



Underland sound

Stephen Petronio digs deep into Nick Cave.

By Gia Kourlas

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SOLO TURN Amanda Wells takes flight. *Photograph: Sarah Silver*

Stephen Petronio lives for *petit allegro*. As he succinctly put it in a recent interview, "Hummingbirds are my favorite birds." In his high-voltage choreography, small jumps send bare feet skimming across the floor as the torso unfurls like a ribbon. Petronio and his company return to the Joyce on Tuesday 5 in *Underland*, a New York premiere that was originally created for the Sydney Dance Company. The work, featuring costumes by Tara Subkoff and visual design by Ken Tabachnick and Mike Daly, takes place in a dark, dank world—in other words, the perfect setting for the music of Nick Cave, who himself happens to be Australian. Throughout his long career, Petronio has worked with many musical artists—Lou Reed, Laurie Anderson, Rufus Wainwright and Nico Muhly among them—but for him, Cave is different. "The whole piece is really a homage to Nick's talent," Petronio says. "His voice gives me chills."

Is *Underland* a work you could have made only outside the U.S.?

In terms of that size and that budget, yes. I've been doing a lot of those works over the years, and America doesn't really get to see them, and my argument was, Let's have a look at what I do when I'm funded and supported. I've been doing a

lot of those works over the years, and America doesn't really get to see them and my argument was, Let's have a look at what I do when I'm funded and supported. I had two of my assistants and one of theirs and the musical and visual people all around me, and I just remember feeling like I was mowing grass every day and rushing down the field. I would make material as fast as I could; somebody would learn it, and then I'd go to the next person. I function well like that because my attention span is so short. The company said, "We want this to be whatever you want it to be," and that's very rare. Not to mention the Sydney Dance Company has studios off the harbor and they gave me a car and a penthouse; we were like celebrities in the town. I made the piece and stayed for the opening night and it was an amazing hit, but I left the next day for a vacation in Queensland to some eco-resort, where there were no phones and electricity, and I was out of contact for three weeks. Meanwhile, *Underland* really took off. I didn't enjoy any of it, and it was probably just as well. A week after I came home, I was walking up Second Avenue with a boom box and a giant bag and climbing up my fifth-floor office walk-up thinking, Well, it was good for a while, but this is my reality.

Had you worked with Nick Cave's music before?

No. The company had been talking to me for a couple of years about coming to do something. [Then--artistic director] Graeme Murphy was the single voice of the company, and he knew he wanted to take a break; I think he just got very tired all of a sudden, and so they called me with two month's notice: "What will you do?" and I blurted out, "Get me Nick Cave, and I'll do whatever you want." And they did. Nick didn't want to do any new music, but he gave me the entire catalog and [assistance from] his producer, Tony Cohen, who lived there.

How did you choose the songs?

It was difficult and fun. I narrowed it down to what I thought would make the right arc, and then he gave me the original tracks, and with Tony and [sound designer] Paul Healy, we mixed bridges between the songs. It reads as a score. For example, "The Weeping Song" has a bassline, so the song is intact, but we ripped it out and built a prelude around that bassline that delivers you to the song.

Were you working on everything concurrently?

Yeah. I got there and added a couple of other songs and, actually, Tony and I discussed what the work was going to be. He was flummoxed that I chose a simple acoustic version of "The Mercy Seat": There's a great rocking version, so I had to really wrestle with him about it. I just knew at that point in the piece that we needed some intimacy. That song is like a knife in your heart. The funny thing is when I chose "Wild World," which is a birthday-party song, Nick was like, "Why do you want that song?" I just thought it was perfect: I wanted it to set a tone of wildness with the women. And then about a year later, he came to New York and he opened the set with that song. I was so excited.

What is the first piece?

The first—"Mah Sanctum"—is a reading from one of his books, which is beautiful, and it sets a very dark, dank place. It's a mute reject describing his hidden place in the jungle, and you don't really know if he's a mass murderer or a rapist. You know he's seriously in some other world, and there's a visit from an angel. It's out there. I wanted to start it with Nick's voice speaking plainly.

Have you choreographed to spoken word?

In *Island of Misfit Toys*, I did a version of *The Raven* with Willem Dafoe. Working with text like that is hard; my work is not really literal. I can play with illustration, but I don't like to, and I think my work is much more abstract, so when you engage the narrative brain with text, it makes everything "look like."

It's dangerous.

