

Don't leave Dolls on shelf

Boston duo Dresden Dolls bring 'punk cabaret' to life

By ALAN SCULLEY
for The Columbian

When the Lollapalooza tour was canceled this summer, one of the bigger casualties would seem to have been the Dresden Dolls.

For an emerging act like the Dresden Dolls, Lollapalooza promised to be quite a coming out party — a chance each day for the Boston-based duo to play in front of thousands of people who otherwise might never be introduced to the group's dynamic live show.

Pianist/singer Amanda Palmer and drummer Brian Viglione were even planning to have several performance artists join in the festivities, as opposed to their usual headlining acts at Lollapalooza.

Palmer, though, said she wasn't as crushed as one might expect by the cancellation due to poor advance ticket sales.

"We were not as disappointed ... because our schedule at that moment when we found out was starting to look so daunting," Palmer said. "Knowing that we were just going to have a few more extra weeks off was actually, it seemed like a real blessing in disguise."

What's more, Palmer and Viglione have carried on with the idea of having other artists join them by inviting



own right, the Dresden Dolls needs to be experienced live to appreciate the full impact of its artistry.

Palmer and Viglione call the Dresden Dolls experience a "Brechtian punk cabaret." It's an apt description for a sound that fuses the German musical theater of Bertolt Brecht and his songwriting partner, Kurt Weill, with the punk sound of artists like Patti Smith and the Violent Femmes and the dramatic piano-based pop of Tori Amos.

What the CD doesn't prepare audiences for is the visual/theatrical facet of the Dresden Dolls. The effect begins with stage attire that includes painted faces and eye-catching costumes. The look complements a theatrical and raucous performance style that finds Palmer and Viglione completely immersed in the emotional power of their music.

As lyricist and chief songwriter, Palmer is very much at the center of the Dresden Dolls sound. Her offbeat, emotionally charged lyrics range from humorous to heartbroken to sinister. She muses about the advantages of having a mechanized lover in the should-be hit single "Coin Operated Boy" and in darkly comedic style reels off a slew of character flaws and mental conditions in the frenzied "Girl Anachronism."

At other times, Palmer can be tender and sad, as on the divorce tune "Truce," or visit dark and dangerous emotions, as on the song "Slide" or "Missed Me."

Palmer's vivid musical imagination makes sense, considering a background that saw her compose her first musical at age 10. She acted in and even wrote and directed theatrical productions in high school and college.

But Palmer, 28, said she always knew that music — not theater — would be what she did for a career.

"It's almost like asking a woman why she wants to get married and have children," Palmer said, trying to explain her passion for music. "I was just a 10-year-old, like so many other girls, saying 'That's what I'm going to do.' I'm going to be Cyndi Lauper. That's what I'm going to do when I grow up — except that I really took it seriously."

TURNING POINT

The turning point for Palmer came at a Halloween party at a friend's home in 2000. Palmer was playing solo that night, and one of the attendees was the jazz-schooled Viglione, who had been invited to the party by a friend.

After watching Palmer's typically impassioned performance, Viglione told Palmer they needed to play together. They agreed to get together for a jam session, and the chemistry, Palmer said, was instantaneous.

"He, for better or for worse, is an insanely sensitive and passionate person, and that's really reflected in his playing," Palmer said. "It could be no other way for the kind of songs that I write. And I had already gone through the experience of playing with a drummer who was just sort of a vanilla kind of, 'How about kind of a funk groove for this song?' It had to be someone who was going to feel the music as deeply as I was going to feel it, otherwise it wasn't going to work. The minute I saw him play, I knew that was going to happen."

GOOD LISTENER

"The other thing is that you can have people who play that passionately and that intensely, but they really don't listen," she added. "They get so involved

and so wrapped up in their own catharsis and their own pounding, that they stop listening. And Brian is the polar opposite. He listens with an intensity that's almost other-worldly and has this second sense of what's about to happen and where I'm going. He totally follows and stops and starts exactly where he needs to, and it's because, like the greatest jazz musicians, he knows how to play with other people."

The duo built an early following around Boston playing galleries, lofts and salons. Their now-signature costumes joined the act along the way after they played on a bill with a burlesque troupe and decided to wear costumes to get into the spirit of the evening.

"It was just one of those things that worked so well that we kept it," Palmer said. "There was never really a discussion about it. Just dress up again next week."

By 2003, the Dresden Dolls had become one of Boston's most popular and lauded acts, winning the WBCN Rock n' Roll Rumble in May of that year and self-releasing a debut CD that September.

National notice has followed extensive touring over the past year and rave reviews for both the self-titled CD and the live show.

For her part, Palmer is pleased that audiences have been responding to the Dresden Dolls' very visual style of performance.

"To be honest, I think people were very excited by the idea of performers really committing to being performers, because the trend lately ... the stage shows have been very drab, which for certain genres of music could be no other way," she said.

Still, Palmer says the showmanship that is the Dresden Dolls' hallmark is coming back, if slowly.

"Costumes and makeup and rock and roll are never going to not go hand in hand," she said.