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Stephen Petronio's dancers risk all, bare hearts in astounding New Orleans show

By Chris Waddington



Photo: Sarah Silver

It's great to be entertained at a dance concert, but it's even better when you get something more. The Stephen Petronio Company delivered much, much more on Friday at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. In that intimate, downtown venue, the New York troupe showed why it has prospered for three decades in America's dance capital. Its grippingly paced program tackled matters of life and death, showcased the astounding physical powers of eleven dancers, and revealed how a great choreographer can use abstract gestures to conjure a mood of lament without falling into the literal.

The company will reprise its program today (March 3) at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m.

On Friday, the troupe opened with excerpts from "Underland" — an hour-long piece set to Nick Cave's brooding cabaret songs. Usually presented against a backdrop of colossal video projections, "Underland" got a spare, studio treatment at NOCCA, but that only served to focus attention on the drama Petronio and his dancers poured into every gesture: limbs spinning in propeller fashion from shoulders and hips; whiplash turns; upright torsos yielding to hip shakes; feather light landings and sudden percussive stomps. Petronio wove those disparate elements into seamless dance phrases that matched the music's moods and rhythms.

It's rare to see dancers execute canons with such mind-boggling precision — and apply that same discipline to a thigh-stroking, undulant quartet that suggested four-way, gender-blurring sex. But Petronio is a master of hybrid forms, able to draw upon the ballet smarts of his dancers, and his own early training as a contact improviser under avant-garde guru Steve Paxton.

When dancers are so virtuosic, it's easy for a choreographer to pile on too many details, press tempos in a way that makes it difficult for an audience to follow the action. But there were no such problems with "Underland" or with the concert's other piece, "City of Twist." That 2002 dance, set to an electronic string score by Laurie Anderson, conjured the mood of New York after the September 11 terrorist attacks — and did so without melodrama or false sentiment.

Both "Underland" and "City of Twist" were models of pacing, in which densely worked solos succeeded stage-spanning tableaux; high flying leaps balanced episodes of profoundly moving, slow-motion floor work. Ultimately, this was a show about risks — the risks associated with any athletic endeavour, and the risks taken by great artists when they bare their hearts to the public.