It is, but I kind of like that danger. I don't really know how to do narrative dance. I actually just finished doing a play with Diane Paulus and [writer and lyricist] Steven Sater. I don't know anything about the rules of narrative-driven dance. I know that my whole thrust is a rejection of that, but it's not like I got really good at that and rejected it: I came in on the

opposite side. My world is the intuitive side, and I think they asked me because they knew that wasn't my forte and that I would bring something askew to the situation.

It's Prometheus Bound, and it recently opened in Cambridge. It's your first musical. Why did you do it?

I'm at an age where it's very easy to get bored. I've been doing this for 27 years. I know my world, and when I'm in control of it, it goes a certain way within the gamut of how I can surprise myself—but it's really my world, and this was out of my realm of experience. I thought, how interesting, and it's not a bad time in the world of economic collapse to do other things. I've said no to Broadway and to plays before, but Steven's a genius, and his writing and lyrics are as thick as anything that I dance.

You talked about how your attention span is short. How do you rein it in? Or do you make that energy work for you?

I like having two or three things to do at one time. First, let me say that my art-making is a practice, so however I am when I'm sitting down talking to you, my life changes drastically when I go into the studio. It's not the chatty Stephen; I find that choreographing is a meditation, and I go into a different state. The minute I start sweating, everything changes. My body's always been that way, and I really think my movement comes from that meditative state. Everything else falls away. But I like to have two or three things on the burner at the same time. Sometimes I can work on one microsecond for two or three hours, which freaks the dancers out; if I have two or three projects going, I can turn my attention to another problem. Often when I do that, the first one solves itself—in a *second*.

How much is what you make based on what it looks like versus what it feels like?

It always starts by what it feels like, because I don't look in the mirror. I'm very lucky that I started as an improviser, and the mirror was my enemy. Even now when I'm choreographing, I'll sometimes get in front of a window where I can see a very small shadow of myself, so I'll get an idea of shape without actually having to look at myself. I've made some of my best work that way. In this piece, there's a solo for Amanda Wells.

I am in love with that solo! I was going to ask who was dancing it.

I made that in Graeme's office before lunch every day. He had a TV up on a stand, so I could just see my upper body in the TV. I would run downstairs after lunch before I forgot it and teach it. I actually taught that to the whole company, and one woman emerged as the diva. It also gets used at the end in "Death Is Not the End."

Tell me about that solo. How meaningful is it for you?

That solo was one of the beautiful finds of the piece for me. There's something about when I go to a different place—I mean, my dancers will do whatever I want whenever I want, and they really indulge my baroque kind of crazy intention of movement, and sometimes that's good and sometimes that's bad. When I go to a different place, there's a negotiation about what they can do and what I want them to do, and sometimes I get more of them and sometimes I get more of me. It depends on how skilled the dancers are. In Sydney, they were quite skilled. Plus they had a very strong vertical undercurrent. Part of why the piece looks the way it does is because they got the language accurately, but they weren't so good at my movement that I could get crazy compositionally. I kept the compositions a little bit more tempered. My guys are used to going inside out, and these guys were willing to, but we only had six, seven weeks. The composition is more plain than usual, and I think it delivers information pretty efficiently.

Well, the whole thing has a texture, and it moves from one world to the next, which also has to do with the visual design.

That's Ken Tabachnick and Mike Daly. Ken has been my lighting designer for years, and he did the visual design, and Mike was the videographer. I thought of this work as a journey through worlds, and you can say I'm creating a landscape all you want, and we all say it, but Ken really made physical landscapes that the dances hang in. We fought a lot about

the tempo of these landscapes, because the biggest curse of any video in dance is that the video wins. So we got to this glacial understanding about how things would move—and mostly it's slow. I think he anchored it in a visual slowness that allows you to absorb both, and of all the times I've used video, I think it's the most successful. I think this is the smallest theater that it's going to be in, but the Joyce really wanted me to do it.

It's funny—no offense, but I would really like to see your work in a different theater. I think the Joyce traps it, in a way.

Well, we should talk about that. I've been feeling that way too, but the Joyce has been amazing to me, and actually, this year I said to them, "Underland needs to go into a dark, dank hole." The Joyce's Linda [Shelton] and Martin [Wechsler] took me anywhere I wanted to go. They took me to the Ritz, to the Intrepid. We looked there and at the Armory. St. Ann's. And in the end, the Intrepid was exorbitant and ten times what the Joyce would cost, and there's no structure, and we'd have to bring the whole theater in there anyway, and how do we get the audience in there.... We even went to a couple of other theater-theaters. The Baryshnikov Arts Center was intimate, and I thought it could be interesting there, but in the end I felt the visual would not work in that space. Maybe the dance would fit in, but who would ever see it? We decided that if I do something there, I would make something for the space. In the end, they let me make the decision. But I am interested in breaking out. My audience knows the way to the Joyce, but I'm sure they'd like to go somewhere else. [Laughs] But the Joyce has been very loyal to me, and they've given me a platform for 20-something years.

