

Punchdrunk, The Place, London

Dance Europe, 1 May 2005, Donald Hutera

Britain's Charlotte Vincent has been making work for her Vincent Dance Theatre for ten years now. To be honest, I wasn't a big fan of the two earlier pieces I'd seen by the Sheffield-based company. Her latest full-length production, however, marks a change of heart. This delicious and melancholic plunge into the impulses behind theatrical artifice is the most engaging and emotionally truest work by Vincent and her collaborators that I've seen. I left a last-night-of-a-long-UK-tour performance wishing more people could see it, and share my delights and questions. (It's within the realms of possibility that the piece could be revived).

Vincent and company took some inspiration from old photos of dancers backstage at the Folies Bergère and the Monte Carlo Ballet. *Punch Drunk* is steeped in the essence, and conflicts, of that kind of hermetic, hard-working milieu. The show has an irony-flecked soul. The opening is a lovely, tickling piece of physical character comedy, as Patrycja Kujawska's imperious yet vulnerable diva showgirl rehearses a would-be grand entrance on her own. Gradually the other denizens of this world of flea-bitten glamour materialise on Richard Lowdon's set (a gorgeous and simple arrangement of ropes, wooden frames and a tall, free-standing white curtain upstage). Nearly all have great moments playing to their skills. Perfectly cast as a pair of squabbling angels, TC Howard and Aurora Lubos also contribute funny and/or touching solos. Aerialist-dancer Lindsey Butcher exudes serene strength, whether up on the ropes or tangoing with the balletically wiry Janusz Orlik. Donning heels, the latter snakes through a sensational erotic adagio dance. Geir Hytten is both odd man out and wild card. This moody, handsome brute is the most ambiguous (or least developed) character. Much of the time he lurks on the edges, wrapped in what could be self-loathing. He enacts a ritual of humiliation upon Kujawska that is hard to watch and, bless her, beautifully executed.

Punch Drunk as a whole is both vigorously rife with, and delicate about, such human qualities as ego, cruelty and show-must-go-on resiliency and redemption. It may be too long, not pointed enough and occasionally indulgent, with dips of energy and lurches of tone. But it is a rich, embraceable work to which the performers give their all. Plus, it contains two terrific bouts of straight-up, full-out show dance that come near to inducing a state of bliss.