

Sherman and music by musician and composer Lou Reed, *The Island of Misfit Toys* offers a dark look into the vagaries of human depravity and includes Reed's retelling of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Raven*, read by actor Willem Defoe.

A quarter way through his international tour, and on a day's break in Seattle, Petronio spoke with *Rail* Dance Editor Vanessa Manko via telephone in February.

Vanessa Manko (Rail): I've been reading through the reviews from London and it's interesting to see that you seem to have become the ambassador of the New York downtown dance scene. What do you think it is about your work that makes it so quintessentially "New York"?

Stephen Petronio: I think there is a sense of speed and multiplicity in my work that is New Yorkesque. You know, you can be walking down the sidewalk and there are one hundred stories going on around you all at once and you might not be aware of any of them— that's kind of "New York." And I try and put a level of complexity on stage that reflects that kind of story, that kind of picture. And, in particular, the speed, the aggressiveness, packed with information on many different levels seems like New York to me. And for the program that I'm doing at the Joyce in March, I've made a group of works that are all made with artists based in New York.

Rail: *City of Twist*, *Broken Man*, and *The Island of Misfit Toys* comprise your trilogy, *Gotham Suite*. I know that *City of Twist* was created partly in response to 9/11, though you began working on it before that. Now that we're two years removed has the dance changed for you in any way?

Petronio: It's interesting that you say that because now that we're on tour, I see it every night. I think it has changed. The whole concept started off by wanting to paint portraits that were loosely based on

dancing with my body as a 45-year-old man. Until I broke my foot, I didn't realize I was dancing as the Stephen Petronio of the past— that image of the 25-year-old and aspiring to that. It was really kind of dysfunctional and, when I broke my foot, it kind of stopped me. I decided to make the dance much more like a portrait and less about the Stephen Petronio dancer that I know. I began to collect a series of overwrought emotional gestures. I learned the gesture and then learned it backward in time as well. And I thought I would scratch over these movements kind of like a DJ scratching over a record.

Rail: How is your foot doing now?

Petronio: Fine. It's fine. I don't jump like when I was twenty, but...*(laughs)*

Rail: Going back to when you were twenty, a lot of men come to dance late. How were you exposed to dance?

Petronio: I had no idea what dance was. I never saw any dance. I saw *ShinDig* and *Hullaballoo* [1960s musical variety shows] on TV. *(Laughs)* The summer before I went to Hampshire College in Massachusetts, my cousin took me to see *Sleeping Beauty* and I thought it was interesting and beautiful. I didn't know enough to know what I was seeing. I was 18. Then I went to college. And Hampshire does this thing where they have these parties the first two weeks to get you tired of doing that.

Rail: It's a good idea.

Petronio: Yeah. *(Laughs)* And there was a girl I was seeing at the time and she was a dancer and we would go dancing almost every night and she said, "Oh, you're a good dancer. You should probably take a class. It will relax you." I was going in the pre-med direction like every first child

kind of freaked out about that and then suddenly I was a dancer. It was like, "Oh my god what is going on?" But oddly enough my father was supportive. My mother had a harder time with it because she was like "How are you going to make money?" And you know it just never occurred to me. I was very idealistic back in the '70s and it didn't even cross my mind. It didn't occur to me that I would or wouldn't make money. I used to chide her for that, but she did raise really important questions that became all too obvious later on. But my mom passed away before she saw any of my success, but I'm sure she's helping from somewhere. But my dad is giantly proud and he comes to all the shows. He loves it. I'm the only dancer he's really ever seen. He's very perceptive. I really appreciate the untrained response.

Rail: I agree. It's very interesting when you bring someone who isn't familiar with dance to performances. They're sometimes able to see things that dancers or choreographers or regular dance-viewers cannot.

Petronio: Those are the most amazing



like Robert Rauschenberg—

Petronio: Well that's the tradition— though tradition is a kind of weird word to use— but that's kind of like the untraditional tradition that I was raised in. Trisha introduced me to some of the greatest artists alive. Within five minutes of being in the company, Rauschenberg was in the studio watching rehearsal and I barely knew who he was. Suddenly, I was having dinner with these geniuses of the art world. That's what I know about dance. It goes with art.

