

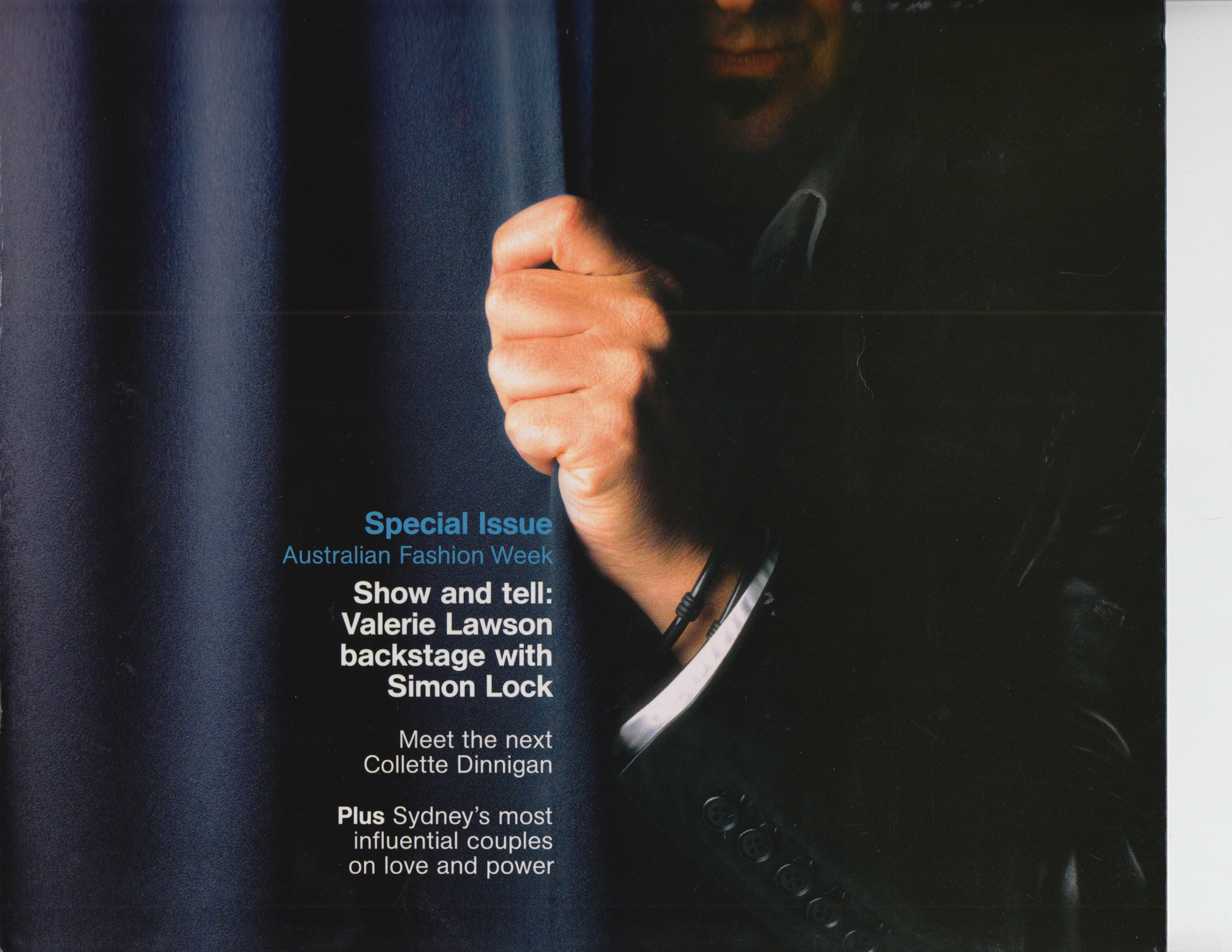
The Sydney Morning Herald

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the (sydney) magazine



A dramatic, low-key photograph of a man in a dark suit. His right hand is clenched into a fist, resting on a dark, textured surface. The lighting is moody, highlighting the contours of his hand and the texture of the fabric. The background is dark and indistinct.

Special Issue
Australian Fashion Week

**Show and tell:
Valerie Lawson
backstage with
Simon Lock**

Meet the next
Collette Dinnigan

Plus Sydney's most
influential couples
on love and power

boxoffice

(the best of) film stage music art

with Richard Jinman

Words **Richard Jinman**
Photography **Stephen Baccon**

Choreographer Stephen Petronio is bringing his visceral style to Sydney, where it will stretch the imagination as much as the dancers.

"His work really cuts you to the heart. He takes you to this really dark and mysterious place." New York choreographer Stephen Petronio is talking about Nick Cave, a musician he has long admired. Cave's songs will form the soundtrack to *Underland*, his first Australian work with the Sydney Dance Company.

