

Broken Chords, The Place, London

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The vitality of Britain's independent dance scene is a thing of wonder to dance watchers abroad, particularly in America, where there is no equivalent of our Arts Council to help keep small companies afloat. Most weeks of the year the Robin Howard Dance Theatre at The Place hosts productions by those companies, whose work – tiny budgets notwithstanding – is often imaginatively ambitious.

Take Vincent Dance Theatre's Broken Chords, with its eight multi-tasking performers, live music even more virtuosic than the dance, and a set comprising 150 church chairs and a room-size chandelier. Yet not the least audacious thing about the piece is its theme: a focus on grief in every shade from grey to black, based on the company's experiences of living through its director's marriage break-up.

It sounds unappealing yet the result is extraordinary, uneven as a rocky road, but strongly affecting, not least thanks to Charlotte Vincent's sure sense of how much lowering an audience can take, even when lulled by the startlingly fine violin-playing of Patrycja Kujawska in unaccompanied Bach. Every variation on the physically depressed state, from slumping and drooping to total collapse, is worked by the dancers into a barely-moving picture that proves remarkably watchable when cut with sudden rushes of savage energy.

There is grim comedy too: Vincent holding a gun to the performers' heads in a bid to snap them out of it, Alex Catona forced to play manic klezmer on his cello, others made to tapdance on chairs. Vicious squabbles erupt, with dancers swinging punches. Tear-stained Aurora Lubos tries to top herself in a string of botched attempts including drowning in a bin bag and suffocation by talcum powder. Amid the comic mayhem are bouts of extended dance and an attempt to probe the anatomy of melancholy in fine lyrical text by Ruth Ben-Tovim, skillfully delivered. A flyer stated that Vincent Dance Theatre is "committed to

demystifying notions of what dance can be". What this showed, rather, was the depth and breadth of its other talents.