

Paula Wilcox walks a tightrope between farce and embarrassment

“Woe is me, to have seen what I have seen,” wails actress Paula Wilcox, emerging from under a grubby duvet. I could have groaned the same words myself by the end of this bogglingly dire one-woman play, by contemporary German dramatist Gerfried Reinshagen.

Wilcox's character, Dora, is reciting Ophelia's lament about Hamlet's tragic decline, the speech reflecting Dora's own sad fall. You see, she used to be a great, too — a great actress, apparently. At least she keeps

distraughtly addressing some imaginary thesp called Arthur. He was formerly her leading man and lover, only that's all over now.

Without him, Dora has gone to the dogs. Her bedsit is strewn with beer cans, and she's rambling insanelly. Now and then she totters suicidally on the window sill. Reduced to rummaging in her costume-box

and dressing up as a clown, she begs an invisible circus artist for work as a tightrope walker. He ignores her, so she eventually has a wobbly go at it on her own.

The painful irony about this show is that you can't help thinking how the mighty (or at least the well known) have fallen, watching Wilcox herself. The ex-star of *Man about the House* may be back on the fringe out of an

Theatre
The Clowness
Gate Theatre, W11

undying passion for acting. However, it looks like desperation. This is a frightful play, execrably staged by Sabine Bauer for Ugly Duckling Theatre Company, supposedly specialists in European drama.

In terms of its structure, Reinshagen's monologue is hopelessly garbled. Dora puts on numerous voices, playing characters you struggle to identify, from Heinrich von Kleist's Amazonian heroine Penthesilea (possibly) Emily Brontë. Don't ask me why — something to do with women's weakness for, or independence from, men, I think.

Bauer's translation is absurdly stilted and poetically strained. In one particularly desperate moment Dora prays to God thus: “Doddery old git,” she cries, “Give me a whale's skin!”

Physically, Wilcox looks stunning. Boyishly slim with those big eyes, arched brows and perfect skin, she could still be 20. Unfortunately her performance makes one think of a doomed

audition piece by a drama-school applicant. There's no punctuation between the different characters. Her displays of grief — falling to her knees, clutching chairs — make your toes curl with embarrassment.

I'm afraid the only time I really shared Dora's feelings was when she failed to hang herself and screamed long and loud with annoyance, realising the show must go on.

Tickets: 0171 229 0706

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