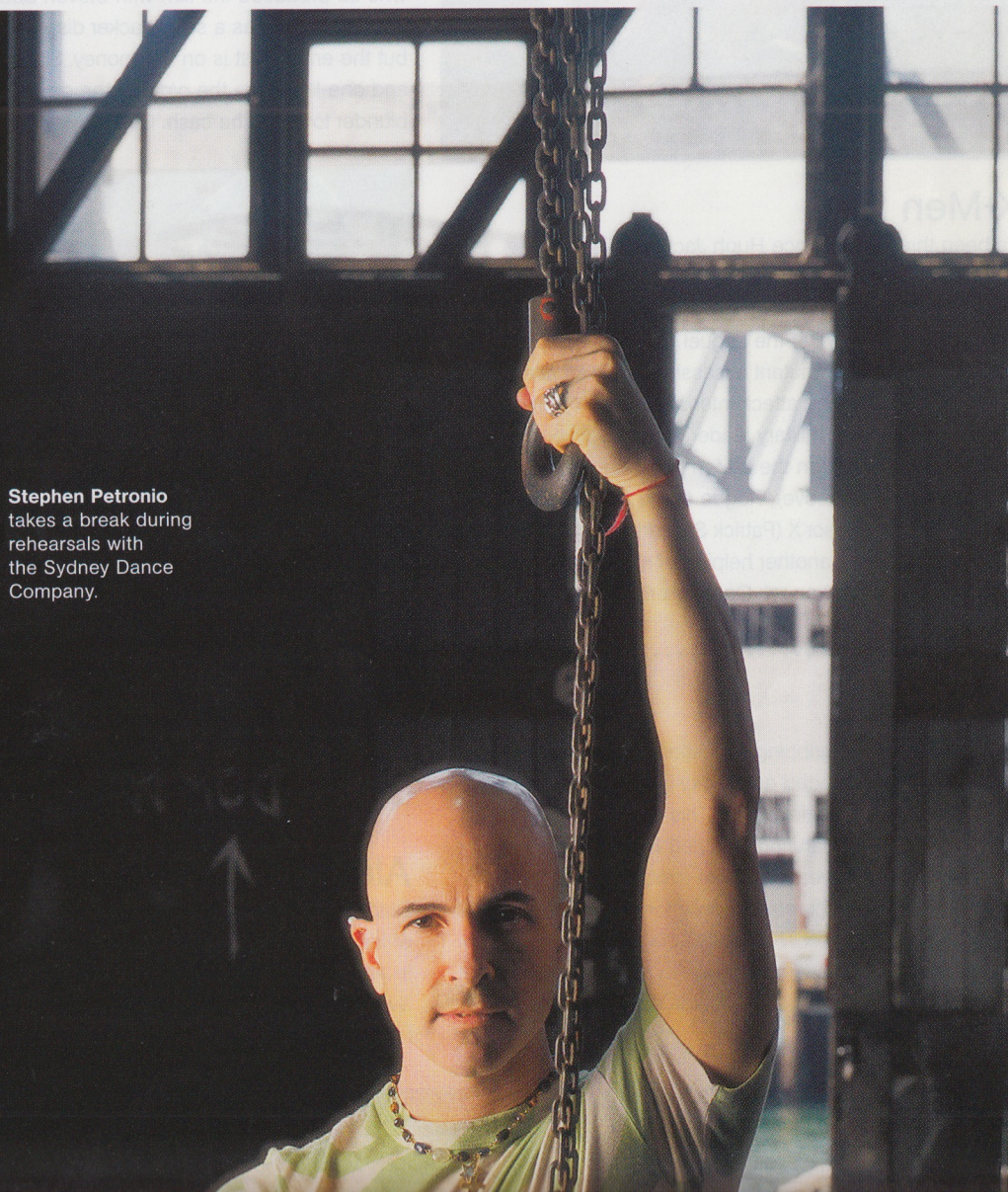
Petronio will combine some of Cave's most bleak and malevolent songs – *The Carney*, *The Weeping Song*, *Stagger Lee* and *The Mercy Seat* – with an ever-changing landscape of projected images and costumes by red-hot New York designer Tara Subkoff from the Imitation of Christ label. It will be performed by 17 members of the Sydney Dance Company who will have to master Petronio's "polyrhythmic" movements, a challenge the 47-year-old gleefully compares to "learning Italian in one night".

He says: "My work is really fast and idiosyncratic. It has a real aggressive bite to it."

What is *Underland* about? "This is not a story ballet, I want to make that clear," says the fast-talking Petronio. "It's surreal and expressionistic. I don't do narrative dance." Pressed for a description, he fires back a sound bite: "It's *Mad Max* meets *Alice in Wonderland*."

