



Punch Drunk: Vincent Dance Theatre. Photo: Hugo Glendinning

WRONG-FOOTING THE AUDIENCE

Victoria Thoms considers Vincent Dance Theatre's ten years of provocation

Punch Drunk is Vincent Dance Theatre's ten-year anniversary piece. Director Charlotte Vincent talks to Victoria Thoms about its creation, its gender politics and how the company's community dance ethos goes hand in hand with their live performance work

Director Charlotte Vincent describes her work as 'pushing the meaning of movement and what moves the performer to make movement'. It does so in an innovative, exhilarating, emotionally engrossing and often conceptually challenging evening performance. Having seen three Vincent Dance Theatre pieces, (*Drop Dead Gorgeous* in 2001, *Let the Mountains Lead You To Love* in 2003 and *Punch Drunk* in 2004), what I find most engaging about her work is its effective combination of social commentary and theatrical enjoyment. While she explores knotty social situations and relationships, Vincent side-steps sermonising; surprising the audience with unusual combinations of theatri-

cal techniques and methods. These surprises run the gamut of theatrical possibilities, from a live folk band materialising out of nowhere, to an angel emerging from a bucket; from a virtuoso rope acrobat to an impromptu bath tub dance routine – with the water! But, layered cleverly through all these effects are troubling themes about social exclusion such as sexual violence, bullying and domination.

Vincent came to the University of Wolverhampton in October to present her latest piece, *Punch Drunk*, at Arena Theatre. She also met the dance students and presented workshops on her artistic interests and practical process. Her visit gave me the unique opportunity to ask her about the inspiration behind the new work as well as her distinctive artistic vision. *Punch Drunk* celebrates the company's tenth year of producing work. Vincent founded Vincent Dance Theatre in 1994 and over the last ten years has produced nine full-length live

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works that have toured both nationally and internationally. From the very start Vincent, and Vincent Dance Theatre, have been based in Sheffield. Indeed Vincent has earlier links with Sheffield, graduating from Sheffield University with an honours degree in English Literature and Drama.

The company consists of an international group of performers. *Punch Drunk* reunites dancer and violinist Patrycja Kujawska; dancer Aurora Lubos; dancer Janusz Orlik, (all from Poland); and Vincent Dance Theatre's Artistic Associate TC Howard from the UK. Dancer and aerialist Lindsey Butcher from the UK and dancer Geir Hytten from Norway join as new members and complete the cast. *Punch Drunk* also includes a musical score by composer John Avery, set design by Richard Lowdon and lighting design by James Harrison.

In thinking about questions for Vincent I especially wanted to bring up the subject of gender politics. Not only because of my background in Dance and Women's Studies but also because gender is so clearly on the agenda for her. I was also interested to explore the relationship between Vincent Dance Theatre's community work and their live performance work and how one influences the other. What

resulted was a warm and open commentary where issues about gender were writ large along with the importance of community dance outreach and of cultivating a wide audience base.

Victoria Thoms: Part of your inspiration for *Punch Drunk* was from photos of backstage at the Folies Bergère and Monte Carlo Ballet during the 1930s. Why did these inspire you?

Charlotte Vincent: I love the aesthetic. I love the over-theatrical nature of the costuming and I like the fact that we've sort of degraded it a little into this dusty homemade sort of world. At the same time it's a very beautiful world. The pictures we looked at were of women dressed like swans and women with huge wings and these directly translated into Patrycja's (Kujawska) outfit, which is the ridiculously large headdress that we added gloves and tights and stilettos to. We have done a lot of work in the past in high heels...

VT: You must spend a lot of time rehearsing with the heels.

CV: We do. We get the heels in pretty early (laughs). In *Let the Mountains Lead You To Love* we got the heels in early as well.

VT: Wasn't it also in *Drop Dead Gorgeous* that you used heels? And that must have been twice as hard because you were dancing on stones.

CV: Yes, for me in *Drop Dead Gorgeous* it was very much a question of how to remain feminine in a very harsh environment produced by the slate and have a completely incongruous image of looking elegant in very 1940s inspired costuming. What happens when a heel breaks or a shoe comes off? Or how do we perceive a woman differently when we see her very elegant, and then in bare feet on those stones. Something that has always moved me in *Drop Dead Gorgeous* is when TC (Howard) and Aurora (Lubos) are dancing bare foot on the stones because it appears even more painful and self destructive. I suppose for me it serves as a metaphor for those questions about whether, as women, we do it to ourselves or society does it to us.

VT: I wanted to ask you more about the gender politics in *Punch Drunk*. There is clearly a love of



the Folies Bergère and Monte Carlo Ballet aesthetic but what I also get is ambivalence. That ambivalence came through in the very 'dangerous' relationships between Geir (Hytten) and Patrycja and then Geir and TC. I was quite affected, almost disturbed, to see TC in that barrel and I thought it was such an excellent resolution to them going behind the screen. You can't imagine the horrors she was experiencing but then it is actually realised when Geir pushes her out in that little barrel.

