Naked Observation To End Festival On A High

Appeared in - The Australian

Paris Combo
Adelaide Cabaret Festival
Festival Theatre Stage
Adelaide Festival Centre
23 June until Saturday 26 June.

Private Dancer
Adelaide Cabaret Festival
Artspace, Adelaide Festival Centre
22 June until Saturday 26 June.

When you go to a show called Private Dancer what exactly might you expect? Dancer, performance artist, satirist and hostess, Wendy McPhee makes it very clear when she appears dressed only in a studded choker. But it is the audience which starts to feel naked as she rearranges the seating, dividing us on gender lines to remind us that blokes are still on Mars and women from Venus.

Private Dancer has a roulette wheel, sexist jokes, bashful audience participation, Karen Carpenter songs and interlews of video porn. At one point we are introduced to and asked to applaud Caresse, an inflatable sex doll. McPhee, with a snazzy smile and a surprisingly disarming manner, questions and skilfully reverses the rules of engagement in a show about the male gaze and the fuzzy line between private and public self. The discourse may be old hat but the performance (as Karen Finley and Annie Sprinkle have also shown us) is something else again.

Some bands are so uniformly accomplished that you don’t quite realise how good they are. There is something so effortless and breezy about Paris Combo’s infectious mix of chanson, gypsy swing, Latin and Manhattan jazz that their individual excellence is taken for granted. Opening with Ubique, singer and lyricist Belle du Berry is all intelligence and restrained charm. The tempo is set by Potzi’s flawless “Django” influenced guitar style, with Cuban accents from bassist Mana Razanajato, suave mute trumpet from Australian David Lewis and splendidly sympathetic drumming from Francois Jeanin.

The Combo originals are not well known to the crowd which warms anyway to Berry’s quirky manner as she moves from the upbeat Senor straight in to Pret a Porter. Berry, in ready to wear casual sweater and houndstooth slacks grooves to the music, her vocal work always subtle and in complete accord with the band as they deconstruct fairytale romance in the snappy latin rhythms of In the Arms of the Wolf and go over
the moon with Sous la Lune, a pensive ballad featuring a trumpet solo poignantly gurgling in a bowl of water.

After being captivated by the vivacious Micheline Van Houtem and her band Mich en Scene, the Cabaret Festival has to change gears for Paris Combo’s more eclectically cool style. But watching them sail through their CD title song, Living Room and the jaunty instrumental Moi, Mon Ame et Ma Conscience, it is clear that the festival is going to conclude on as high a note as it began.