

Punchdrunk, Traverse Theatre

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Punch Drunk, by Sheffield's Vincent Dance theatre, is a piece about faded grandeur and past-it entertainers. This is strictly to pull off, since seedy acts don't know when to stop can be, well, seedy to watch.

This production expertly evokes the backstage worlds of vaudeville and burlesque performers, winding physical theatre, circus skills, chorus-line moves and music into one dizzying carousel. But at 105 minutes, it is overlong by at least half an hour; and like the ego-laden artistes it seeks to parody, prone to fits of self-indulgence.

Set in a disused theatre – festooned with bare light-bulbs, strewn with tatty props and costumes- Punch Drunk is in many ways a study of that edge-old stage mantra, “the show must go on”. Charlotte Vincent – now celebrating 10 years' directing, choreographing and performing with her company- is interested in what performers will endure to keep kicking high and smiling.

The six characters she has created will put up with just about anything- humiliation, violence, mental breakdown – to stay in the spotlight. And though they are plucked from the vaults of vaudeville and cabaret history, they could be from any era, sporting the bruises and emotional scars familiar to every performer.

Central figure Patrycja Kujawska, dressed in oyster-pink satin and ripped fishnets, is washed-up cabaret star who spends most of the piece trying to perfect the moment she steps out onstage and hears the audience roar. Over and over she makes her entrance through a collapsing proscenium arch, never quite getting it right. And when others launch into chorus-line routines, she is there beside them, doling out corrections.

It's a nice metaphor for the performer's obsessive streak- the essential repetition of their art. And in many ways, Vincent seems to be sending herself up here, her pivotal position as director and the ego that implies.

But the five other characters are equally vivid. TC Howard and Aurora Lubos, tiny women dressed in mannish jackets and white tulle skirts, play a cabaret double-act whose bickering and munchkin-like fizz and fury continues backstage.

Lindsey Butcher brings a touch of circus to the piece: she is only happy when dangling from a rope. Tall, handsome Janusz Orlik performs perfectly-placed ballet routines- but he has a secret beneath his well-cut suit. Later dressed in sexy lingerie and silver heels he reveals his cross-dressing side, his long shaved pins more than they have any rights to be.

All six are sad beneath the razzle-dazzle; but one character is dangerous, too. Geir Hytten skulks around backstage swigging from a bottle, only emerging to dance risky, physical punishing duets that turns into outright abuse. In one poignant scene he strips Kujawska of her satin gown before kicking her into the footlights, where she completes the humiliation by performing a brutal, tearstained striptease. The others form a V-shape around her as she rips the clothes from her body- but they turn the other cheek, refusing to see what is in front of their faces.

These glimpses of what might lie behind the entertainer's fixed grin are hard-hitting and tantalising by turns. And while aware these are fictional characters, we can't help but wonder if there are biographical elements in here too. After all, it is Vincent herself in the programme notes who compares the way the Punch Drunk characters live their lives ("through gritted teeth and genuine smiles") with the way the Vincent Dance Theatre live theirs.

And this is where Punch Drunk falls down. Devised by the whole company, it is evocatively executed but descent too often into individual reverie. Like so many collaborative pieces, there is a feeling everyone wanted their ideas included, and nobody was brave enough to edit them out. What at first seemed engaging- Howard emerging, snake-charmer-style, from

a barrel dressed in homemade angel wings; Aurora Lubos relentlessly soaked in tin bath- becomes pretentious when it goes on too long.

It's ironic that a piece lampooning the egos of performers should fall prey to its own vanity. Bring down the curtain 30 minutes earlier and it might win back some of its razzle.