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Stephen Petronio was ready to quit as a choreographer. Then came Sept. 11, 2001.

By Allan Ulrich

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Can a choreographer sum up a dance concert — his own — in just a few sentences? Stephen Petronio is just brave and focused enough to try.

“Laurie Anderson, Lou Reed, Cindy Sherman and myself are all New York artists. We all live below 14th Street, and the world needed to hear something from us right now. These dances are cave paintings of New York life,” he declares.

Of course, Petronio is alluding to the horrific events of Sept. 11,

2001, and their devastating effect on an urban artistic community, which, in large part, still remains traumatized. But the three works on the program, which the Stephen Petronio Company will perform during its four-day run this week at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theater, represent more than a collaboration among trailblazing artists, more than a report from the front. Each of these pieces — “City of Twist,” “Broken Man” and the nearly new “Island of Misfit Toys” — marks another step in the evolution of a remarkable maker of dances.

For a long time, the dance crowd thought it had nailed Petronio. A New Jersey native who flirted with a medical career before joining Trisha Brown’s dance company in 1979 (the first man in her troupe), he struck out on his own in 1984. Between 1997 and 1999, Petronio was an artist-in-residence with San Francisco Performances, where he established a reputation for fearless, if not reckless, movement

The Stephen Petronio Company performs at 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday, with a family matinee 2 p.m. Saturday at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theater, 700 Howard St. Tickets: \$24-\$45. (415) 398-6449, www.performances.org.

essays in which the body penetrates space with a velocity, invention and logic of its own. Later, he embraced the confrontational gender politics that seemed inordinately relevant during the height of the AIDS epidemic. “The early ’90s were about prancing your gender. I admit it: I was strident, I had a reputation as a troublemaker.”

Petronio regrets nothing, but time and his sensibility have moved on.

“Before ‘City of Twist,’ my dances were about construction and form and speed and architecture. They were pretty abstract,” Petronio said in a recent conversation. “All the fireworks you expect from a



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STEPHEN PETRONIO

male choreographer were there. But I was beginning to feel a lack of intimacy in the work. I had also broken my foot and thought I would never dance again.

“So about three years ago, I was looking into medical school. After a broken foot, and 9/11, when the jobs and the funding dried up, I thought maybe I wouldn’t be able to celebrate my mid-career (Petronio turns 48 next month). Then, I got a lot of support from my boyfriend. Why throw it

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away when you're just getting interesting? So, I went through a year of intense mid-career crisis. I figured, 'I'm still alive and I know how to choreograph.' "

What also hadn't changed was Petronio's affinity for collaborating with the important artists of his generation. He admits to a bit of reticence in approaching composer-performer Anderson for an original score to accompany "City of Twist."

"Well, I was in a very emotional state after the World Trade Center, I was making these very emotional solos and I was listening to her album, 'Life on a String,' every day, just because I needed to. So I called Laurie. She loved the title of the piece, came to the studio, saw the solos and got into it. She sat in a corner, wrote a lot and took the video of the dance away with her.

"Then Laurie invited me over. She played me some material, asking if I liked these sounds. It was not comfortable, but it's always that way, working with a genius. She was very open to what I had to say. It was an amazing experience, watching this very small woman with a giant brain twiddling knobs at a huge bank of electronics."

After that, Petronio needed a companion piece, his preferred method of programming these days. Anderson suggested that the choreographer call her boyfriend, rocker Lou Reed.

"Lou had always been an idol of mine. He admitted he didn't know or care much for dance, but there we were, sitting on the floor of his living room, and he's pulling out this incredible stuff that hadn't been released," Petronio recalled. "He was incredibly generous. His music was a gold mine."

In all, for "The Island of Misfit Toys," which premiered at London's Dance Umbrella in October, Petronio selected 11 episodes — "meditations on the darker side" — including a portion of Reed's "Metal Machine Music" and Willem Dafoe's reading of a version of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven." The piece marks a milestone in the choreographer's output.

"Where 'City' is light, humanist, sincere and emotional, 'Island' is a gothic, Abstract Expressionist dance, and it's something I said would never do," said Petronio. "It illustrates the music; Lou's specialty is singing sweet songs about repulsive things. It also includes my first pointe work for the com-

pany, about one minute of it."

Sherman, a long-time member of the Petronio's board, contributed to the earlier "The King Is Dead," but the famed video artist has attempted something different for "The Island of Misfit Toys" — a sculptural environment without projections. "A horribly gothic, comic playroom," is how Petronio describes it.

In the middle of the program comes the solo, "Broken Man," to a score by Blixa Bargeld, a German composer who works with Nick Cave. "This speed-demon virtuoso was feeling sorry for himself. I said to myself, 'You've got to figure out what you'll do as a grown-up.' I collected all these emotional gestures, put them together, and when I finished, I thought it was sort of humiliating. But it's also sort of honest. It's what this body is doing right now."

What the Stephen Petronio Company is doing right now is dancing and touring for a record eight months a year. On his own in the past year, Petronio has choreographed or revived five works, including the full-length "Underland" for the Sydney Dance Theatre, which still awaits an American tour. At the invitation of director Frank Andersen, he will make his choreographic debut with the Royal Danish Ballet ("a real ballet company") during the 2005-06 season.

What surprises and satisfies Petronio most these days is the warmth he feels from European audiences.

"For a while, American dance was very unpopular in Europe. Five years ago, it was all about circuses — Circus This and Circus That. Modern dance? You make steps? You don't do performance art? Oh, Petronio, you're so old-fashioned. And I'm sitting there thinking, 'I've been here before.' "