

The Culture

DANCE

At play with very bad dolls

Strange toys are a motif Stephen Petronio uses to explore darkness, writes **Sharon Verghis**.

Stephen Petronio grabs my pen and mimics skewering something onto it. I'm thinking kebabs, chunks of satay, but, no, they're tiny dolls' heads, four of them, impaled on a stick. That's what New York photographer and video artist Cindy Sherman presented him with as a creative motif when he turned up at her apartment to check on the progress of her design ideas for his 2003 work, *The Island of Misfit Toys*.

The effect: sinister, creepy, and aesthetically, a perfect match for what he was already turning around in his head. He grins: "It was like, Cindy, I love it, you've got to keep that in. This idea of a totem – it was fantastic."

Sherman – a close friend, board member of the Stephen Petronio Company and past collaborator on the company's 1993 piece *The King Is Dead* – obviously took his plea to heart. Huge, tiny, broken, limbless, double-headed: dolls of all variations feature in *Misfits*, the most recent of Petronio's trilogy of works, *The Gotham Suite*, which opens on Wednesday in a presentation by the Sydney Dance Company. Collectively, they are the stuff of nightmares. Pediophobics – those afflicted

with a fear of dolls – would be well-advised to stay clear.

The work will feature alongside two other pieces from 2002: *Broken Man*, which has Petronio, strapped into a get-up resembling a violent accident between a business suit and a straitjacket dancing a visceral solo as a man with a psyche cleaved in two; and *City of Twist*, another skewed vision of New York's lost souls and cityscape. All three are, in some way, shaped by his response to the September 11 attacks, as dancer, as choreographer, and as native New Yorker. At least one – *Broken Man* – is moulded by personal darkness: a broken foot which agonisingly took more than a year to heal, as cataclysmic to a dancer as a broken hand for a violinist.

Petronio will present the works next week in the company's Australian debut. He was last here in 2003 for his staging of the critically acclaimed *Underland*, a commission from Graeme Murphy that was performed by the dancers of the Sydney Dance Company.

Now in his late 40s, Petronio looks fit, springy of foot, and lithe, tattoos snaking down both arms, that famously bald head sitting squarely on top of a corded neck like a giant river pebble on a plinth.



A bare foot – hard to say if it was the one that was hurt – peeps out from under the table between us.

As with *City of Twist*, he began work on *Broken Man* well before September 11. Even before buildings fell and the sky spewed ash and bone, Petronio says he was in a vulnerable place, nursing his injury and grappling with a hefty mid-life crisis (Should he retire? Go to medical school?), reflecting that his dance style over the years, inevitably, had solidified into a trademark: robust, vigorous, big, and that change was needed to reflect his own growth as man and dancer.

Then, came September 11, breaking around him in his neighbourhood below 14th street. Both *Broken Man*, and *City of Twist*, originally intended as a tribute to the essence of New York, took on a different shape in his head, fed by private and public anxieties coming together.

"Tragedy brings out very different creative responses in different people. With me, I became almost obsessive about creating, about form and structure." He flashes a wry smile. "You know what they say, when faced with danger, some run, some procreate? Well, I was procreating."

Petronio to tackle in the tragedy epidemic gender early 1990s produce on the le termed

Pieces Gorge, v in a prog compan New York works th their sha the issue driving



September 11, in his low 14th street. and *City of* tended as a ce of New York, shape in his e and public together. t very different n different became almost ating, about e." He flashes a ow what they h danger, some e? Well, I was

Petronio has never been afraid to tackle real-life politics: steeped in the trauma of the AIDS epidemic and the confrontational gender debates of the 1980s and early 1990s, he could never produce dance works that remain on the level of what Lloyd Newson termed "beautiful wallpaper".

Pieces such as *MiddleSex Gorge*, which he recently reprised in a program celebrating the company's 20th anniversary at New York's Joyce Theatre, were works that looked outwards for their shape and pulse, drawing on the issues of sexuality and identity driving the times.

But in *The Gotham Suite*, which showcases the talents of creative collaborators Tara Subkoff, Lou Reed, Laurie Anderson, and Blixa Bargeld, Petronio has engaged with a real-life event that goes well beyond the personal and subjective. The September 11 tragedy has evoked scores of such creative responses, such as John Adams's elegiac, haunting *On The Transmigration of Souls* to Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's powerful dance drama, *Foi*. Cherkaoui and company point to an interesting shift in dance's traditional treatment of dark issues - hate, loss, betrayal, violence, damaged souls, the evil



More than skin deep ... Stephen Petronio (whose tattoo in Latin reads "now I know what love is") and above, *The Island of Misfit Toys*. Photos: Wade Laube/Sarah Silver

in gods and men - as abstractions, to examining them in a real-life, contemporary context as they stalk the world.

Witness productions such as *Nanjing 1937*, the China National Chinese Opera and Dance Drama Company's production based on Japan's war crimes in the city, or Palestine's El-Funoun dance company and its creative responses to the Israeli occupation, or *Fagaala* by Senegal's Compagnie Jant-Bi and based on the Rwandan genocide. The piece is in Sydney this month and is a key work in the Melbourne Festival.

But not all in the dance world feel that dance is the ideal medium to comment on the real world. Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin, among many others, believes his politics and his art should be kept separate.

Petronio says he did not want, above all, to be obvious, to take a sledgehammer approach to September 11, but use it perhaps, as a kind of catalyst for the themes in the trilogy: big city anonymity, the experience of being a misfit, a shifting dance aesthetic.

But dark times prompt reflection. "The world is in trouble. You can either choose to ignore it or you can respond to it."

The Stephen Petronio Company performs at the Sydney Theatre at Walsh Bay from October 5 to 16.