Rail: Why do you think that's so?

Petronio: Well, they belong together. It's so natural for me to see them together, of course. I think visual art stimulates a part of your brain and dance movement talks to another part of your brain and I think having those centers in your intellect at the same time is an exponential experience. I love it. I love how they effect each other. You know, Cindy [Sherman] has made this very weird, warped Victorian playroom for *The Island of Misfit Toys* and it really shades everything that you see and I love it.

Rail: *The Island of Misfit Toys* is a series of adult, Gothic nursery rhymes. Can you talk about the piece a little bit?

Petronio: Lou [Reed] opened up this entire catalogue of music and I decided to take short pieces from a wide range of history, so it goes from the '70s till now. And right now he's obsessed with Edgar Allen Poe so there's this gothic feel to a lot of what he's doing. Lou's specialty is taking unsavory subjects and putting the most beautiful, sweet melodies on them. It's really twisted when you actually listen to what's he's singing about. Let's see...there's a text on guilt which is kind of like a poem about guilt and obsession. Lou's done a rewrite of Poe's *The Raven*. And, the story of *The Raven*— if you go back to your high school English class— *(laughs)* Lenore, his

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Petronio: It's interesting that you say that because now that we're on tour, I see it every night. I think it has changed. The whole concept started off by wanting to paint portraits that were loosely based on some of my dancers. I just thought it would be interesting to make a solo that was more like a portrait as opposed to a dance. And now, we're a quarter of the way through the tour and I'm just noticing that the dancers have become—well I don't really see them as dancers anymore—they're more like these heroic souls. You can only get to that level by repeating something over and over again.

Rail: *Broken Man* is also a really striking dance. You had broken your foot before creating that work, correct?

Petronio: Yes. I broke my foot and that was the first solo I had made after the break. I

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Petronio: Yeah. (Laughs) And there was a girl I was seeing at the time and she was a dancer and we would go dancing almost every night and she said, "Oh, you're a good dancer. You should probably take a class. It will relax you." I was going in the pre-med direction like every first child who goes to college. I took an improvisation class and it was one of those thunderbolt moments. It occurred to me that I had this body that I knew nothing about and it was offering me information in improvisation classes that I had no idea existed. It became kind of obsessive from then on.

Rail: You come from an Italian-American family from New Jersey, and, since you were the first one in your family to go to college, I'm wondering how your family reacted to your dance aspirations and how they feel about your career now?

Petronio: Well, my mother passed away and my father—my father was a truck

Rail: I agree it's very interesting when you bring someone who isn't familiar with dance to performances. They're sometimes able to see things that dancers or choreographers or regular dance-viewers cannot.

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responses. I mean you can kind of guess what the dance world is going to say about dance. I love it when someone comes to one of my performances and it's the first dance they've ever seen. It's shocking to me. It's such a privileged position to be in for me. I also think that the kind of music and the kind of artists I work with give the dance a broader context so that it has some kind of relevance to the moment that we're living in. And I think sometimes people will come to the work via that avenue and then they get turned on to dance. That really excites me.

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Rail: I have a question about ballet, because I know you've been working with some ballet companies lately—Ballet Frankfurt, Lyon Opera Ballet. What is it like working with ballet dancers, or setting your movement on ballet dancers who are so centered, whereas your choreography has a lot a twist and torque quality?

Petronio: It's hard. Especially at the begin-

ning it was hard. I don't know classical steps. It's not my specialty. And when people are afraid to let go of their placement, the work can look bad. It can look like bad modern dance. (*Laughs*) But over the years I've gotten more comfortable with it and ballet dancers have gotten more sophisticated about knowing other information.

Rail: By "other information" do you mean understanding and learning modern dance?

Petronio: Exactly. For example, Lyon Ballet is extremely versatile. They do many, many modern works. They were very fun. So when you get a ballet dancer who can throw themselves off center and do incredible petite allegro [fast, little jumps], it's like having a toy.⁴

Rail: The best of both worlds?

