

Breaking Down the Illusions of Dance

John Highfield, 21 October 2009

If Charlotte Vincent is looking a little tired that's because, as she admits, the past few weeks have been quite tough.

The development and rehearsal period for any Vincent Dance Theatre show is, she concedes, always a big challenge. But the lengthy creative process that went into new show *If We Go On* has perhaps been a greater drain than ever, maybe because it touches more than ever before on personal thoughts and issues and has challenged Charlotte to question her attitude to the world of dance and theatre, the very things on which her career has been based.

'This is not really a dance show,' she says quite bluntly – and when you've seen it you understand exactly what she means, for although the piece does feature music and movement, it also has big moments of dialogue and a pure theatricality that comes from the fact that Charlotte has collaborated not only with her regular team of performers but also with composer Alex Catona, writer Wendy Houstoun and dramaturg Ruth Ben-Tovim.

The result is something that in effect dismantles many of the things that an audience might expect of contemporary dance theatre, with a joke that could be at the expense of the performers – or the people watching them. And immediately you come to one of the biggest problems that Charlotte faced, the issue of whether a show that deconstructs contemporary dance would be perceived as in some way elitist.

'It wasn't my intention to make a show, the humour of which was only designed for dance people,' she insists. 'It's a fragile show because we play with all those notions of dance, we are questioning the form of dance within the show and by doing that we are making ourselves very vulnerable to the criticism that it is potentially self-indulgent.' 'A lot of dance is based on illusion and pretence and I wanted to strip away that pretence.'

What brings Charlotte to this point is surely as much to do with personal as professional life, the realisation that she is now past 40 and perhaps looking for new directions. Added to the mix was the realisation too that several of her regular company were also beginning to ask themselves similar questions. Janusz Orlik, for instance, although still only his 20s was beginning to question his commitment to dance, while musician and performer Patrycja Kujawska was suggesting that she was also looking for new creative challenges.

‘This piece is an exploration of all those ideas and what happens if you remove and question all those things you have been doing for so long,’ Charlotte says. ‘It’s also about losing things – and that was pretty personal for me. I think my work in the past has been solidly based on narrative or a theme or a personal disaster or an emotional catharsis but now I am trying to move in a very different way with this piece and that has resulted in a much more layered piece of work which interestingly enough reflects more of a state of mind than anything I’ve made in the past. By pulling back I have found something fragile and delicate that really requires the performers to understand every second of what they are doing and why within the work’.

All of this may have led to difficult and tense times in the rehearsal room, but the ultimate feeling seems to be that, by refusing to repeat herself, Charlotte has delivered something that really is different. ‘I’m really pleased with it as a show,’ she admits. ‘I think it is a strong and demanding piece of work – and I don’t usually say that about my own work. One of the things I really like is that there are moments in it where the audience is given moments to pause and reflect and a lot of contemporary dance doesn’t give you that. I’ve been told that we’ve been playing with fire with this production, that if we get it right and it works then it is moving but if the performance is difficult for whatever reason – and there have been performances like that – then it has the potential to fall flat on its face.’

The production tours Britain until the end of the year – it arrives at Sheffield’s Crucible on November 20 – and then next year joins previous show Broken Chords for performances in the USA and Canada.

And after that? Is it really possible that Charlotte might be thinking of taking a break? 'I've been doing this for 15 years and I am questioning why I continue to do what I do. I think this is an interesting piece but each time I make a middle scale production it really costs me something. I'm going to see how I feel but the intention is to hire a cottage somewhere and just hide and read all the books I haven't read and spend some time with my family and friends. The touring lifestyle means you lead an unstructured life. Even when you get home, you can't sit back for too long because you have to go away again – I think it may be time to recharge my batteries.'