

# Stephen Petronio Ventures Into a Dark World

By Deborah Jowitt Wednesday, Apr 13 2011

For once, I didn't read the program. When the lights came up on Stephen Petronio's *Underland*, I watched videos of fiery explosions on the three-paneled back wall of the Joyce stage, heard crashes, and thought of the earthquake in Japan. When Reed Luplau descended from above, head first, harnessed, and clinging to a cargo net, I saw Orpheus entering the Underworld to find Eurydice. The burning buildings and circling helicopters in Mike Daly's video montage, as well as the drastic lighting (visual design by Ken Tabachnik), seemed part ancient fable and part shockingly contemporary vision

As the piece unfolded, however, it became clear that Petronio had in mind other disasters, other hells, and the subterranean, subcutaneous land of dark minds and dark deeds. No heroes except the valiant dancers daring to enter the maelstrom. The gothic songs of the Australian Nick Cave thread through a dire soundscape of elements sampled and manipulated by Tony Cohen from the recordings of Cave and his band, the Bad Seeds. The singer's voice moans tales of death by execution, sadistic sex, murder, the sorrows of life, and possible redemption like wind rushing around an underground cavern.

Only afterward did I discover that Petronio made *Underland* for the Sydney Dance Company in 2003, when 9/11 and the wounds that disaster inflicted on the world were still fresh and sore.

Working with the Australian dancers in *Underland* may have influenced Petronio into using more big leaps and jumps than usual, but his own style dominates. The movements of his magnificent dancers are both three-dimensional and incisive. The four men and five women in his company (plus guest artists Luplau and Davalois Fearon) swing their legs like scythes so sharp that it takes no great effort to wield them; their straight arms slice the air. In my mind's eye these wily athletes are always turning, vaulting, charting new directions. In *Underland*, I see them as survivors, insisting on life while buildings collapse and bombs explode behind them.

Petronio sometimes alludes obliquely to Cave's lyrics, as do Tara Subkoff's costumes. In "The Carny," Shila Tirabassi, Tara Lorentzen, and Emily Stone have shed the scanty black costumes they wear over flesh-colored leotards and appear in red tutus and bras. Luplau (I think it was he) enters with back flips. During a lull, Gino Grenek waddles across the stage, belly thrust out. Joshua Tuason and

Amanda Wells (in a sky blue tutu) walk with doll-like stiffness.

Cave sings of the shabby circus troupe trying to bury the Carny's dead horse, Sorrow; the dancers (including Julian De Leon and Barrington Hinds) lift Wells

overhead, laid out, and carry her toward the dark at the back of the stage.

Is it my imagination that when, to heavy piano chords, Wells performs (magnificently) the fierce gestures of the solo "Prelude to Weep," her eyes look like dark pits? And in "The Weeping Song" that follows, the dancers, wearing shabby gray clothes, enter in a line, marching numbly; however many individuals break out of that line into wilder dancing, there are always others still slogging along. Not only does Petronio shy away from literal references to the songs, he gives some a different slant. Cave's "Stagger Lee," a murderous psycho-sexual encounter between two men, with a woman as catalyst, becomes a violent duet between Hinds and a flirtatious Natalie Mackessy; she floors him, and they roll offstage together.

"Come sail your ships around me/And burn your bridges down/We make a little history, baby/Every time you come around," sings Cave, and in one of the quietest, most hopeful, and most poignant sections, Grenek, Tirabassi, Tuason, and Wells stand shoulder to shoulder (Grenek in a shiny black raincoat—perhaps to provide a nautical reference). Without moving from their spot close to the audience, they interweave and twine, nuzzling one another, collapsing and being caught, reaching out and being embraced.

The beautiful, dangerous *Underland* progresses toward a more hopeful conclusion, invoking religion along the way. In the final section, "Death Is Not the End," the dancers reappear in white, and the flames disappear into whiteness and images of swirling fabric. Although black hearts still flourish underground, art, perhaps, offers redemption. Five people are still dancing as the curtain descends.

