

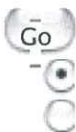
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Dance

Nerve/The Idea of Sea

★★★★★ Robin Howard Dance Theatre, London

Judith Mackrell

Wednesday October 2, 2002

[The Guardian](#)

Asphalt - gritty, resistant, dirty - is not a natural surface for dance. Almost the first thing you notice about the two dancers in Carol Brown's latest work is the grimy sticking plaster that binds their feet and wrists. But Nerve is not about theatrical dance aesthetics; it is more an attempt to bring the street to the stage. Hence the long strip of asphalt flooring, buckled into three uneven folds at one end, upon which Brown and her partner Grant McLay perform their duet.

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The dance is preceded by a short, jerky film, also made by Brown, of a woman voyaging out from the inner city to the empty horizons of the sea. Images jostle, implode and unravel into dazed slow motion as the woman experiences that mix of casual contact and entranced solitude that defines city travel. When the lights open on Brown's live piece, these images persist.

Her own first solo, danced between two fiercely focused beams of light, takes us instantly to a place of neon and night-time. As Brown's arms wheel through urgent trajectories, they flash between brightness and shadow. She is a one-woman light show, flickering with electricity, barely human.

The piece progresses through a dreamy duet in which Brown and McLay yield to each other's bodies, although the rasp of asphalt, discounts any sense of ease or romance. During some passages they dance separately, one on the flat end of the floor and the other teetering on

the steep folds of asphalt. The latter, tilted into sudden speeds and awkward balances, seems to be navigating the disjointed momentum of city life.

Sometimes the dancers segue into an urban rhythm, surfing on the vibes of the street; at other times their movements have the disconnected frazzle of exhaustion. Russell Scoones's accompanying score sounds like the inner organs of the city: its rumbling intestines, its thudding heart.

The public, sitting on the floor or standing along the length of the asphalt are more like a crowd than an audience, and Brown's desire to blur the boundaries between the theatre and the world outside is effectively realised. It is a shame, though, that in the final few minutes she yields to the temptation of words. Standing alone, gazing across at the huddled body of McLay, Brown recites a kind of postmodern version of Streets of London. The images of the poem only reiterate, lamely, what was already there in the choreography.

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