

A gnomish figure, head and arms atop a tiny sackcloth body, pops out from behind hospital-bed curtains, as if they were the drapes of a fairground sideshow. His spiel is comic, vulgar, bullish. But, making a display of his refined side, he is moved to scribble down a poem – until he reaches the line ‘my mother and father are dead’, when he breaks into exaggerated sobs, blows his nose with gusto on the notebook, and rips it to shreds.

Set in a hospital ward, Jasmin Vardimon’s Lullaby is dedicated to the memory of her father, Nadav. But Lullaby is neither romantic nor comforting: like its pithy opening, it is fuelled by a burning black humour, sometimes icily clinical, sometimes stoked with aggression and rage. It hinges on a double vision: illness as alien invader, or as integral to the self. The body is its battleground. A doctor (Gavin Rees), thwacks his demure assistant nurse (Mafalda Deville) with a pillow, explaining that the patient’s body is under attack. She is goaded into counter-attack, the lecture-demonstration developing into escalating rounds of a fight club. Later, Rees manhandles the corpse of Kath Duggan in a one-sided duet that shades from mawkish cradling to necrophiliac fondling. Where Duggan’s body sags and flops, Vardimon’s own turn as a brittle mechanical doll evinces a different kind of lifelessness: her synthetic tics conceal no depth, her plastic heart, pinned to her coat, pulses like a cardiograph.

The choreography is physically risky, sometimes bruisingly so, and often refreshingly inventive. Hofesh Shechter dances a solo of opposing impulses, arms blocking each other, torso twisted against the ungainly swing of his legs. Duggan is especially impressive, gangling twitches and jerks sending her body into arrhythmic spasms, to spot-on comic effect. Vardimon can be pat – three women hula-dancing with skirts at half-mast, jiggling their builder’s cleavages. But her use of props is inspired: a quartet twirls their Zimmer frames as easily as if they were majorettes’ batons; Shechter, a blithely nonchalant interviewer, drums and scrapes his microphone against Rees’s body to generate a funky electronic tattoo. With its multimedia theatrics – movement, film, speech and sound – and its constant shifts of tone and pace, Lullaby is a sprawling, ambitious work that is inevitably patchy in places. And though it is certainly overlong, losing some focus in the second half, it also contains some of the best physical theatre currently on show.