

Soulful and slapstick across the divide

ONE of the dancers in *Two Faced Bastard* owns up to a "just for chaos" when asked how life and art interact. And chaos does indeed ensue as the seven performers toss around ideas — and themselves — in search of truths about the theatre.

It's not a terribly convincing answer to the questions being posed. *Two Faced Bastard* ends with a mad, exhausting free-for-all that could be a metaphor for the difficulty in creating something coherent, or perhaps suggesting that the creative process is fundamentally chaotic. In reality, though, it's a messy bit of staging that goes on too long and needs some surgery (as does a sagging, shouty section in the middle).

Two Faced Bastard operates on the principle that there are two sides to everything (well, probably: even that contention is briefly challenged). A performer has public and private faces, there are opposing arguments, mixed feelings and, for this work, alternate spaces that might be considered onstage and offstage.

The audience for *Two Faced Bastard* is divided in two, using nothing more calculated than the ticket-holder's place in the scrum as the doors open. The space is bisected by a fringed curtain and the action happens on both sides simultaneously.

The festival program blurb would have it that there are "two simultaneous shows", but that's nonsense. This is one show grappling for insights into duality.

PERFORMANCE

Two Faced Bastard

Created by Gideon Obarzanek and Lucy Guerin. Chunky Move, Arts House, Meat Market, Melbourne, October 9.

Kitten

Written and directed by Jenny Kemp. Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne, October 10. Tickets: \$49. Bookings: (03) 9685 5111. Ends October 25

The performers chat about whether artists exist without an audience, what they feel if people walk out of a show ("a mix of triumph and anger"), what certain movements might mean, whether it's necessary to please, if fun is a high enough goal and so on.

At one point audience members are given the opportunity to swap sides, giving them a choice, or at least the appearance of it. *Two Faced Bastard* is a bit slippery in this respect. I stayed put and think I got the best of it, which included a lovely, introspective solo from Stephanie Lake early on and another endearingly twitly one from Anthony Hamilton near the end. (I can't be 100 per cent sure that either side didn't get them at another point in the piece, but I think not.)

I was on the right side to hear virtually all the dialogue while seeing dance, and also for Vince Crowley and Lake's very sexy trio for them and a table. I happily missed the bulk of the slapstick battle in which the performers dressed in Styrofoam armour. I hope I'm not



Sexy moves: Stephanie Lake and Vincent Crowley

Picture: Andrew Tauber

being flippant here. Michelle Heaven really hates that in a critic, and the audience gave that insight a huge hand.

Despite its feel of still being a work in progress, *Two Faced Bastard* is full of life and often very funny as it engages strenuously with its audience. That is unfortunately not the case with Jenny Kemp's *Kitten*, which, although being billed as a soap opera, has nothing of that genre's ability to hook and keep its viewers enthralled.

A woman's husband has died and, in the grip of terrible grief, she goes mad and then recovers. Kemp dives the piece into three

parts and has three women — Natasha Herbert, Kate Kendall and Margaret Mills — simultaneously play the part of *Kitten*. The style shifts from poetic mindscape to manic comedy to unconvincing cabaret, much of it in language too self-conscious or, more fatally, too banal, to be remotely moving in what should be a heart-rending situation.

The one male character, played by Chris Connolly, is a cipher. On Friday night the four performers worked extremely hard to inject emotional truth into the piece, but the cause was as lost as *Kitten*'s husband. Deborah Lofes