



Bernie Ng

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Frontier Danceland's "Milieu" 2018: Emotional Rollercoasters

By [Winnie Chen Dixon](#) | December 10, 2018 | 5 minutes of reading

It was a night of emotional rollercoasters and an audio-visual feast at Frontier Danceland's double bill *Milieu 2018*. Two original works – *The Whole She-Bang* by Deborah Nightingale and *Dimensions of Dialogue* by Sascia Pellegrini – left the eyes and ears satisfied, but not quite the brain.

The Whole She-Bang

Hopscotch and PE class: the piece opens with snapshots of childhood and school life. As the music tenses up, the little people become adults, entering and exiting the revolving doors of the corporate



world – salaried employees glued to computer screens and keyboards. Stressed and torn mentally, they wrestle with their alter egos through a long and arduous journey of reconciliation. One particular pair stood out and metamorphosed into a couple – the self and the better half, finally uniting to give birth to a new life. The baby stares at the starry sky with eager hope for a better tomorrow. These rites of passage depict the circle of life; step by step, the logic is clear.

Keigo Nozaki is brilliant in his jumps – long and high. For a second, he seems weightless, floating free in the air. Samantha and Adele deliver a flawless duet filled with energy and tension in the struggle between the self and alter ego.

However, it came as a surprise when I learnt the piece is about “the female explosion happening right now around the world”. #MeToo perhaps? Or Ricky Martin’s Spanish hit? Whichever the inspiration, the moves don’t appear to be gender-specific, nor the message pointing towards feminism.



Photo: Bernie Ng

With a BA (Hons) in Drama, Nightingale is well equipped to create stories. Based on her two years of research into psychology, the piece investigates various archetypes like Mother Earth, the Trickster, as well as abstract concepts like the four Classical Elements, Higher Realms, and Underworld. Philosophical topics for sure, but the question becomes whether a 24-min production offers enough time and space to convey all these complex ideas. It seems daunting enough to respond to a global movement alone. Is it realistic to cover all these abstract concepts in addition? Even William Forsythe – widely applauded for his intellectual rigor and often citing philosophers in program notes, may find it a challenge. The piece seems over ambitious and the choreographer might have bit off more than she could chew. After all, the contemporary genre relieves the stress for dancers to be physically en point, so the responsibility now shifts to the choreographer to be intellectually en point.



Dimensions of Dialogue

It is the drumsticks – and the way Pellegrini plays them. It is self-evident the piece was created by a choreographer with solid musical background. The soundscape is sophisticated, encompassing multiple layers of background music, noises made by dancers and musical instruments. A singing bowl and a Chinese cymbal each occupy a corner of the stage, and Pellegrini creates rhythms with vibraphone mallets, gong mallet and bamboo sticks. The sticks then travel to every possible surface from the floor to the dancers' heads, arms, torsos and feet – each with different muscle composition, resulting in varied sound textures. The dancers join the “orchestra” by tapping and stomping their feet, clapping and even banging their whole bodies on the floor.



Photo: Bernie Ng

As they gather, disperse and run around the stage, the ensemble portrays a tableau vivant as if pulled from a painting. The graphic quality is superb thanks to the animated geometry and rich visual symbolism.

The work presents a fine piece of audio-visual integration that explores the deep relationship between motion and sound. The pianist-percussionist is versatile, regularly developing choreography and visual works with multi-media artists. Pellegrini's passion for experimentation and talent for integrating various art forms are well reflected in this piece.

The eyes and ears have thoroughly enjoyed the feast, yet why does the brain somehow feel hungry? The movements were mostly improvised. Such game-like nature bears the risk of a less than potent message which seems to be the case with this production. Nevertheless, Faye Tan is impeccable in her brief solo. Also, the lighting is minimalist yet effective. But what good of great music, technique and lighting, if not



governed by a solid idea? The message behind the piece, much like the foundation to a skyscraper, lacks depth and substance.

As the title suggests, *Milieu* is about surroundings, especially of a social or cultural nature. The first piece attempts to respond to a current social movement, but does not succeed to a great extent. The second displays little intention to even do so. How can contemporary dance win the recognition it deserves without making itself relevant to the larger social context?

To be fair, both pieces were only allowed 3-4 weeks to hatch; no wonder the productions feel half-baked. Funding simply does not grant more time for the works to mature. If this continues, contemporary dance will only perpetuate the vicious cycle of churning out poor quality works – lots of them. While it is investment principle 101 to not put all the eggs in one basket, does this justify the sporadic, idiosyncratic, fragmented funding scheme for contemporary dance? It remains a priority question for the entire ecosystem to ponder, especially policy makers and corporate sponsors.

Milieu by Frontier Danceland ran from 9 – 10 November 2018 at Esplanade Theatre Studio. More information [here](#). This review is based on the performance on 9 Nov 2018.

Having studied arts criticism in Hong Kong and arts management in Italy, she now specialises in dance reviews. Her works are well published in the International Association of Theatre Critics, Hong Kong Dance Journal and various mainstream media.

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Winnie Chen Dixon is a corporate marketer by day, and multi-disciplinary artist by night. A trained keyboard player, she enjoys a variety of art forms: drama, dance, drawing and photography. Such versatility cultivated her passion for integrated arts: Winnie believes in the integration between art forms because they are inherently connected, and serve the same mission of educating and inspiring people. Having studied arts criticism in Hong Kong and arts management in Italy, she now specialises in dance reviews. Her works are published in the International Association of Theatre Critics, Hong Kong Dance Journal and various mainstream media.

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