Born in New Jersey, Petronio began dancing at college in Massachusetts. He formed his own dance company in 1984 and earned a reputation for pushing boundaries, particularly in collaboration with his then lover Michael Clark, a former heroin addict

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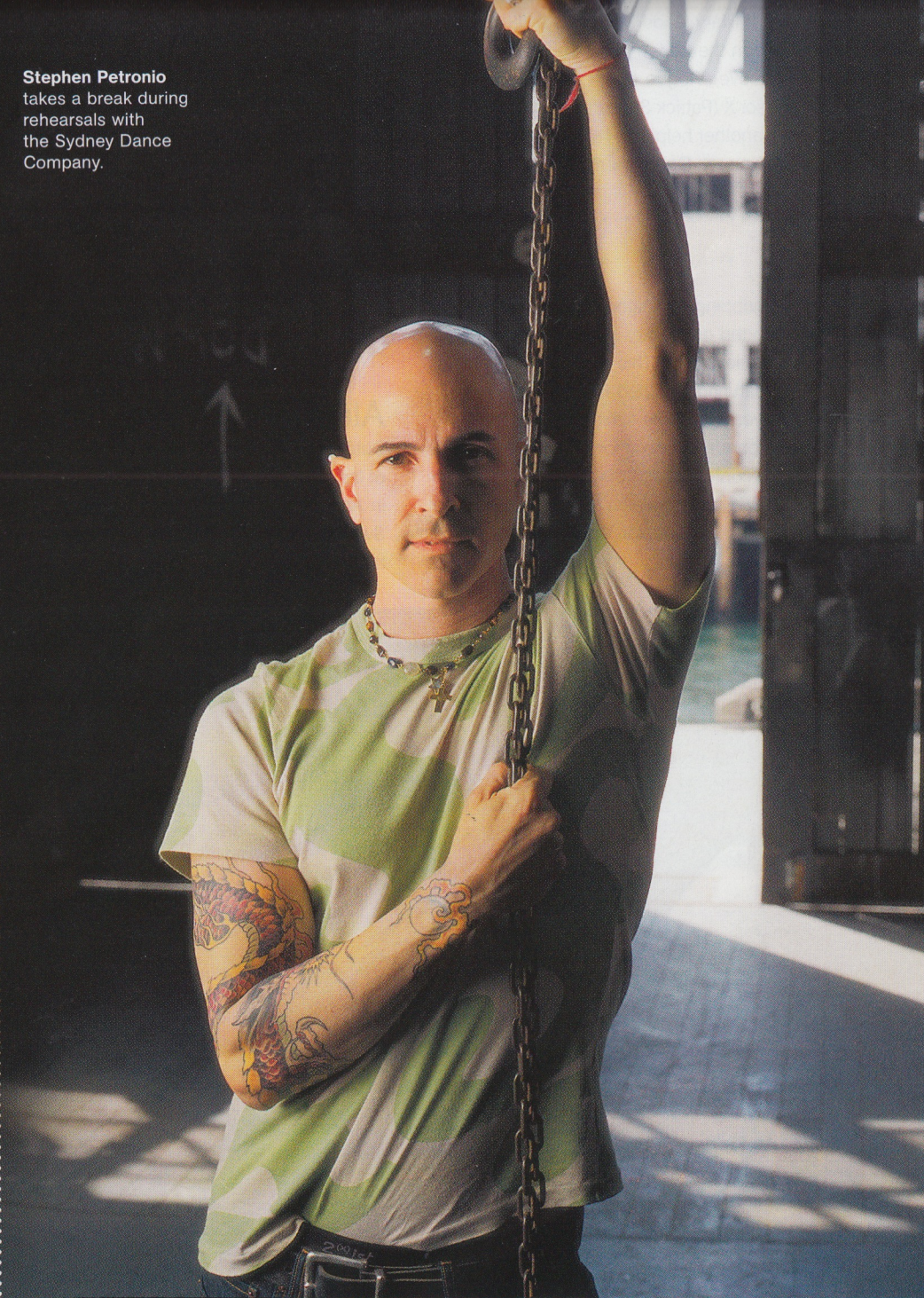
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During a show called *Heterospective* at a London art gallery, Clark and Petronio raised eyebrows with their intensely erotic performance. In more recent years, Petronio has solidified his reputation as one of America's highest profile choreographers. He frequently collaborates with other cutting-edge artists – Yoko Ono, Laurie Anderson, the Beastie Boys, Diamanda Galas and Tanya Sarne of the label Ghost, for example – and has created work for companies including Ballet Frankfurt, Deutsche Opera Berlin and London's Ricochet Dance Company.

Gregory Nash, the former director of Ausdance NSW, says: "Stephen is a brilliant choreographer with a razor-sharp imagination. His fiercely visceral dance language will really stretch Sydney Dance's virtuosic dancers and the results should be extraordinary."

Petronio certainly hopes so. "My work hasn't been seen in Sydney before, so I'm puttin' my best foot forward for you guys," he says.

Stephen Petronio takes a break during rehearsals with the Sydney Dance Company.



Underland Opera Theatre, Opera House.

Previews May 23, 24, 26. Season May 27-June 14.

Tickets \$29-\$65. Bookings 9250 7777.