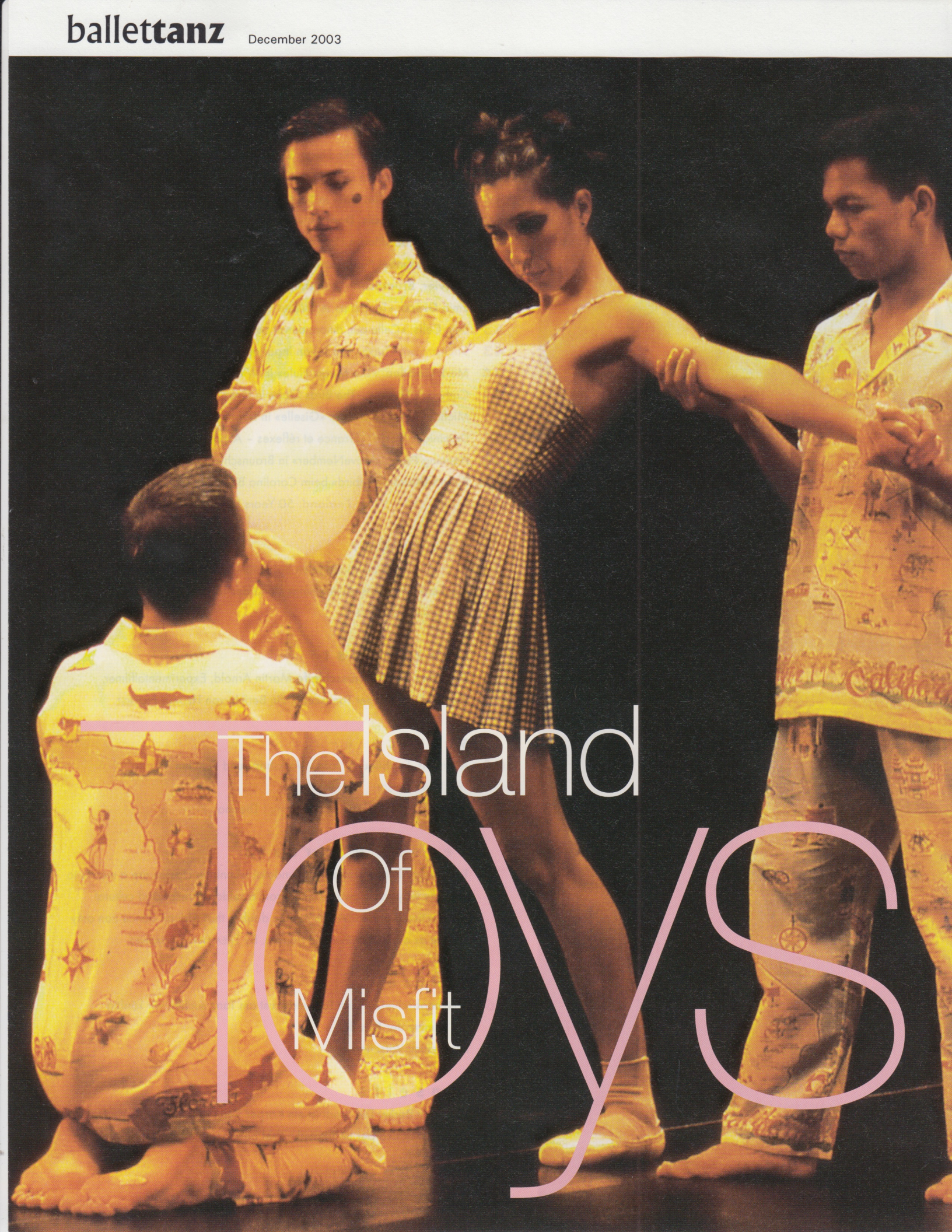




The Island Of Misfit Toys

The Unbroken Man

20 years of Stephen Petronio Company

Starting out in New York in the 1980s, Stephen Petronio rode a euphoric wave of sex and money. Then came the crash – injury and financial struggles tested the endurance of the independent choreographer. Now, in the caring, sharing atmosphere of post 9/11 New York, he is gathering friends from all branches of the arts around him and drawing strength from the old-fashioned concept of a dance company.

By Frank Werner

There are few things in life that can shake up a tough New Yorker. September 11 was one of these rare events. Most natives, however, responded to the catastrophe in a way that might seem a little strange to those who are not acquainted with the city and its people: instead of fleeing the haunted grounds, they stayed and felt an overwhelming gratitude, even privilege, to live and work in the city they loved – like Stephen Petronio, a resident of New York since the late 1970s. Yet the titles of Petronio's latest company works, "City Of Twist" and "The Island Of Misfit Toys," hint at the complications, doubts and questions, contained in this love affair. "Broken Man," a solo choreographed and performed by Petronio himself, completes a somber and touching homage to New York and opened the 20th anniversary season of Stephen Petronio Company at this year's Dance Umbrella festival in London.