But I'm not even talking about your relationship with the Joyce. It's more about seeing your work in a different frame.

I agree with you. You can look at this in two ways: I'm getting stuck with how I'm looking at my work, or how lucky I am that I have a place that will produce my work every year. They don't produce it, I produce it, but...

That's what I thought.

The first year, they produced it. I make a lot more money when they allow me to produce it. They produced me for two years, and when my audience was built, they were like, "Look, we love you and we'll continue to produce you, but you could make a lot more money if you produce yourself," and I didn't know how to do that. They taught me. They raised me. And so people don't know this, but if I don't do my Joyce season at 85, 90 percent [capacity], then I'm going to have a very hard year. If they produce me, they give me \$10,000 or \$20,000. I can make so much more money than that. It fuels the company.

How do your dancers approach Underland differently than the Sydney group did? Have you changed the choreography?

I've reduced the cast to 12. I used 18 in Sydney because that's what they asked me to do. The piece has gotten clearer for its reduction. I've tailored a few things; I'm remaking "The Ship Song." I made that for Sydney in about three hours. I had something else there and [costume designer] Tara Subkoff was with me, and we began fighting about that section. I love her, and she hated what I was doing. There was text in there and she said, "You can't use text, I'm an actress, you can't use text! Just do that thing you do where people touch each other. If you do it, I'll make really fabulous costumes for you." It became a beautiful part of the piece, but I thought it was more illustrative than I would have liked it to be. I lived with it for many years. We actually brought it here a few years ago, that little section; I niggled around with it and I realized what was wrong with it: It was indicating a scenario instead of having a physical need for one, so I'm injecting that section with a physical need for codependence and mutual support. That's the real crux of what I wanted to do. I've gone deeper into that. It's still in a line and it's still the same costumes.

That's great—that was a moment that stopped me on the DVD.

Well, it is kind of like an intermission in the piece. Maybe it's not as different, but I think it is. I'll tell you, all the self-groping really bothers me. It's a place I've been once or twice [as a choreographer], and it's like, Why am I doing that? Well, I was doing it because I had three hours to finish it. [Laughs] Do groping—quick! It's like, You have a sharpened

pencil in your box? You have to use it. Some choices got forced in a good way and some choices got forced in another way. I kind of like that pressure. I wouldn't want to have it all the time. Sometimes I defeat myself with freedom and sometimes I defeat myself with a limit. But you need them all, for sure.

How else have you changed it?

Mostly all the steps are the same. Shila [Tirabassi] has a solo in there that's a little more special for her. All the partnering is the same. For Amanda in that solo, I think I added one of her specialty turns, but I really believe that that particular choreography is one of my best things. I want to just brush it up and give it to her. I made it with her in mind. This is a typical vein for Amanda, although I think it's the pinnacle of that vein.

After *Underland* was a huge success, Murphy announced he was leaving the company. I remember hearing that you wanted his job. Is that true?

Yes. I made a very hard pitch for that job. For me, it was a dream come true. The company adored me. The piece kind of revitalized the company. And I feel like America is just like, "Oh, Stephen Petronio? We know him. Get in line." I was like the king of Sydney. My face was on the front page of the paper—often. And not that I need that, but that's the position of dance in that culture. If I was a football player it might be a different story, but since I don't draw blood, it's not going to be that here. It was down to two people, me and the woman they chose—Tanja Liedtke. They called me and asked me if I would share it with her, and I said no.

God.

And the end of the story is tragic: Two weeks before she started, she was killed. A truck hit her. She had a boyfriend she was working with and they were going to take it together. And I lost a lover when I was in college—she was killed by a car as well. In some ways, because I had that experience, I could call her boyfriend and say, "You can survive this." It was so weird; I just felt lucky that I didn't get the job in that moment. You never know why things are going to happen. She had a lot of promise, and it was a very big thing they were giving her. But it was not meant to be for me, and what it made me do was—no one has ever given me anything. It might look that way to you, but no one's ever given me anything. You have to fight for it, and when I work with a collaborator, I usually have to chase that collaborator until they agree to work in a poor theater. Very few exceptions. Laurie Anderson, Cindy Sherman: They love dance, so they will do it. But mostly you have to talk someone into it, because they come from a world where they're making a lot more money and to take the time out of their career is not only a diversion but a financial loss. I'm very good at talking people into things, but I felt like if I had gone to Sydney, at last, I would be given everything.

