

■ review

Petronio dance company enchants

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BECKETT, Mass. -- Stephen Petronio's New York is a timeless city of dreams and nightmares that could exist anywhere -- or nowhere at all.

On Wednesday evening at Jacob's Pillow, the Stephen Petronio Company performed a preview of "The Island of Misfit Toys," set to premiere this fall. "Island" is a companion piece to the 2002 work "City of Twist," which was inspired by the choreographer's hometown and completed in the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001.

The eight-minute excerpt was an intriguing glimpse into a very different landscape. Where "Twist" has a fluid, whirling rhythm, "Island" is full of angles and odd shapes. Where "Twist" is built around a handful of solos, "Island" links the dancers in lines, chains and fleeting partnerships.

In this off-kilter, off-balance world, connections are attempted in strange, almost desperate ways. Dancers flop across each other or reach into the negative spaces made by each other's bodies, always turning away before the union is fully realized. The music, three songs by Lou Reed, adds to the droll, surreal atmosphere.

Compared with "Island," at least thus far, "City of Twist" has a kind of innocence and purity about it. Laurie Anderson's commissioned score -- wordless, and warmer than much of her work -- is a haunting, evocative complement to the long lines and loops Petronio draws. There are places where all eight dancers are onstage at once, with interesting things happening in every corner, and there's a brief, stunning duet between Gerald Casel and Thang Dao, but the backbone of the work is formed by four solos by Gerald Casel, Jimena Paz, Gino Grenek and Ashleigh Leite.

Like spotlights that zero in on faces in a crowd, the solos reveal the subtle essence of each character. The longer you watch the dancers move, the more you feel you understand something important about who they are. There's a riveting coiled quality to Casel's dancing, while Paz can be light and airy as gossamer and then suddenly drop all her energy into her pelvis and feet. In her solo, Leite seems to be searching for some way out of her own skin: She dances fast as she can, then goes still and opens her arms wide in entreaty.

The movement in "Strange Attractors Part II," from 2000, is less personal but equally compelling. One captivating tableaux replaces another as Petronio works in balletic turns and a muscular kickboxing section and deploys his dancers in patterns that make their own sort of pleasingly asymmetrical sense.

The program also included "Broken Man," a tense, tortured solo that Petronio choreographed for himself last year after recovering from a broken foot.