

Stephen Petronio Brings *Underland* to S.B.

N.Y.C.-Based Choreographer Explores the Dark Side

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“Dance is the primary expression of the human experience,” choreographer Stephen Petronio said in a phone interview last week. Judging from his oeuvre, the human experience is thrilling and dramatic, full of anguish, desire, passion, and, transcendence — anything but simple.

Last on the Campbell Hall stage in 2007, Stephen Petronio Dance Company returns to Santa Barbara this coming Monday, November 14, with *Underland*, an evening-length program inspired by the haunting music of singer/songwriter Nick Cave. Petronio is known for bringing together cutting-edge music, fashion, film, and design with relentlessly aggressive, technically demanding modern dance. Trained in

the ‘70s and early ‘80s by Steve Paxton and Trisha Brown of the experimental Judson Dance Theater, Petronio went on to forge his own extreme movement vocabulary. More than 25 years after founding his own company, the New York-based artist continues to build provocative multi-media dance productions that often explore sexuality, anger, and violence. *Underland* was originally created on Sydney Dance Company and premiered in 2003. Conceived in the post-9/11 era, it’s a surreal exploration of the darker side of the human experience, though, in describing the work, Petronio uses words like “redemption,” “elevation,” and “release.”

Tell me about the early inspiration for *Underland* and how you began creating the work. The Sydney Dance Company commissioned me to create a new work, and I immediately said “I’ll do anything with Nick Cave.” It just popped out of my mouth. That’s how it started — it really began with his music. His work is quite dark, but it also has this amazing sense of elevation and redemption in it. I looked to the music to guide me. Then 9/11 happened, so I was thinking a lot about apocalypse, and at the same time I was trying to get to the soul of Nick’s songs: to the subconscious, psychological underworld.

Can you give me a specific example of the way Cave’s music directly informed your choreography? Absolutely. There were several murder ballads he wrote about the subconscious of the criminal, and one of them was called “The Mercy Seat.” In Judaism, the mercy seat is the golden throne that sits above the Torah — it’s where you go to talk to God. In this song, it represents the electric chair. The song is about a man who has done something really horrible in his life, and he’s walking to his death with a great sense of elevation and release from all the drama of human life. Death is an incredible portal for release. So for me, that became a lot about jumping and flying through space and elevation into the air.

What do you look for in your dancers? Well, I generally look for incredibly well-trained technicians. Often I am drawn to the person whose technique is so good it’s invisible, seamless. And then I am usually drawn to people who have something intuitive and unspoken to dance about, where the dancing comes from a place of human resonance. Sometimes that comes from trouble, and sometimes not.

What’s the most gratifying aspect of your work? Two answers: One is that I get one foot away from these movement constructions, and I get to see the amazing skill of these dancers creating the most impossible, exciting movement. That’s incredibly nurturing and satisfying to me. Also, when I make something that’s really good and I’m watching it, sometimes it’s hard to recognize. When it’s culminated enough for me to see it as something outside of myself, then that’s really satisfying — it becomes a foreign object again.

Why is dance important? Well, it’s the primary expression of the human experience. It comes from the body, and it expresses our physicality. The body is the primary tool we’re given. I find the body has an intuitive intelligence that supersedes the rational mind, and to be in touch with that, at least periodically, is a really important part of the human experience.