

Petronio Dance Company's “Underland” at Alverno Presents

By Tom Strini
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Photo by Sarah Silver

The sheer physicality of the dense, athletic dancing in Stephen Petronio's *Underland* would have been enough Saturday night in the Pitman Theater at Alverno College. But this choreographer and his 11 dancers gave a great deal more.

Petronio set a suite of varied and remarkable songs by Nick Cave, whose music I know but little but now want to know better. Many of the songs are dark and violent, especially in the beginning of the piece. But I could catch just some of the rapid flow of words; I could not attend to both them and to the amazingly intricate and speedy dancing.

In the first half of the 75-minute piece, the dancing reflects the rhythm of the words more than their sense. The dancers move to the rhythm of the passing syllables rather than the underlying beat, which gives a strange and beguiling conversational flow to the dancing. Petronio and company inflect that flow with all manner of ornament through their torsos, which seem to be forever twisting and turning above quick, busy feet. Often, they dance on legs locked at the knees, which they can swing in all directions with surprising force. Their lofty technique and superb conditioning allows them to adopt a grand aloofness. They're blasé toward their own feats, which they appear to perform without effort.

But this is no dance heaven. The sombre setting and costumes – dark trunks and ripped shirts for the men, a variety of sexy little black numbers for the women, with bare feet for all — suggest an underworld whose denizens have no peace. Underland begins with Petronio himself “taking notes” as he slithers headfirst down down down an incline to the stage.

The dance evolves, not gradually but in spasms. Surprising costume changes come out of nowhere. When the women suddenly sweep in wearing red tutus and garters beneath bras, everything changes. A carnival mood takes over, and the dancers respond to the three-quarter time in the music. Then everyone troops on in military khakis, again responding to the beat. In a tender and very sexy *menage a quatre* in very close quarters, two men and two women love in every combination to a Nick Cave love song. For the first time, it became possible to fully perceive both the dance and the words. The relationship between the two elements had evolved.



Photo by Julie Lemberger

The most crucial shift comes with Cave’s brutal *Stagger Lee*. Petronio interprets the song as something like a swing/*apache* dance for Barrington Hinds and Natalie Mackessy. He’s in a tattered version of the army khakis. She wears a red-hot red dress and black, french-cut briefs she’s not shy about displaying. In this dance, with all its leveraged push and pull and astounding partnering tricks, Petronio responds to both the meter of the music and the sense of Cave’s lyrics.

Despite the duet’s violence and the beautiful violence of an ensuing barroom brawl among four “soldiers,” *Underland* has turned some structural and moral corner. You can feel it. We’ve gone as low as low can go and thus made redemption possible. And redemption comes at the end, in Cave’s gospel-tinged *Death Is Not the End* and in the dance of angels that Petronio set to it. You would never imagine such an ending, but there it is: wildly improbably but weirdly plausible, and a blessing on us all.