

# Charlotte Vincent

## Broken Chords

*The title alludes to bodies and spirits (as well as chords) being broken, no longer in working condition, not honoured or fulfilled, destroyed or badly hurt by grief or misfortune, split apart by separation.*

*The piece takes place amongst 120 wooden chairs, which through various formations represent the order, chaos and disorder that takes place when relationships fall apart.*

*Broken Chords* was conceived in late 2004, when I knew my marriage was in deep trouble, and made in late summer 2005 after a long, painful and very public separation. The work is full of momentary fusions, fragmentation and chaos. I nearly didn't make it. I nearly did not make it at all. Following my divorce, I fell into a deep depression. I stopped finding any kind of pleasure in life. I cried all the time. I couldn't sleep and I couldn't eat.

How to produce something at a time of depletion and distress? How to find a poetic lightness within all this dark? How to remain visible when the fundamental need is to disappear? How to avoid being swallowed up with fear? How to find a voice in a time of silence and suppressed emotions? How to start breathing again when you have not come up for air for months?

*Broken Chords* reflects a kind of schizophrenia that existed in me at the time. It is two pieces in one - a fictional, abstract dance that describes the dark side of love, loss and defeat, and a series of interruptions that attempt to save the work from its own self-indulgence. *Broken Chords* is a show within a show - the concept of the work is conjoined with the form and structure the piece takes. These parallel and contradictory strands go some way to describing the idea that the show must go on, at times in your life when the overwhelming desire is to stop. Many gestures are incomplete or imperfect - a visual representation of the way that separation is never really resolved, never tidy. In *Broken Chords* performers slide in and out of control, coming together and falling apart, revealing vulnerability as well as virtuosity, weakness as well as strength. The piece malfunctions and circles around itself. The dancers and musicians struggle to hold on to each other, and hold on to the work itself.

*Broken Chords* cannot shake off a sense of darkness and weight. It is not an angry piece. I wanted the work to reflect on the painful complexities of loss and loneliness with a certain kind of beauty. Amid the comic mayhem are

bouts of extended dance and an attempt to probe the anatomy of melancholy. The title alludes to bodies and spirits (as well as chords) being broken, no longer in working condition, not honoured or fulfilled, destroyed or badly hurt by grief or misfortune, split apart by separation. The piece takes place amongst 120 wooden chairs, which through various formations represent the order, chaos and disorder that takes place when relationships fall apart.

Making *Broken Chords* eight performers shared many stories about loss. We spent a lot of time crying together in the studio. When we started to work physically, the emotional weight of these stories was already manifest in the performers bodies. Our work is constructed through discussion and improvisation-based tasks that throw up fragments of ideas that become scenes through a process of rigorous distillation and rehearsal.

Physical, textual and emotional thoughts that initiated discussions and became the basis for many layered physical improvisation tasks in the making of *Broken Chords* were:

Falling off centre  
 Collisions  
 An anchor with someone being broken  
 Being washed up / washed out  
 Moments of suspense and suspended animation  
 Looking up, hoping  
 Falling off balance  
 Running at something over and over again  
 Relentless sadness  
 Being knocked back / Being knocked down - emotionally and physically  
 Drowning in tears  
 Drowning in lies  
 Drowning in fear  
 Slipping and sliding all over the place  
 Circling patterns

Releasing into someone  
 Releasing into something  
 Being lost in time and space  
 Sleepwalking through life  
 Emptiness  
 Being on the run  
 Being uncomfortable in your own skin  
 Defeat  
 Failure  
 Urgency  
 Instability  
 Trying to reach a person who is out of reach  
 Standing up for yourself  
 Saying what you feel  
 Being let down gently  
 Breathlessness  
 Stillness  
 Nothing fitting together any more

Starting over again

Counterpoints that I kept in mind when structuring the work were those of:

Music and Silence  
 Music and Movement  
 Movement and Stillness  
 Movement and Silence

We seemed to accept quite early on in the process of making *Broken Chords* the inherent limitations of dance as an art form, which allowed us to play with the form itself and make explicit certain questions within the work. What is the appropriate language to express myself at this time? How can I make this abstract language speak of deeply felt things? How can the work be abstract (i.e. non literal/non-rhetorical) without abstracting the people in it? What is the contract between the performers, the unseen director (whom the performers rebel against as they change the course of the intended show) and the audience? In *Broken Chords* performers slide in



Charlotte Vincent and Lee Clayden (Darren Anderson and Eleanor McDonald in the background) in *Broken Chords*. Photo: Hugo Glendinning

and out of the action. We make transparent things in the show that don't work as part of the show. We fragment the choreography as a metaphor for the fragmentation of a life. There is no narrative structure. We give space around the things that take place in the piece. We spend time watching and witnessing things taking place on stage, from within the work.

The work begins and ends with a dazed woman making her way blindly across the stage, metaphorically and physically struggling to stay on her own path and rediscover her own centre. As one of the performers put it "moving along the edges of a place with no middle, slowly, step by step, finding your way".

Making *Broken Chords* enabled me to reconnect with my art and somehow with

my life. I chose life. The piece is a tender reminder of art's ability to heal, reassure and connect us with the universal, and ultimately with a sense of hope. *Broken Chords* becomes a kind of song to the 'us' that had and could have been, but more importantly, a song to myself.

CHARLOTTE VINCENT (Britain) is a dancer, choreographer and artistic director of Vincent Dance Theatre, a company that produces devised dance theatre work, short films and video works and interactive installations. The company works as an ensemble and places great emphasis on the personal contributions, individual physicalities and cultural histories of the company members involved. VDT's ensemble encompasses dextrous practitioners, multi-skilled in dance, theatre performance, aerial work, mime, song, emotional commitment, and live instrumentation.