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Vincent Dance Theatre

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Like another internationally renowned choreographer of dance theatre, Mathew Bourne, Charlotte Vincent didn't initially train in dance. She graduated from Sheffield University with a degree in English and Drama, yet now guests all over the world as a choreographer, collaborator and director of her own company - Vincent Dance Theatre. Her work has gathered an almost cult following over the past 14 years - largely owing to her bold experiments exploring and breaking the conventions of theatre and contemporary dance.

You call your company very specifically a dance theatre company, not just a dance company. Is this what differentiates you from other contemporary dance companies?

I think it's the work that differentiates us. When we perform, it is rarely using dance in isolation; it usually involves us engaging on stage with live music, or texts, or what some people might call "acting." We see performance as an all-round thing and our performances are usually grounded in some sort of reality.

Your website cites one of the companies' aims as "challenging conventional expectations of what dance can be." Could you explain this?

I think that dance as an art is often seen as being quite abstract and poetic - something that doesn't really include the dark underbelly of life, and focuses on form. Whilst we have a very clear structure and form, our work is more about the human side of representation - representing things that have meaning for us, as a company and for the people that come to see our work.

You say "we" and "us" a lot. Do you see your works as a collaborative effort?

Yes. The performers that I have worked with are all individual people and I try hard to bring out their individual voices. It is not that kind of company where everyone is a clone of the choreographer! I am very keen on audiences knowing something about those who are performing for them. I think that often dance doesn't seem to be about individuals, but about making these abstract shapes on the stage. My work is more about looking at the events I want to take place and finding a connection with the given landscape or environment.

So is the set a priority for you?

Yes. To me the set or environment is very important. Saying that, in this double bill the first piece, Test Run, is very deliberately set on an empty stage. There are a lot of jokes about how usually we work with more people and how normally there are big sets, and it is all very extravagant and visually interesting

etc. I wanted to see what would happen if we took all that away.

And what did happen?

What happened was that the impetus became about the interplay between the music and the dance, which is actually something I have been exploring for a long time.

What about your new work - Don't Look at Me Now Mummy?

Well, this is very much a theatre piece - there is no dance in it at all. It's very much physical comedy.

Where did the inspiration for this piece come from? In the past you have used your own personal experiences to shape your works, not least your own divorce for Broken Chords in 2006...

I think the inspiration for this is partly derived from me reaching forty and not having had children. As an artist we make choices - either to make babies or make art and although I have chosen to make art for quite a long time, I am beginning to think about the ideas of having or, at least, not having had children...

So what does the piece involve?

Well, I don't want to give too much away... It's set in a very messy kitchen and it deals with the woman attempting to get herself physically together to perform whilst being distracted by these ideas about children...If you strip it down it's primarily about presence and absence. It's about questioning whether you want to be on stage or not, whether you want to continue on along the same line in life...

It sounds as though you are revealing a more individualised side of the same questions you raised in your piece Punch Drunk in 2004 - about what it means to be a performer and to devote your life to the theatre?

Yes, I suppose. It's not as theatrical as Punch Drunk. It's equally as dark and as humorous in some ways, but it's not as extravagant. It's much more about someone lost in their own imagination really; someone trying to hold a certain frame together. **How important do you think the elements of humour are for these tragic pieces?**

I don't think you can have tragedy without humour or else you get too earnest. With every dark patch you have to shed some light on it and visa versa. Humour has in fact become quite a mainstay in the work that I make.

Is that because many of your pieces are based on tragic events or emotions?

Well, I am interested in the idea that in a performance we build up the audience, only to pull them down again. That's the thing about Don't Look at Me Now Mummy - it's very uncomfortable and you never know really whether you should be laughing at this woman or with her, or not at all.

So what is your main objective when you are creating a piece?

I like to lead the audience on an emotional journey. I am also always aware that it is a very human transaction going on between the audience and those people performing for them. I guess I am interested in questioning why we want to watch people and more importantly, why do we, as dancers, want to entertain people and jump around for them? I think it will take a lifetime of research to answer those questions, but I'm working on it.

And finally, if you were writing a history of 21st century dance 100 years down the line, what would you like to say your company had contributed?

Blimey, that's a big question! I think on the tombstone of the company it would say something like "they tried hard" or "they made us laugh", or perhaps, more importantly, "they moved us".

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