

Clowns with attitude

Pure showmanship characterises American duo the Dresden Dolls. Naomi Watts meets a pair 'in total rock love'

For a considerable number of rock outfits, to be described as theatrical would be considered a slur. But for the Boston duo the Dresden Dolls – pianist/vocalist Amanda Palmer and drummer Brian Viglione – it is both an inevitable and a desirable label.

"We're total hams," admits Viglione without shame – as anyone who has witnessed their live performances of "Brechtian punk cabaret" can also testify. With their faces pansticked white, and wearing a clown-ish monochrome motley, the pair sit side-by-side onstage to play their frenzied, witty, lusty songs. Palmer pounds the keys, her upper lip in a permanent curl, and her striped-stockinged legs jerking like a malfunctioning clockwork toy, while Viglione mugs incessantly from under a pulled-down bowler hat.

It almost goes without saying that this is a band thrillingly at odds with every dominant rock trend. Not only do they display a surfeit of showmanship, but Palmer's lyrics also fairly drip with acerbity and female rage (which is never fashionable).

On past single *Girl Anachronism* (from their self-titled debut album), her voice rises to a full-throated roar, "Behold the world's worst accident: I AM THE GIRL ANACHRONISM!"

One sweaty morning in June, Viglione and Palmer disembark from their tour bus outside London's Festival Hall. Palmer's intricately-drawn eyebrows are already inked on and Viglione sports his bowler hat and smudged eyeliner with an Iron Maiden T-shirt. They have been travelling through the night from Paris, where they played their final date on a lengthy US and European tour supporting Nine Inch Nails, Trent Reznor's industrial rock band. Although they were hand-picked by Reznor, they had prepared



At odds: with their white make-up and clownish routines, the Dresden Dolls defy rock-band conventions

‘We had people hugging each other, slapping high fives’

themselves for a hostile reception from NIN's uncompromising fans:

"When the tour was announced, I would lurk on the internet watching the NIN message boards," says Palmer. "It was all – 'The Dresden Dolls are f***ing gay mimes. This is going to totally suck.'"

Viglione continues: "But we watched them fall, city by city. By

the last dates we had people hugging each other, slapping high fives."

The band were in London when I met them, having been hand-picked once more, this time by Patti Smith for her *Meltdown* Festival, to contribute two numbers to the evening's homage to Bertolt Brecht. Walking through the warren of corridors backstage to locate

their dressing room, Palmer lovingly strokes some of the pieces of A4 taped to the other dressing-room doors, bearing the names of fellow performers – the New York-based songwriter Antony (who is a friend from underground theatre days), Marc Almond, and fellow piano-driven act Sparks.

Palmer and Viglione met in 2000 at Palmer's Halloween party. "She played six songs solo for the guests. Afterwards, trying to contain myself, I approached her and said would you like to get together and play sometime." At the resulting jam session, Palmer says, they "fell in total rock love".

They certainly have a very particular super-interactive chemistry, with both acting, to an extent, as front person. "We don't just play outwards. We are actually playing with each other, and to each other."

They are impressive and instinctive musicians, both having grown up with their instruments. Viglione, whose father is also a drummer, passed many teenage hours playing along to his homemade heavy metal mix tapes. Palmer, too, learned by ear – attempts to buy piano lessons foundered (her first teacher she disliked and another, later on, liked her too much).

Later this month, they are back in the UK for the Leeds/Reading Festival and a handful of Scottish dates, including one on the Edinburgh Fringe, a context that could come close to a natural habitat for the Dresden Dolls.

Until the band took off, Palmer was extensively involved in experimental theatre as a playwright and director (her last production, *Hotel Blanc*, staged in 2002, was "about the effect of the Holocaust on three generations"). Not only that, she is a hardened street performer – she supported herself "on and off" for five years as a living statue.

"I was the Eight Foot Bride. I'd stand on a pedestal painted white and holding a big bouquet of flowers. Anyone who put money in would get a little flower."

"The stories I have could fill a book. There was a woman in Providence who told me she had been on her way to commit suicide when she saw me and changed her mind. I thought, 'I can retire now'."

The Dresden Dolls will play *T* on the Fringe on August 24. *The Dresden Dolls' (Roadrunner)* is available now. www.dresdendolls.com