

Behind the China Dolls

Stephen Petronio Company
20th Anniversary Season
The Joyce Theater
New York, New York
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by Nancy Dalva

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Whatever
Stephen
Petronio
is
reading
before
bed at
night, it
isn't
"Winnie
the
Pooh."
*The
Island of
Toy*

Misfits, seen for the first time in New York recently, is an addition to the toys-with-lives-of-their-own genre, but not a honeyed one. Set to Petronio's patchwork selections from the recorded works of Lou Reed, the dance is a series of vignettes from a post-gothic nightmare whose congeries of anomalous associations will depend on the eye of the individual beholder.

The piece unspools behind the Betsy Wetsies from Hell: two huge dolls, one on either side of the proscenium. On the left, an enormous baby with a scooped out face, the head a hairless, gaping half-skull. On the right, Siamese twins, their grossly misshapen four-limbed body topped by two heads. These upsetting figures and the projected totem of giant dolly heads are the work of Cindy Sherman. They look like mutant Boteros. Thank goodness they have nothing obvious to do with the work, other than grounding the title, but they nonetheless loom large. This is too bad, because the dance itself, considered apart from its set, music, and also (a huge also) its urban chic vintage—

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and underpants costumes by Tara Subkoff—is intrinsically interesting.

Let's see. Random-seeming music. Disconcerting arty set. Distracting costumes. Distinct choreographic units. Add to this mix *Misfit's* multiple fronts and a stage picture often featuring multiple activities, and what do we have? Hello, Merce Cunningham! However, where Cunningham predicates a separation of dance/music/decor, Petronio does not. An aleatory affect is not his goal. Thus, although *Misfit's* eleven sections show Petronio working with an increased complexity, the new work was overshadowed by the two-year-old *City of Twist*. A strong unity of impression and a keen and consistent emotional current make that work the stronger, a dance truly dark, rather than just noir.

Speaking of which, *Misfit* opens with Reed's musical setting of Poe's "The Raven," with Willem Defoe reading the text. Seated with his back to the audience is Petronio himself, smoking fitfully. He never stands up and we never see him from the front, but it is his scene nonetheless. While ostensibly Poe—or at any rate, the narrator—he looks to me very much like Eric Von Stroheim in Jean Renoir's movie "Grand Illusion." Similar costume, similar bald head, similar crabbed gestures, similar fondness for cigarettes.

This was Petronio's only appearance on the program other than his galvanic solo opener, *Broken Man*. This self-portrait has only gained in subtlety since its debut in 2002, so that now it not only explodes (explosion being Petronio's forte) but implodes. The solo begins with a slight raising of the arms to the sides, almost to a crucifix, but the gesture is not explicit. The serious, clear moves allow Petronio to transcend his own silky, transgressive allure, suggesting the experience of resignation, pain, exhaustion, despair, great sadness. If the piece poses a question, the query combines physics (that area plumbed so consistently by Trisha Brown, with whom the choreographer danced) and existentialism. If there a finite amount of energy in the universe, what happens to our energy as we die? Is our quota set free? Petronio's irreversible trajectory seems as much psychic as physical.

There's no question the choreographer sends his dancers on similar trips. Like him, they can whip around their limbs so that there seems to be phosphorescence in their wakes, like those little arrow tails you can put on a computer's cursor. But while Petronio himself is a dynamic phraser, that quality is not inherent in his work, which spirals in and around and back on itself until it is dissipated by its own seamlessness. The choreography is episodic yet undifferentiated. No phrase ever really comes to an clear stop. No phrase has internal variation (fast within slow; slow within fast), and so the potential for movement drama is lost. Petronio can and does play such contrasts out on the larger scale—that is, between dancers,

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or groups of dancers--but not on the intimate scale of a single, dancing body.

Except, as we have seen, his own. It is possible that his power is a gift, and idiosyncratic. It is also possible that there is a way for Petronio to endow steps not only with his shape, but with his motor. For while his company is fine, it is unlikely that he will ever find anyone as charismatic as himself to dance in it. You can instruct in a technique, and you can impart style, but personality is singular. To express it in movement is the choreographer's art. The steps are the craft.

Photo: "The Island of Misfit Toys"; Photo: Sarah Silver

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