

English company presents a grim satire on artistic ambition at Kasser Theater in Montclair

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The lights have nearly gone out in *If We Go On*, the bitter and despairing but frequently hilarious dance-theater piece that Vincent Dance Theatre from England presented Thursday at Montclair State University.

It feels nasty to laugh at such a pathetic spectacle in which the artists refuse to perform, guiltily confessing feelings of inadequacy and flogging themselves. Yet the giggles keep coming.

Charlotte Vincent, the choreographer of this existentialist farce, has reached the point in her own celebrity biography where the star breaks down and is carted off to rehab. Sharing her boredom, anger and exhaustion, her collaborators are all but catatonic. Before they sign off for good, however, these quitters will put on a “reality” show. Rambling onto the dim and littered stage of “*If We Go On*,” they use their feet to flick on personal spotlights and whine. They want to make sure we feel their angst.

Some people do not find this amusing. During the pauses in which the performers stare at the audience with mute, passive aggression, ticket-holders can listen to themselves think, or they can stomp out of the theater — and many do.

Those who remain, however, continue to snicker, perhaps recalling their own self-doubts. Making the show funnier, or more ghastly, a woman in the audience can be heard stifling sobs.

So *If We Go On* is effective theater after all, its insults delicately calibrated and its outrages timed to achieve catharsis. It can feel wonderfully liberating.

Patrycja Kujawska and Aurora Lubos appear first, Kujawska standing to recite a manifesto of insolent negatives (“No more dancing!”), while Lubos sits and shuffles an untidy script, fidgeting in her seat and plucking at the air.

The reference is to post-modern contrarian Yvonne Rainer, although this group’s equally defiant attitude is more modest. They know their families will be disappointed in them.

Janusz Orlik begins a dance, but then thinks better of it. Composer Alex Catona tinkers with his cello desultorily, Scott Smith plays a lonesome harmonica and, half-weeping, Lubos recalls the women artists whom she admires.

As her cries cycle through a tape loop, you realize that these heroines have set a standard impossible to match and that the echoes haunt her. The backdrop is a chalkboard, on which the performers scribble music and draw the empty outlines of dancers, but a game plan never materializes.

Almost against her will, Vincent does supply some lovely dancing. Harry Theaker is a wonderfully fluid mover, and in Orlik’s rapid duet with Carly Best, the dancers come apart and back together with a firm and admirable assuredness. The choreographer can’t help being musical, even when Orlik slams Best into the wall. Lubos’ gestures are nimble and richly detailed. These highlights contrast poignantly with the darkness all around.

Still even in this entropic landscape, faith in art remains.

Smith describes the luminosity of great stars who have “carried on,” forgetting aches and pains as they abandon themselves to a performance. Memories of those shining transformations inspire the rest of us, as we toil in mean, everyday circumstances.

Staring at each other across the lip of the stage, we all know why we are here.