Petronio: Exactly. It's really, really fun. And I bring a lot of that home to my company. There's a lot of classical ballet vocabulary—words that I can use—but I'll never quite use the syntax of ballet. It's not that interesting to me. There's a sense of transition in ballet, which is something I try and avoid in my work because everything seems so right with those transitions, and I'm much more interested in a sense of graceful disjointedness.

Rail: And what can go wrong in movement, the mistakes that are made?

Petronio: Yes.

Rail: Do you feel that there is anything changing or missing from the New York dance community or is there anything you'd like to change about it or see more of?

Petronio: I think up until recently there

Still/There

by mj thompson

Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company The Phantom Project— The 20th Season

If Bill T. Jones has been haunted, in mind, gesture and artistic output since the death of his partner/collaborator Arnie Zane in 1988, it is a specter that has proven contrarily useful. Both in terms of his own production and for the dancescape more broadly, Jones's demons remain exhilarating and uncannily in sync with the most urgent cultural debates of our time. This season, in a 20th anniversary celebration that risked slipping, as all such events do, into redundancy or sheer myth-making, Jones asserted instead the lingering relevance of the early work and the luminous power of the new.

I caught two different programs at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM, February), and came away swearing to always see dance in duplicate, to go back for seconds for the sheer thrill of seeing how contingent and, in the end, beyond scripting performance remains. The first night began with Jones's gently urging the crowd to vote in the pending elections. But the political quickly became personal, as the curtains opened to reveal Jones in silhouette for the New York premiere of the solo *Chaconne* (2003). A meditation on what constitutes a life—whether his

Jones's dancing body in negative—a ghosting that allows for duets and trios with himself.

Reading, Mercy and the Artificial Nigger (2003), based on a short story by Flannery O'Connor, jumps fearlessly into the question of race in America, all the while offering a formal challenge: how do you attend carefully to two discrete activities at the same time? With actors reading aloud a condensed version of the story—in which a white man betrays his grandson, yet somehow finds redemption via his unified fear of the city and the African-American—the company dances along, at times enacting the text, at times challenging us to find the connection between body and word. Struggling to listen carefully and watch the dance at the same time, I wondered instead at the beautiful simplicity of Bjorn Amelan's design—whereby a large, empty moon becomes a screen onto which he projects colors and shapes evocative of shifts in mood and plot. And I wondered how Jones wanted us to read this story of the wretched and small, written in the 1950s and set in the segregated South, and where, in fact, the "mercy" lay?

But at *Reading, Mercy's* end, Jones makes an excellent move, reminding us that if he has been our most politically engaged choreographer, he is also incredibly adept at the craft of theatre-making. The piece ends and



Reading, Mercy, and the Artificial Nigger. Photo by Jack Vartoogian.

suggested in the program's final work, *The Phantom Project: Still/Here Looking On*, they are simply artists trying things, seeing what works or doesn't. With that degree of experimentation, there was much dance for thought. For instance, a version of Arnie Zane's *Continuous Replay* (1978) that began the evening is perhaps the best, most ecstatic thing I've seen in years. It is an accumulation dance that features forty-five hand and arm gestures performed as the dancers move around the perimeter of the stage. Accompanied by DJ Spooky's deluge of discordant sound, *Continuous Replay* begins with Erick Montes's extraordinary leap onto the stage.

As briefly as Montes arrives onstage, he leaves and starts the dance again, one gesture at a time. Arms sweep to the left at the hip. A hand forms a beak and nods downward. Fully extended arms reach in opposite directions and shudder as the face looks toward the audience. He jumps with head to forehead

dance

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Rail: And what can go wrong in movement, the mistakes that are made?

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Rail: Do you feel that there is anything changing or missing from the New York dance community or is there anything you'd like to change about it or see more of?

Petronio: I think up until recently there has been a strong movement away from dance, per se, and more of an interest in performance and circus and dance theater which I don't have a giant problem with, but why does it have to be one or the other? But all that's changing again and steps are back in fashion. But I would say the biggest problem is who can afford to live in Manhattan? And who can barely afford to live in Brooklyn? So there's a giant problem. It's becoming a big, white, rich city.

Rail: Gentrification seems rampant.

Petronio: I know I moved out to Brooklyn two years ago and it's crazy.

Rail: What neighborhood?