There is no curtain in this theater, so while being seated for the world premiere of "The Island Of Misfit Toys," our view of the stage is unobstructed and we get a foretaste of what awaits us. Downstage right, visual artist Cindy Sherman has placed a baby doll about the height of a dancer. Its face is cut off; we look right into the empty back of its head. Downstage left, draped over the edge of the stage, lies an unshapely heap of Siamese twin dolls that could be an interpretation of Munch's "Scream." The lights go down. Right next to the nightmarish still life, Petronio sits on a translucent chair, back to the audience, smoking. And the hallucinatory dream commences.

Willem Dafoe's merciless, sardonic voice reading from "The Raven," E. A. Poe's haunting po-

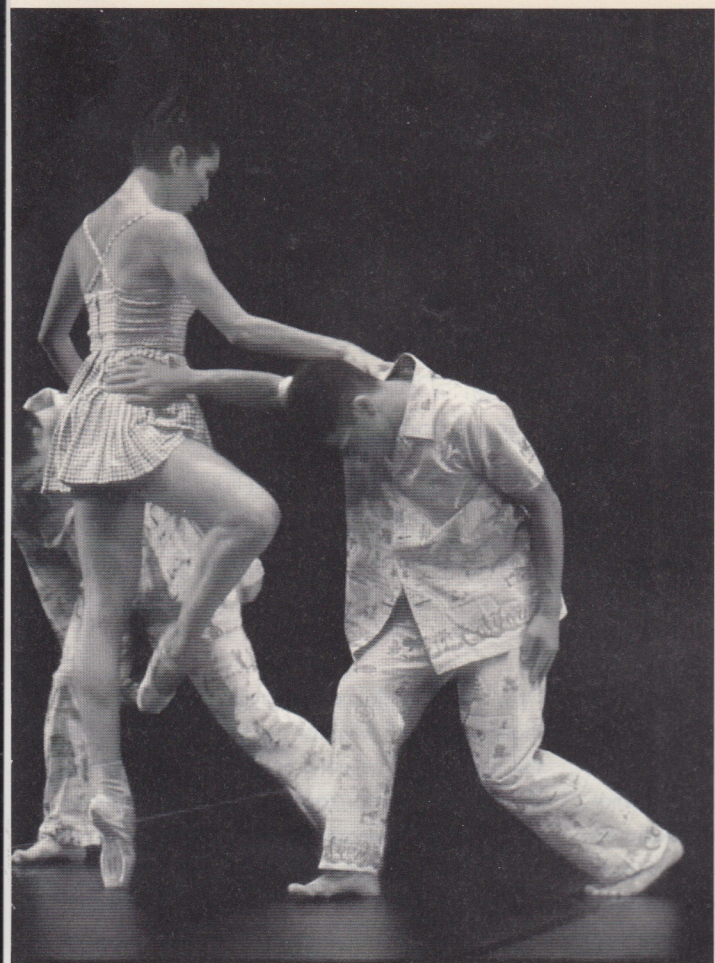
em on lost love, sets the tone for the first of eleven sequences that make up this dark dream. Petronio, in a captain's guard uniform, sways his head as the dance around him unfolds to the text like an animated REM-phase: the eight dancers are automated toys, stumbling, tripping over and bumping into each other haphazardly, alluding to the hapless attempts at meetings that so often occur on the streets of Manhattan. Petronio's landmark movement – the tossing of energy through the body into space, extending the limbs of his dancers into the infinite – is peculiarly fractured by these hyperactive, blank-faced marionettes. Equally fragmented and curiously vague is the choreographic structure that Petronio attaches to the suite of songs that accompanies the piece, taken from the "13 Meditations On Poe" by avant-garde rocker Lou Reed. The imagery becomes uncanny when the dancers start worshipping the totem of blind baby doll faces that Sherman has erected at the back of the stage; it turns cruel when they finish a groovy ensemble sequence to Reed's "Waiting For The Man" by tearing off the Siamese twin dolls' heads; it develops into full-blown perversion when a Barbie ballerina on pointes (Petronio has never used pointe shoes for his own company work before) is abducted to Reed's sarcastic, unambiguous "Balloon" lullaby: "I'm a little balloon and I get puffed up / Squeeze me and bend me it's never enough / Put your lips around me, blow me up / But if you prick me I will pop."

