

First Night reviews

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Stephen Petronio

By Debra Craine

Dance

Queen Elizabeth Hall

★★★☆☆

THE most appealing thing about Stephen Petronio's choreography has always been its raw New York energy. Almost more than any other US choreographer whose work we regularly see over here, Petronio taps into the mania of the downtown New York scene. All-night parties, tramps in doorways, dirty needles, the young and the beautiful, the defeated and the desperate: his frenetic choreography seems to encompass them all.

But now he has added something new to the mix - melancholy. It courses through his new choreography shown at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, part of the Dance Umbrella festival.

Something sad and terrible is happening from the moment we encounter the stage. Cindy Sherman's giant distorted dolls tell us that. Booming out of the sound system is *The Raven*, and in a chair sits Petronio, his back to us, smoking. This is the world premiere of *The Island of Misfit Toys*, gothic tales from Manhattan; it's going to be grim.

Like the empty-eyed men and women in Andy Warhol's bathetic films, Petronio's dancers (dressed, apparently, for bed) are debauched youngsters inhabiting a city on the edge of a nervous breakdown. The choreography rides a wave of uppers and downers, schismatic, ragged and floppy, filled with empty vanity, confrontational undercurrents and insecure flailing. A man blows up a balloon, a woman teeters in pointe shoes and pink ankle socks.

There is a certain authenticity in *The Island of Misfit Toys*. Petronio's company looks strong and polished, and there's no doubt he's varying his tone as a choreographer. But the aural accompaniment is a joke. First Willem Dafoe mangles Lou Reed's take on Poe's iconic poem, then Reed offers us the unmitigated insult of his *Metal Machine Music*. Only with *I'm Waiting for the Man* is there any hint of the Reed magic.

City of Twist, meanwhile, is Petronio's contribution to the canon of 9/11 dances. Set to a droning original score by Laurie Anderson and using eight half-dressed dancers, it culminates in a choreographic trance that feels like Petronio marking time. It left me cold. Petronio's own solo, *Broken Man*, is similarly half-baked but it does at least remind us of his potency as a dancer.