

Larrikins take to cabaret

**Dilapidated Diva, Barbarella, John Rodgers,
Brisbane Cabaret Festival
Brisbane Powerhouse, May 22
Reviewer: James Harper**

THE *Dilapidated Diva* had the audience at the triple-bill Visy Theatre gig shrieking in horrified fascination.

The Diva (Emma Bathgate) takes the conventions of cheesy Vegas-style showbiz, turns them inside out, and spits them into a bucket. It's easy to see why she has been described as Australia's most "cutting edge" cabaret performer. What is cutting edge to some can seem like over-the-top to others, although it would be hard not to go over the top, trying to send up something that's utterly excessive to start with.

For me, there was too much striving for impact. There's something in cabaret that requires that the central art form — singing, in this case — be good enough to stand on its own, even if the song is being sent up rotten. The Diva has a voice to do the job, but the act suffered because singing was a means to an effect rather than the core business.

There was elegant posing and not much else to Cabaret Salon's (Vashti Hughes and Imogen Kelly's) *Barbarella* for fans of 1960s dolly-bird, sci-fi kitsch. A slim idea was stretched beyond its limits.

Things leapt to a completely different level of sophistication with *The Ultimate Prize*, *The John Rodgers Show*.

Rodgers is best known for his uncompromising composition and performance for "serious" contemporary ensembles such as Elision and the Australian Art Orchestra. However, I don't see why he and his *Ultimate Prize* co-conspirators, singers Leah Cotterell, Andy MacDonnell, Pearly Black and Megan Sarmardin, shouldn't take the cabaret world by storm, should they choose to take the show further.

The group's collective sense of timing, and feel for just the right amount of larrikin stage business, kept things flowing, as did the powerful backing trio of Helen Russell (bass), Jamie Clark (guitar) and John Parker (drums). Youngest performer Sarmardin stood out.