Petronio eventually gets carried away with his dream, quite literally, when the performers lift him into the wings. He reappears only in the final sequence, cuddled up to the faceless baby doll's lap, tenderly watching his dream end to Reed's "Perfect

Day," with his dancers reaching toward him. Although Petronio's whiplash movement is broken, and the choreographic patterns are unusually erratic, the dancers' performance is a stunning tour-de-force; and all the more so for being reduced to cartoon-like marionettes that are allowed to function, but not to breathe.

Many choreographers will have dreamt, although few will freely admit it, of the perfect performer, the super-marionette. Through Sherman's set design and the Petrushka-esque characterization of his performers, Petronio aligns himself with a symbolist tradition inspired by Heinrich von Kleist, E. T. A. Hoffmann, E. A. Poe and Gordon Craig. They proposed that rationalism, intellectualism and other human characteristics limit the scope for artistic concepts such as grace and beauty and thus demanded the substitution of the actor/dancer by the marionette. "My best work is instinctual. Anything intellectual is discarded," Petronio remarked about "City Of Twist" in a recent interview with dance critic Donald Hutera. He goes a step further in "The Island Of Misfit Toys:" his dancers become the compliant toys with which he makes his dream come true.

"The Island Of Misfit Toys" is a daring, personal meditation on eternal youth, ill-starred encounters and (sexual) omnipotence that still sits uncomfortably with the choreographer. After "City Of Twist," an unusually quiet ode to New York, he found himself at a crossroads. "I didn't know if I should become even more personal, or if I should return to my former, rather abstract working mode," Petronio said in an interview after the premiere. He went for the former option and decided to use text and a suite of illustrative songs for the



➔ first time, and – to a certain degree – even to mutilate his own choreographic language. He is aware that to be so outspoken makes him more vulnerable: “It’s dangerous. I am messing around with meaning, like I did in my very early pieces.” His latest creation thus refers back to the beginning of a career spanning almost thirty years, and the last twenty have been with his own company.

So, how did it all start? A truly postmodern artist, Petronio quotes his initial source of inspiration as seeing Rudolf Nureyev and Steve Paxton perform. “I learned sequencing movement through the body from Steve. Bonnie Cohen taught me the extension of the body, and how the spine can undulate and twist from two directions,” he remembers. In college, Petronio started with improvisation and composition classes. “I was a good contact improviser, but I didn’t know how to make steps, so my first pieces were rather performance art than anything else,” he says of early choreographic attempts like “Wall Piece” (1975). Being already an accomplished performer, his choreographic skills quickly improved, however, after he became the first male dancer in Trisha Brown’s dance company in 1979. “It was like being at camp,” Petronio raves about his time with Brown. “I could see a genius at work, and

practice composing with her.” While dancing with the Trisha Brown Company, he nevertheless also pursued his own choreographic path. Works like “Adrift” (1984) and “Walk-In” (1986) contained many ideas which he elaborated on later. Petronio is still very grateful to Brown:

“She gave me the context and introduced me to the interface between dance and the visual arts; how collaboration can have a synergy effect,” he says. Performing a solo section in Brown’s “Set And Reset” (1983) helped him mature as a dancer and provided him with his breakthrough. For two years, Petronio danced simultaneously in Brown’s and his own company, founded in 1984. Then a schedule conflict occurred, and he decided to become independent.

Brown has been an avid supporter of Petronio’s work ever since, despite his indulging in what he calls his “sex period”. On the one hand, his stormy artistic and personal relationship with British ballet dancer Michael Clark earned him notoriety with works like “Bed Piece” (1990). On the other hand, it attuned Petronio to a different, more balletic sensibility and sharpness, as is evident in the under-appreciated “MiddleSex Gorge” (1990). “It took me quite a while till I dared to push my pelvis

forward on stage,” remarks Petronio. His choreographic coming out, sexually provocative costumes and the music by indie rock band Wire, however, almost completely eclipsed the fact that “MiddleSex Gorge” was a work of structural perfection. This September, it received its deserved revival by The Scottish Ballet.

1995’s “Lareigne” marked the end of Petronio’s concentration on sexual subtexts and in “Drawn That Way” (1996) he focused entirely on abstract forms and shapes, exercised by his dancers with enormous speed and precision. In “Strange Attractors” (1999/2000), he thrashed out his keen interest in architectural structure and chaos theory. Here, Petronio’s almost scientific exploration of the kinesthetic relationships between body and space through choreography was matched by a congenial, minimal set designed by sculptor Anish Kapoor.

An independent choreographer is by no means immune to life’s ups and downs and, following “Strange Attractors,” Petronio experienced a sharp down-turn. First, he broke his foot, which literally grounded him for months and led him to rethink just how and what he could dance in his 40s. At the same time, his funding dried up and touring possibilities, one of the company’s most important and re-