

Murder Ballads: Underland

by Brad Bynum | June 23, 2011

Come sail your ships around me

And burn your bridges down

We make a little history, baby

Every time you come around.

—Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds, “The Ship Song”



Stephen Petronio is a New York-based choreographer known for creating *avant garde* dance pieces set to contemporary rock and pop music. In 2002, he was approached by the Sydney Dance Company, one of the premier dance companies of Australia, to create an original piece.

“I said, yes, I’ll come if you can get me Nick Cave,” says Petronio. “So they did, which I was very pleasantly surprised by, because I’m a giant Nick Cave fan. ... He’s kind of like the Bob Dylan of Australia—the punk rock Bob Dylan of Australia.”

Petronio eventually created *Underland* for the Sydney Dance Company, a quick-footed dance piece set to the songs of Nick Cave. The Sydney Dance Company performed the piece throughout Australia, and now Petronio has reconfigured it for his own company, The Stephen Petronio Company. They’ll be performing it in Reno as part of Artown, at the Grand Sierra Resort Grand Theater on July 30 at 8 p.m.

Cave is one of the most respected songwriters of the past 30 years, with a large body of work that draws on blues, folk, punk, post-punk, and film music to create dense music with compelling, literate songs. *Underland* includes songs from throughout Cave’s career.

“His music is often very much based on a story, and he is very obsessed with good and evil,” says Petronio. “He often sings about the most despicable criminals in the world. He makes these epic folk ballads about some very criminal minds, and I thought that was really interesting. And there’s always some kind of sense of redemption. He can take you to a very dark place, but he often releases you into the light. This piece is really a journey from darkness to light.”

Petronio moves through some of Cave’s darkest songs, like the nihilist romps of his early band The Birthday Party or his obscene take on the oft-recorded folk song “Stagger Lee,” to some of Cave’s most beautiful songs, like the uplifting ballad “The Ship Song.”

A centerpiece of *Underland* is the song “The Mercy Seat.”

“‘The Mercy Seat’ is about giving up the darkness,” says Petronio. “‘The Mercy Seat’ refers to somebody on his way to the electric chair. Why is it ‘The Mercy Seat’? Because he will be released into death. Also, in Judaism, the Mercy Seat is really the mythical golden throne above the Torah. In Judaism, when you want to pray and talk to God directly, you go to the Mercy Seat. So this is a criminal, a crazy criminal who was convicted, and put on death row, singing this song to God, basically, about facing death and then the light after that.”

Petronio avoided directly illustrating the lyrical content, but instead attempted to choreograph the spirit of each song.

“I’m not a storyteller by nature,” he says. “My work is much more abstract. ... I rarely illustrated the story he was singing. No need to do that, really. You can hear the story. You don’t need to see it, too. ... I’m really looking at the essence of the songs. And the essence of [“The Ship Song”] is about a ship pulling into the harbor between two people. It’s very sexual. It’s very sensual. So I made something that I felt was as steamy and sensual on an abstract level as those lyrics are.”

Cave’s songs are often heard to be musically violent, and lyrically morbid. There’s also an underlying sexuality to many of his songs, which is something that interested Petronio.

“There is an aggressiveness that some people read as violence in my work,” he says. “For me, it’s more about physical assuredness and affirmation than violence. ... The movement is quite fast, and a lot of the movement gets pushed through the pelvis. The pelvis often leads the movement. Generally in dance, the pelvis is on top of the legs and the shoulders are on top of the pelvis. In my work, the pelvis usually pushes off the leg, and the shoulders get left behind. The first chakra, the sexual part of the body, is leading the movement.”

Cave’s music is an ideal candidate for dance because it is intensely physical.

“I try to put more onstage than the audience can possibly understand at once,” says Petronio. “I find that very sexy and interesting. In the sexual experience, you let go of who you are, and you become something else. You let go physically, and something else takes over, and that can be disorienting. I think that’s part of why sex is fun. So I try to disorient the audience by overloading them in many ways.”