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Stephen Petronio's Salty Pas de Deux

By **Rebecca Milzoff** Apr 19, 2009



"I'm done with the image of how I used to dance," says choreographer Stephen Petronio. "And I'm not opposed to lapsing into complete caricature at points. After 25 years performing in theaters, I'm kind of tired of that wall." Hence Petronio's *I Drink the Air Before Me*, a new evening-length piece for his company (and his first major appearance onstage in five years), with score by Nico Muhly. For his own rather eccentric character, Petronio turned to artist Cindy Sherman, mistress of disguise. "Part of the reason I love using visual art with movement is that what I do disappears," says Petronio, who will set the mood for the piece, acting as a sort of ringleader. Will he dance? "Who knows what's going to happen," he says mysteriously. Petronio and Sherman did, however, explain the evolution of his unique costume (debuting at the Joyce Theater on April 28). (Photo: Hannah Whitaker/New York Magazine)

The Costume

Petronio's multilayered outfit begins with a sailor's long johns. He'll remove clothing as the performance goes on: "I will be peeling the banana," he says. The costume will eventually evolve into something "sort of sexy, in an S&M way," says Sherman.

The Character

"This is a transition for me in terms of my performance life, which is why we were looking for a character on the edge of two elements, and since weather is a driving theme in this piece, it seemed like we should go to the sea." Petronio settled on the "salty dog," since he lives between the land and water. "Nasty and crotchety" Captain Haddock from "Tintin" (above) was his inspiration. For the look, Sherman was inspired by a photo (below) of an old doll, which Petronio found hilarious: "Oh my God, is this still available?!"



The Intention

Petronio views this character as a window to a new way of performance. "I've dropped all pretension—I'm not going to do an arabesque like old times," he says. "At certain stages in your career, you become trapped by what you are in your own mind. You create through that identity, but it can become a limitation. So the disguise [which will include a beard and big boots] will help out."



The Collaboration

Sherman and Petronio discovered they share a coy sense of perversion (he was wearing a corset in the first photo she saw of him). "One reason I've stayed a choreographer is investigation in imagery," Petronio says. "Cindy is one of the few artists whose work makes me cross-eyed." And like her, he's not afraid of the unknown. "I try to make situations I don't understand," he says. "I find that sexy."



(Photo: Patrick McMullan)

The Dance

Much like a sea captain, Petronio will observe his dancers from a high perch for most of the performance. "The last movement is mellow, the calm after the storm," he explains. "The choral group will be in the audience ringing bells, so I can easily climb down and be a part of that." Petronio, wanting to surprise audiences, is keeping the specifics hush-hush.

(Photo: Francis Miller/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images)

