

IN PERFORMANCE - The Stephen Petronio Company - ★★★★★

A thrilling 'Underland' from Stephen Petronio



"Underland," Stephen Petronio Company. (March 17, 2008)

By Sid Smith, Special to the Tribune

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The glories of the specific choreographic piece that is "Underland"--and they are considerable--almost don't matter in that it's also a chance to watch the Stephen Petronio Company, about as thrilling as dance troupes get.

Petronio's one-hour piece is fascinating, but it's his consummate mastery of the craft that blows you away. It's as if he whispered into the ears of this terrific ensemble, "Just keep moving, and do so spectacularly," and then sent them on stage to prove the power, beauty and excitement of the art.

Back in the day, Petronio was an electrifying dancer himself, and he begins "Underland," created in 2003 and playing in revival during the troupe's visit through Saturday to the Dance Center of Columbia College, in telltale cameo. Shrouded in dim light, he lurks on an inclined plank, crawling slowly downward, an object clutched in his teeth.

It's a play on the Down Under nickname of the homeland of the work's composer, Australian songster Nick Cave, and a kind of inverted Sisyphean image foreshadowing the dark underworld of Cave's lyrics. We are journeying to dismal places.

There's an intoxicating paradox between this world view and the virtuosity of the dancers, who spin, leap and shape-shift on a dime, in moves expertly crammed with magnificent, natural detail. How can life be so bad when artists dance this sensationally?

That tension energizes "Underland," a work finally as moving and hopeful as it is grim in subject. Petronio's style is more classic than I remember, whirling whiffs of ballet everywhere, my favorite a brief sequence in which two men enact duplicate entrechats, then jut their legs and spasmodically twitch their feet as follow-up.

The foursome in "The Ship Song," the inflamed classicism of Joshua Green and a wondrous duet by Natalie Mackessy and Barrington Hinds to Cave's Stagger Lee ode, ingeniously melded with a richly complex male quartet, deserve mention.

But it's Petronio's silky direction that rules, a smartly balanced control of medium and message, even as the dancers technically tear off the roof.

People say the old model of single-choreographer company is no longer practical. Maybe Baby Boomer Petronio is a sublime breath of its last gasp. Or maybe he's reason to make sure they're wrong.