CV: The barrel section is about packaging women away and saying, you go in there and you be still, and I'll wheel you on and when I kick the bucket you will come and do what I say. And while it is framed in a slightly humorous, slightly ridiculous, frivolous way it is also troubling. It makes a point about control, who has it and who is subjected by it. We are going to play this music and you're going to dance. This is all you know. Get on with it. And I think, well I don't know if it comes across, but certainly it feels like *Punch Drunk* is a show where we explore what it means to be a woman and how women are treated by men, even though it is not laid on with a trowel.

VT: No, I think the show is very subtle that way.

CV: *Punch Drunk* is subtler than earlier work. It's also more rhetorical I think. Somewhere around

1998 I got bored with just beating myself up. I wanted to do something different. I felt I had done it to death and I was looking for a more subtle form. I still can't let it go completely and the violence might be quicker, or shorter or subliminal or more subtle. But those relationships between men and women, relationships between women and women, and women in face of adversity, they are still all there. They will always be there and they will always inform my work because I am a woman and care about these things.

VT: You also care a lot about the community work that the company does. What community work have you done recently and why is it important to you?

CV: At the moment it ranges quite a bit. I had this whole programme of work that was funded by the lottery called *Germinate*. One of these programmes was working with skateboarders in Bridlington: young men who were excluded from school and drunk half the time. We taught them dance and movement to go with the skateboarding. We set up a load of ramps inside the Bridlington Ballroom, which is this amazing space, and did a performance for their friends and family. We also did a project led by me and a self-defence tutor that combined self-defence and bharata natyam for young Asian women in

Doncaster. I did a massive project in Sheffield with synchronised swimmers, divers, gymnasts and trampolinists where we made a 45 minute long performance. We had all the young divers diving in and we had some rope work coming down and we had the young kids doing synchronised swimming and nearly drowning (laughing). About 400 people showed up. The other project was the disability project that TC led and was about 'do disabled people go clubbing?' So you can see that I like to jam the most incongruous things together both in this work as well as in live performance work.

VT: Yes and it's great because it opens people's horizons and challenges them to see that dance can be so much more.

CV: Yes, yes, that incongruity is the strongest link. Most people are not stupid enough to try to try to jam self-defence for women with South Asian dance (laughter).

VT: But it is a way to get people to think about...

CV: different issues to do with social inclusion and opening up boundaries.

VT: That's what is happening in your own work with the company as well?

CV: In our work we are constantly trying to wrong-foot an audience by giving them something very funny and then undercutting it with something darker. Or giving something that has quite a personal meaning and then doing something completely and wildly abstract that has no meaning at all. I like the idea that we are pulling the rug from under the audience throughout the show several times. That is often the feedback we get: the audience didn't know how to feel or react. It was a roller coaster. I think *Punch Drunk* is very much like that. TC said something after the feedback session last night about the middle-aged woman that asked a question last night. She finds it reassuring that women of that age can talk about, articulate and feel so strongly about something that could potentially pass them by. They seem to totally understand it and she said it makes her less fearful about getting older because of this woman's open-mindedness. I hope for that open-

mindedness and that's why it's important to have audience development that isn't just about young people. I am just as interested in what that fifty-something woman said as what your students said. I think the work can stand up to a wide range of people; it can stand up to the intelligentsia, to a certain degree; it can stand up to the young 'happening' people, but also to people of my parents' age and there were a few silver haired gents in the audience and I thought that was great!

VT: That's what my colleague was mentioning last night – that there were a lot of older, dapper gentlemen in the audience last night.

CV: Yes (laughs) and right by the sound booth there were these elderly ladies, and when we were doing this routine (gestures to a musical hall dance-type routine) they were like 'ahhhhh'. It's like we tapped into this old world they had forgotten. I can't imagine a teacher told them to go to the show! I believe our work appeals across the ages because it has a devil-may-care attitude and it's slightly anarchic – it relates to eras people can either remember or have romantic attachment to or just enjoy the aesthetic of. It gives me a lot of satisfaction to see the range of people watching the work because I feel it is quite mixed. It isn't just providing work for the lowest common denominator. It isn't just populist entertainment. We are interested in the subtleties.

VT: So to sum up both your community work and the live performance work then...

CV: Well, it's a way to open people up to new possibilities, new combinations, whether they are old or young, or white or Asian, or male or female. I think exposure to different combinations of really incongruous stuff actually opens people's minds. And I think those interesting, challenging, perspective-changing things come when you don't give in to a convention and stick to your guns.

For more information on Vincent Dance Theatre visit www.vincentdt.com

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