



Stephen Petronio's 'Like Lazarus Did' is a divine piece about resurrection

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It takes a lot of living to make great art about dying. Stephen Petronio is no longer the hot, young post-modern dancer he was in the late '70s. Now 57, he's something more — a mature artist.

His new work, "Like Lazarus Did," is about resurrection. There's no plot, just dance, but the imagery is so clear that you don't need a story.

The piece begins outside the theater, where children from the Young People's Chorus of New York City are lined up on the sidewalk, all in black. Accompanied by a vocalist and trumpeter, they sing as they enter the Joyce: It's the kiddie version of a New Orleans funeral procession.

Inside, a sculpture glows softly, hovering over the audience. It's made of plastic body parts and bleached bones suspended above an evacuation cradle — the kind used for rescue missions. The curtain is raised just enough to see Petronio lying on the stage barefoot and wearing a black suit as if laid out for a funeral.

Nine dancers in loose white shifts begin the piece in trinities, moving three by three as they



exchange places in neat, precise patterns. The movement gets bigger, spiraling through the stage.

In between you see apparitions lifted from medieval imagery. One man has his arm outstretched as if he were begging, leading another man by the hand.

Photo Credit: Julieta Cervantes

Though their moves are deceptively simple, Stephen Petronio's dancers are precisely controlled, ever elegant.

Twin silver cords descend; a dancer turns from us and grabs them to begin a solo, even his smallest back muscles rippling. Yet he doesn't ascend. Instead, the curtain falls and rises to reveal the entire cast, moving with tight arms and whipping turns. The final solo is for another man, nearly naked. He inches along the floor before finally standing erect.

Though the subject is somber, the choreography isn't. The dancers are astonishing, their movement so deceptively simple and flowing that you want to try it yourself. Yet it's precisely controlled and requires the pure, long lines of a ballet dancer.

Composer Son Lux has delivered the right music — atmospheric and haunting. He sings the opening himself, in a strangled voice: lyrics from a slave spiritual, "I want to die like Lazarus did." The children's chorus is also well-used, as their voices slowly swell in impact.

Petronio has delivered far more than dance. "Like Lazarus Did" is the best kind of theater. It feels like a dream you might have if you found yourself in a dark, empty cathedral in the middle of the night.