

Multiple Perspectives on a Relationship's End

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Charlotte Vincent's *Broken Chords* is about her bitter divorce and breakups in general. It has been described by critics as "brave" and "beautiful". Nothing unfamiliar about the material or its reception.

But Ms. Vincent's 90-minute dance, performed on Thursday night as part of the Montclair State University's adventurous Peak Performances series, is astonishingly original in the way it takes the familiar and turns it on its head. In the process *Broken Chords* shows the subtlety with which expressive movement, choreographed by an experienced and inspired artist, can cut to the heart of everyday reality.

Ms. Vincent's 13-year-old modern-dance company, based in Sheffield, England, made its American debut on Thursday. It has also created film and video works and large-scale community projects, and that breadth of experience may have helped her to stand outside the emotional quicksand of a marriage's breakup and make sufficiently dispassionate use of it as a dance theme.

But one leg does teeter a half-inch into that quicksand, and the resulting balancing and integration of simultaneous perspectives is part of what makes *Broken Chords* so powerfully affecting. It is not every work of art, however demanding, funny and sad, that can move a group of college dance students like Thursday's audience from surreptitious cellphone glancing to hesitant, then unabashed, laughter to rapt empathy and finally a spontaneous standing ovation.

The piece begins with a nerve-rackingly long, slow-paced dance of bleak despair. One by one, drably dressed performers enter and make their slumping way between rows of wooden chairs. Some sit. Others touch as if to comfort. Eventually small duets spring up

between the chairs. Mostly they appear as supported bodies soaring clumsily and then plunging down. The chairs might almost be partly obscuring waves in a stormy sea.

A woman (Patrycja Kujawska) murmurs a litany of regret. She is sorry, she says, for each mundane failure to connect, each of those failures echoing with the sound and shifting emotional tenor of a bad marriage's descent into endless shouted arguments.

Suddenly another woman (Rachel Krische) strides forward and takes over the performance, seizing a microphone and issuing loud, clipped commands to the stage crew and dancers. Her orders are often nonsensical, but she is so ordinary, a believable stand-in for a sturdy, efficient, commonplace housewife, as well as a bossy, impossibly demanding choreographer.

Her victims include the goofy, eager Darren (Darren Anderson), the youngest company member, who tries, ineptly, to break into the others' big dancing moments. The suicidal, cigarette-smoking Valentina (Valentina Formenti) tries to suffocate and drown herself in a crazily hilarious solo bit. The violin-playing Patrycja (Ms. Kujawska) and cello-playing Stefano (Stefano Fogher) are ordered to accompany a dogged flamenco solo and a loopy attempt at jazz dance.

But the mood grows solemn again. In what must be one of the saddest romantic duets ever choreographed, two exhausted people who once loved each other remember how it felt and why, with fleeting, yielding tenderness. Finally Stefano murmurs a closing litany of homages to remembered sex, to trust and to voids, and to "loss, loneliness, absence and longing, and no longing at all." Slowly, the dancers walk out one by one as they have entered, and the lights dim.

Everything works in *Broken Chords*, from Ms. Vincent's eloquent writing to the eloquence, plain and comical, of the performers, who also include Lee Clayden, Eleanor McDonald and Janusz Orlik.

There is a seamless integration of live music and taped music (composed by Alex Catona, Colin Elliot, John Avery, Bach and Heinrich von Biber). James Harrison's lighting picks out

faces and props as unassumingly as the sunlight that glimmers briefly through a kitchen window. Ruth Ben-Tovim served as dramaturg.