

# The Boston Globe

## Movement blurs ballet, yet redeems

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By Karen Campbell

Devastated landscapes, hovering helicopters, bombs exploding, and flames so vivid you can almost smell the smoke. The visual effects in Stephen Petronio Company's "Underland," presented in its Boston premiere last night by World Music/CRASHarts, take this intense 65-minute dance theater work to a very dark place. But amid the visuals of mayhem and destruction, Petronio's 11 extraordinary dancers carry on, stoically, methodically. Throughout, they throw themselves into Petronio's slashing, slicing choreography, falling and getting back up. And toward the end, there is a glimpse of redemption.



Barrington Hinds and Natalie Mackessy perform in Underland. (Photo: Julie Lemberger)

Petronio is known for working with a range of provocative creators, from Laurie Anderson to Cindy Sherman. The visuals for "Underland," designed by Ken Tabachnick with video by Mike Daly, provide a sense of context as they flash across three large backdrop screens. But the work takes its primary inspiration and tone from the gothic songs of Australian artist Nick Cave, whose edgy lyrics and monochromatic delivery can be an acquired taste. Paul Healy's rumbling, machinelike soundscape effectively fills in the transitions as well as the opening tableau, in which Petronio crawls headfirst down a ladder.

After that, however, Petronio's choreography is a busy, nearly nonstop blur of motion. The movement has the sharp clarity and control of ballet, but Petronio often skews the lines. In grand jetés, legs frequently corkscrew to the side. Fouettés seem to melt and balances set up slightly off-center. Loose torsos and heads that dip and roll ride atop crisp footwork of scissor kicks and fluttery beats. Arms arc and windmill. Weight and dynamics shift with breathtaking precision and speed.

After a while, it looks repetitive, yet it's riveting to watch. The few shifts of tone are memorable - a sensual quartet of caresses, swoons, and kisses; a marching, fatigue-clad ensemble breaking rank in expressive outbursts, hands brushing away tears in "The Weeping Song;" a hint of playfulness in Natalie Mackessy's smile and jazzy hips in "Stagger Lee."

Petronio created "Underland" for the Sydney Dance Company in 2003, and though 9/11 is an obvious reference, it's hard not to think of other disasters since, like Hurricane Katrina or the tsunami that leveled a swath of Japan. Thankfully, Petronio offers us some hope by the work's conclusion. As a chorus of voices reminds us "Death is not the end," dancers in white leap and turn across the stage. Even as the music fades and the lights dim, they carry on.