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Troupe's undoings come together

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By Leigh Witchel

DANCE REVIEW

STEPHEN PETRONIO COMPANY

The Joyce Theater, 175 Eighth Avenue, 212-242-0800. Through Sunday.

Stephen Petronio's new dance looks as if it could fall apart at any moment — and that's what makes it so interesting.

As the title suggests, "The Architecture of Loss," which debuted Tuesday, is about disappearance and disintegration. Even the dancers' loose-knit costumes seem on the verge of unraveling. Nothing's explicit; it feels as if there's something we can't see in its gray landscape, but if that mysterious something were removed, the whole would crumble.

In one long duet, a woman leans on her partner as if without his support, she'd collapse. At the end of the half-hour work, the cast enters in groups that mirror one another. They fill in the stage, but just as the design seems to resolve, a few dancers leave.

Like many things made after 9/11, the other large work on the bill, 2002's "City of Twist" is a meditation on New York. You see it in the projections on the backdrop — a fire escape, or a glittering night skyline — and in how the dancers are together but alone in a crowd. But what you really notice are the lushness of Petronio's steps, carried out by his smoothly expert dancers, their arms lifted and legs circling high. "City of Twist" unspools like a ball of string that leads you into a maze.

The only disappointment of the night was New York City Ballet star Wendy Whelan's too-brief turn in "Ethersketch I" — the work seemed to end just as it began.

Petronio himself danced a more substantial solo: an improvisation about censorship by postmodern pioneer Steve Paxton. In "Intravenous Lecture," the 55-year-old choreographer was hooked up to an onstage saline drip. An assistant in scrubs wheeled it around as Petronio moved and talked about getting locked up in 1989 in London because he was wearing a lewd Vivienne Westwood T-shirt.

This time, he wore a black-and-white-striped outfit designed by John Bartlett, who was in the gala night's audience along with Cindy Sherman and Mikhail Baryshnikov. Pithy and funny, Petronio is part aging firebrand, part social-climbing fashionista — and an artist worth watching.