than a response to specific dances, whether they are in fact ingrained viewpoints about the so-called plotless purity of modern dance contrasted with the European affinity for emotional content. There's a transatlantic divide aesthetically, but Petronio straddles the entire sea so adroitly in this program.

In fact what gives *City of Twist* its buzz is not the movement per se - Petronio had set his company spinning in these densely textured essays for years, but the feeling you get throughout the 30-minute piece that these seven people are dancing on the edge. In *Island of Misfit Toys*, they have already tumbled over the precipice; in a sense, it's a post-apocalyptic fantasy happening in some infernal kindergarten. There may be too much emotional content here, too many exposed nerves to satisfy the cool postmodernists. Petronio does something that his contemporaries scorn - he lets his choreography be inspired by assorted works of rocker Lou Reed; and he will further irk some of his contemporaries by allowing his décor to ascend to the level of the specific.

Petronio has always exhibited great imagination in choosing his collaborators. Here, Cindy Sherman, famed for her photographs, has contributed a child's garden of horrors. Two plush sculptures of babies, one with a gaping mouth, the other with two heads (pulled from their moorings at the end), flop over the stage apron. Sherman has also supplied a totem pole of baby's heads at the back of the stage, which, thanks to Ken Tabachnick's brilliant lighting, emit an ominous glow. The nine dancers, their faces smeared with finger paints, bounce around in Tara Subkoff's pajamas and baby dolls. They exhibit rage, envy and a lack of emotional connection throughout. Two prominent duets, for Gerald Casel and Ashleigh Leite and another for Jimena Paz and Gino Grenek, find the dancers flailing in their isolated infantilism. A fantasy of dancing on pointe (fulfilled by Shila Tirabassi) quickly vanishes.



Stephen Petronio Dance Company. Photo courtesy of Driscoll Horton PR.

The piece begins with Petronio, his back to us, sitting in a chair smoking (shades of Rudy Perez's *Countdown*). The brats seem to pull out his entrails, he leaves, and with him, parental or societal control goes, too. The choreographer asks what would we do without the mediating influence of society and it's not pretty. The fact that it's also mesmerizing seems to have repelled more than one viewer. Energy here seems undirected, as the women spin madly from wing to wing, combinations implode upon themselves. A dancer blows up a balloon; it is punctured with glee. Heads recline in folded hands, and, then, there are those dismemberments at the end. As a portrait of the instinctual urge run amok, *The Island of Misfit Toys*, won't be bettered this season or next. What it needs is a bit of trimming.

Laurie Anderson's brooding score for *City of Twist*, with its propulsive underpinning, couldn't be improved upon. The dancing, as might be expected, is unnervingly good. Petronio's dancers plunge into space aggressively, but there are terrifying moments, like the ritual imposition of one body upon another. Jumps are obsessions, rather feats of agility, while the dancers in a state of semi-undress seem to have been roused from a deep slumber. 9/11 analogies, anyone?

Petronio's solo, with arms reaching and hugging shoulders in desperation, achieves a measure of urgency in Blixa Bargeld's piano music. The costume tells the tale: one of the dancer's arms is in a suit jacket; the rest of the garment hangs from his back. Perhaps, Petronio is also trying on a new style.

The Stephen Petronio Dance Company next appears Feb. 15-19 in Seattle, sponsored by On the Boards.