What happened when you didn't get it?

Instead of becoming bitchy and bitter, I decided to expand my company: That's why it's grown from six to eight to ten to twelve. I had to put together a three-year-plan for Sydney Dance Company, and it taught me that I have the plan, I have the vision, I just need to turn it around here.

Tell me about expanding the company. How did you do that in this economic climate?

Leave it to me to wait for a downturn to expand. I think perhaps that my instinct was to become larger so as not to disappear. All the real circumstantial promptings seemed to be leading that way, and I just knew I could not shrink without a real possibility of losing it all. I'm pretty stubborn, and I will deliver a work every year until I'm in the ground. That's part of my practice. Like I said, I believe that making work is a practice, and it's not a product, and so I need to practice. It's my life. Sometimes it's like, Oh God, what is it going to be this year? Or why are we doing it so soon? But two more years is two more years of money. I've chosen to make the practice regular, and it's good for the dancers and for me.

Do you have a rehearsal space?

No. But you never know why things are the way they are, and I do believe that, because it turns out that my not having a

space is part of why I've survived. The Mellon Foundation analyzed my company and it turns out that my longevity is directly proportionate to my low overhead. I kind of got good at making it look like there was a lot more money around me. [Laughs]

Yes, you don't seem poor—and you don't talk about working in an impoverished field on purpose, right?

Absolutely on purpose. Whether I've paid for the music or it's given to me, it's the top music I could find, and how I get it is not really anybody's business. A lot of time I pay for it, believe me. [Laughs] There's a whole poverty mentality in dance. I think dance is glamorous, and I love the glamour of dance. It's also sweaty and gritty and sensible-shoes and all that crap, but it's also fabulous and full of gold and diamonds, and part of my mission is to bring that fantasy to life. It's not poor movement. My work is rich.

Why do you love Underland?

I think it welds a classical sense of technique with my sequential and aggressive movement. The [Sydney] dancers were so hungry, and they had all these fucking sharp tools and they were waiting for something new to come in and I had that deep interest in using those tools. I'm not antitechnique, as you know, and it's not like I'm so popular because of that, but that's who I am and that's what I love, and either some day the world will love it again or they won't. But I love it and that's what I need to see in the world, and they allowed me to take my sense of the spherical and sequential into this vertical world.

What exactly do you mean by *vertical world*?

The vertical balletic world of standing and jumping from the legs up—I'm not a ballet choreographer, but I love that. My dream is to have the Balanchine legs and speed with the 360-degree torso and arms. That's what I think I could add to that vernacular. With my dancers I don't ask them to beat so much because it's a modern-dance company; I'm not ballet trained. I'm organic. I come from improvisation, but I deeply love that look, and I can ask for it and my dancers will reproduce it, but I think at a certain point I stop myself, because I'm like, Oh—they're not really ballet dancers. And I didn't care what these dancers [in Sydney] were—all I knew was their feet were fast and nobody said no. That's the thing about working with another company: You're away from your home, you're away from your own definition of yourself. They don't know who you are. No expectation. The music was the only thing that put an expectation on me, and I loved those expectations. A lot of my interest in pyrotechnics is about elevation—not just height but metaphysical elevation. A lot of times I'll bang you with movement to lead to that shape.

It's about the energy of the shapes you're creating rather than the specific steps.

Exactly. All those specifics are necessary to get you there. One of the underpinnings of my language is using energy that is very organic, that stretches out and carves out in space through every direction. I do that to more or less degrees in my work, but with these guys the music was so full throttle and their lines were so stretched that I felt I could stretch much farther out into space, so their reach is a lot bigger, and as a result I think it's easier to see. If there's anything that marks this piece it's the energetic reach out into space—it's more extended than I'm used to it being, and I think it's because it's carving, not flowing.

And each section is created by an individual reaction to a song?

Yes. For "The Weeping Song," I was trying to find something that could live with the pain of the world. Look at Japan. The world is going to weep, so how do you make a dance that touches on anything like that? I tried to make it kind of like a folk dance. I never use circles, but there's a circle in it, and it's pretty simple. I was trying to get to a postmodern folk feeling. For "Wild World," it was about tough, sexy women, so I wanted to make something sexy and pointy and "fuck you, bitch" kind of steps. I wanted to start the piece, close to the beginning, showing the tough women in this tough world. Really, the music called on certain sides of me that called on certain things. "Stagger Lee" is a duet between a whore and a killer, basically, so I made it as gross and as big as I could. I rarely let myself make male and female duets like that, and it was fun to do. A lot of it was led by the music. [Laughs] Always choose your collaborators wisely.