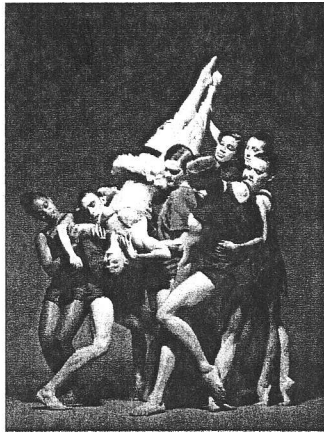




Dancers and the Dark
A pared-down 'Underland' comes to New York
By Susan Reiter



Stephen Petronio Company's Underland. / Photo by Sarah Silver

It's become an annual rite of spring at the Joyce Theater: If it's April, Stephen Petronio's company is there to unveil his latest work. But that doesn't mean you should expect something flowery or sunny. Petronio's dances tend to flirt with danger and desire, and his full-evening *Underland*, set to music by Australian rocker Nick Cave, is a dense, eye-filling journey that veers through unexpected twists and fills the stage with extremes, both in terms of its movement and its projections.

The work premiered in 2003; Petronio was commissioned by Sydney Dance Company to create a full-evening dance. He was asked what it would take to get him to commit to a two-month creative period in Sydney. "I just blurted out, 'Anything with Nick Cave, and I'll be there!'" Petronio says by phone shortly after completing a day of rehearsal with his 11-member company. "I love his music but hadn't planned to make a work to it. Someone like that is on your wish list of things to do. So that was all I needed for inspiration. Then the concept came together very quickly."

He explains his attraction to Cave's songs, seven of which are used in *Underland*. "Nick's music is very dark and sexy, and a lot of my work has been very sensually oriented. He's a pop artist, but his music can be very dark. His music swings back and forth between the grimy evil human spirit, and the elevation and redemption of that psyche. That pull is a classic pull, and I just love it. The murder ballads are beautiful celebrations of criminals, and there's one particular song I love, 'The Mercy Seat,' about preparation for going to the electric chair. They're some of the best rock 'n' roll you'll ever hear, deeply thoughtful and artistic."

Petronio envisioned a very specific world through the songs. "Underland is a subterranean, post-apocalyptic, subconscious kind of place. I was making the work shortly after 9/11, so I wanted to give you a place that was hidden away, tucked underneath what was there before it. It starts with a descent into that world. I definitely think of it as a place 'below.'"

Cave approved the song selection. "He actually questioned some of them. The conversation was lengthy and it worked out beautifully. He gave me his longtime producer, Tony Cohen, and through him we had access to all the instrumental tracks that went into making the songs we chose. So we were able to use those original tracks any way we wanted, to build bridges between the songs."

The choreographer, who formed his company in 1984 after dancing with Trisha Brown, described Underland as "a real meeting of Australian and New York artists." In addition to working with Cohen, Petronio was introduced by SDC to Australian video artist Mike Daly. Working with Petronio's longtime lighting designer Ken Tabachnick, Daly responded to the request for "a slow-moving world that the dance could travel through." Projected on a triptych of screens is an intensely volatile, evolving mix of images.

Discussing SDC's dancers, Petronio says, "They have incredible classical training, but they are super modern dancers. So they really upped the ante for me about what I can do based on the vertical axis, which I don't normally work with that much. They were willing to go flying off of it, as well. My dancers are perfectly willing to fly off their vertical axis, but they don't really put such a stress on staying on vertical. So there are differences, but my dancers look amazing in it. It's a lot of quick footwork—*petit allegro*—and they can do it beautifully. Plus, they have the advantage of having the deep understanding of the way I want torsos to twist and arc and splash around."

SDC performed Underland for six seasons, touring it all over Australia. The company performed it on a U.S. tour, but only in a couple of cities. Petronio had nearly given up on ever having the work seen in New York. But when a new director took the helm at SDC and the license wasn't renewed, Petronio was able to stage it for his dancers, with the Joyce season marking its company premiere and a tour planned for the fall. The content is all there, but streamlined for 11 dancers rather than the original 18. "My task was to cut the excess off it, so that it's leaner and meaner now. All the essentials are there, and I've enhanced a few things. I've had the benefit of six years looking at the videotape and thinking about it. My dancers were jealous when they saw the video—they were begging to do this piece!"

Underland

April 5–10, Joyce Theater, 175 8th Ave. (at W. 19th St.), 212-242-0800