

Underland is an expertly crafted study in contrasts

by [JANET SMITH](#) on SEP 30, 2013 at 1:47 PM



Stagger Lee wasn't the only one who had to walk through the rain and the mud. The howling winds and downpour that befell Vancouver this weekend could not have been a more apt setting for heading out to Stephen Petronio's *Underland*. In it, the well-known New York choreographer descends into the murky depths of the songs of Nick Cave—tales of serial killers, rapists, and death-row convicts.

But anyone expecting a straight-up interpretation of Cave's tortured murder ballads was in for a surprise. Instead, *Underland* sends human forms fracturing, whirling, and leaping in ever-shifting patterns across the stage. The show is an expertly crafted study in contrasts: beauty and depravity; story and abstraction; chaos and order. And its strongest sequences build into a sort of dreamscape where the movement loses itself in the emotions and yowling rhythms of piano and guitars.

The production opens with Petronio himself, slowly crawling down a rope lattice into the depths of the underworld he's created. From there, the next few fiercely flowing songs, and the atmospheric, almost Lynchian musical "bridges" that Cave producer Tony Cohen builds between them, are the strongest in the show. The dancers sport ripped, black bodywear (by Imitation of Christ designer Tara Subkoff), partnering to the growled killer obsessions of "Mah Sanctum" and the distorted guitars of "The Mercy Seat"; a woman falls back repeatedly into two men's arms before they swing her forward like a pendulum. The vocabulary is surprisingly balletic, but there's a sensuality, a drive, and a hunger to it that push beyond prettiness; bodies twirl, single arms reaching, rod-straight, toward the heavens, before they rush away again. Video artist Mike Daly projects images that punctuate the mood—rising smoke clouds, infernos, and shattering glass.

The look and feel change from song to song. Among the highlights is a warped riff on "The Carny", with broken ballerinas in surreal red tutus, lace bras, and garter belts being bent, hoisted, and whipsawed around like wind-up dolls. "The Ship Song" becomes an erotic ménage à quatre, with men and women caressing and tangling to the closest Cave gets to a love song.

Only a few moments felt too on-point—most obviously "The Weeping Song", with its sad march of tired soldiers in raggedy military vintage against repeated projections of mushroom clouds.

Otherwise, if you could let go of strict expectations about Cave's badass musical portraits, and could open yourself to Petronio's shape-shifting patterns, you were in for a treat. In a preshow talk, he mentioned he's an Italian and so likes "a full table". Yes, there's a lot to take in on his busy stage, but it was well worth trekking through the rain and the mud for—and considerably more civilized than, say, running into Stagger Lee at the Bucket of Blood.