

Vincent dancers explore emotions

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The Pittsburgh Dance Council ended its 40th anniversary season Saturday on what some in the audience might have termed an inexplicable note, something easy to tell by several puzzled conversations around me and the repetitious squeaking of the Byham Theater seats. In this era of 'Dancing with the Stars' and 'So You Think You Can Dance', they want programs full of athletic Velveeta — in other words, a highly processed dance blend solely aimed at satisfying the public's appetite.

But Vincent Dance Theatre's Broken Chords was exactly how PDC built its well-earned and often exotic reputation as a first-rate international presenter, with an intelligently constructed and emotionally complex piece that would make people think, wonder and, yes, be puzzled. That's usually an accepted part of the package and requires a little patience — no immediate gratification, only a doorway to curiosity.

Vincent might be a British group, but the emotional landscape it conveyed was universal. The inspiration came from the painful and unavoidable depths of Charlotte Vincent's own divorce about six years ago. But it was only the beginning of an incredibly rich and satisfying journey.

Dozens of chairs were set in rows that covered the stage, dimly lit by a large plain chandelier. A funeral home? A theater?

A woman sluggishly entered one of the rows. She began a slow collapse. Another woman came to support or protect. The first, as it turned out, was not a dancer, but an accomplished violinist who began playing an original score that paired her with a cellist and channeled between live and recorded music. But it didn't matter that they were musicians. This piece had eight artists, plain and simple, all committed to an often brilliant display of

matters of the heart. I don't think I've ever seen a work that so expertly wove the musicians into the movement and the text.

Ah yes, the text — often disturbing. "I'm sorry you have nothing to say for yourself." "I can't take this anymore."

But Vincent didn't allow Broken Chords to wallow in its own weepy bits and pieces. Certainly there were terrifying aspects, such as slitting wrists, a waving gun segment and that final, morose and wearisome litany of heavyweight phrases like "to falling in love ... to falling out ... to displaced phone calls ...". But the choreographer would unexpectedly interject humor into the situation, giving it an absurd edge. In her words, "it's a whole lot more and a whole lot less than I thought it would be."

Of course, that's the way emotions clash, like seismic shifts in our very human earth. It could be seen best with the youngest of the dancers, who erupted into a brief, often silly dance history of his own, one that included the Roger Rabbit. Then two men interrupted him with a "serious" duet, which he, in turn, periodically interrupted.

Or the last duet, both painful and lovely, for Broken Chords tapped the contradictory elements of life itself. I would wager that there was hardly a viewer who, upon reflection, couldn't identify with something along the way and be affected by the outcome.