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7 dancers mold Oslund's 'Doll,' into their own

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"Reflex Doll" wasn't created by Madame Alexander or the merchandising genius responsible for Barbie. She's no baby doll. She neither wets nor cries, although she can look pert, pretty and cute.

"Reflex Doll" is the puppet creation of dancer/choreographer Mary Oslund, a character inhabited by seven different dancers in an evening-length piece that premiered at Conduit on Friday night.

In a series of solos and duets, five of the city's most interesting dancers are joined by San Francisco performer Tanya Uhlmann and Tere Mathern, recently returned from New York. They perform Oslund's quirky abstract movement in a space defined by standing lights and polished metal panels that reflect and distort both the dancers and the space itself.

The set installation is skillfully constructed by Kirsty Munn, Yariv Rabinovitch, Don Schreiber and Richard Munn. It splits the Conduit studio floor in half horizontally and is the best use of this unwieldy studio so far.

In the first solo, Oslund sets the mood and pace with abstract movement. She's occasionally anxiety-ridden, but becomes relaxed as she moves into a dance in which she is clearly having a good time.

For the second duet, Oslund is joined by Uhlmann. The pair performed in unison, falling on the floor, slapping it., all to the beat of an electronic score.

Next comes a duet by Katherine Peterson and Mathern filled with witty facial movement in which these two reflex dolls are clearly alienated from one another. This chic-looking pair may well be mannequins with a touch of Barbie thrown in.

The last duets have the most emotional content. Oslund is a highly cerebral choreographer, her movement heavily influenced by the abstract approach of Merce Cunningham. Bonnie Merrill and Ann Bell are both touching and funny as they move through the box step, a bit of soft shoe and look askance at themselves.

Keith Goodman and Neena Marx perform a funky, '60s "do your own thing don't touch" duet. Oslund twists the form so that the pair dance with, instead of against each other.

"Reflect Doll" is a brilliantly crafted comment by a mature artist on the objectification of human beings.