Petronio: Windsor Terrace. Oh. Are you going to print that?

Rail: Well...

Petronio: Oh. No. You can. It's cool. So I think that's a giant problem. What's New York going to do because it's gentrified itself and only rich, white people can live in Manhattan? How does that effect dance? How does that effect people's ability to rehearse? How does that effect people's ability to even live? I mean, the reason I had a dance company was because I had a rent-controlled apartment on St. Mark's Place for twenty years. I had my office in my front room. I didn't have to worry about rent—ever. I should have never let that go by the way. Anyway, I love living in Brooklyn. **BR**

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March 23-28, (Tues.-Sat. at 8:00 pm,
Sun., at 2:00 pm and 7:30 pm.)
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www.stephenpetronio.com or
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DANCE

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Phantom Project: Still/Here Looking On. Photo by Richard Termine.

mother Estelle's, Arnie's, or his own—Jones began with a fragmentary recollection: "The last time I saw her, she was so weak.... The last time I saw her, all she wanted to do was sing." He then offers twenty-two shapes, each introduced with a word or two: Melted B-boy, after the money shot, Estelle's MRI, Stephen Spielberg, Trisha. Are these words descriptive of the movement or ironic? Do they name gesture or sentiment? Or are they eccentric nicknames, uttered by a choreographer performing his dance with a workman's concentration, in an affect-free way? If the relationship between movement and spoken word remains opaque, the structure of the work—in which cumulative, repeated gestures recall the influence of postmodern choreographers like Trisha Brown on Jones—is transparent. Against a white band of light, a scrim that flares from silver to blue, *Chaconne* beams cinematic images to the crowd. Beautifully lit by Robert Wierzel, the lights soon shimmer up to render Jones in full detail and dimensionality. Fleeting motion-capture images by Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar project

fall in slow continuum, beams down on the stage. The company drops form. Some leave. Some sit down. Others remove shoes. We are backstage. It's an old post-modern trick and it is performed here with a seamless calm that made me a believer all over again. Quite suddenly, *Mercy 10 x 8 on a Circle* (2003) begins. Here, Jones reworks the earlier *Mercy* distilled as pure movement. This time out, there are no distractions. There is only the lush dancing of company members like Ayo Janeen Jackson and Leah Cox. As Jones challenges us to question how movement means, and how we see or fail to see it, he remains as resolutely curious about uncoded movement—quirky gestures and non-verbal language—as he is about ballet, modern and the host of other techniques embedded in his work.

The following night, I went back for more. And the program was uneven: ecstatic, rigorous, angry, messy even. Full of twists and surprises, wind and inspiration, improvisations and outbursts, Jones again reminded us that great theatre risks everything. As he

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as if in prayer. The movement is as relentlessly engaging as the assortment of dancers who join him, whether formally "accumulating" or else walking, running or joining the crowd and breaking the flow with a stuttered gesture or improvised moment. As some thirty-five naked dancers gather on stage—company members and alumni including Heidi Latsky, Sean Curran, Lois Welk and Arthur Aviles, to name a few—we see the action, again and again, from multiple angles and on different bodies. The singular, utopic vision drew cheers and a standing ovation.

Also on the program was *There Were...* (1993/2002), a movement study inflected by European court and African-American social dance, in which Jones matches decorum and rhythm, formal arm extensions alongside rocking torso isolations. The evening ended with the weirdly compelling *Phantom Project/Still/Here Looking On*, in which Jones offered a time-line of his career so far, radically overshadowed by an abbreviated reconstruction of *Still/Here* (1994). If the new work retained the fire of the enduring stories of the people who participated in the original survivor workshops, it also unleashed Jones's own lingering piss and vinegar at the work's critical reception. Will Jones ever be free of the cranky debates engendered by this monumental piece? Will his work ever be read for its formal, aesthetic values? Would he, or his fans, even want it that way? His demons, our luck. Our demons, his luck. By night's end, with the entire company gathered onstage, Jones said good bye as the crowd went wild: Good bye this, good bye that, "Good bye Arnie," and left us looking forward to the next 20 years. **BR**

mj thompson is a writer living in Brooklyn.