



# FiveLines

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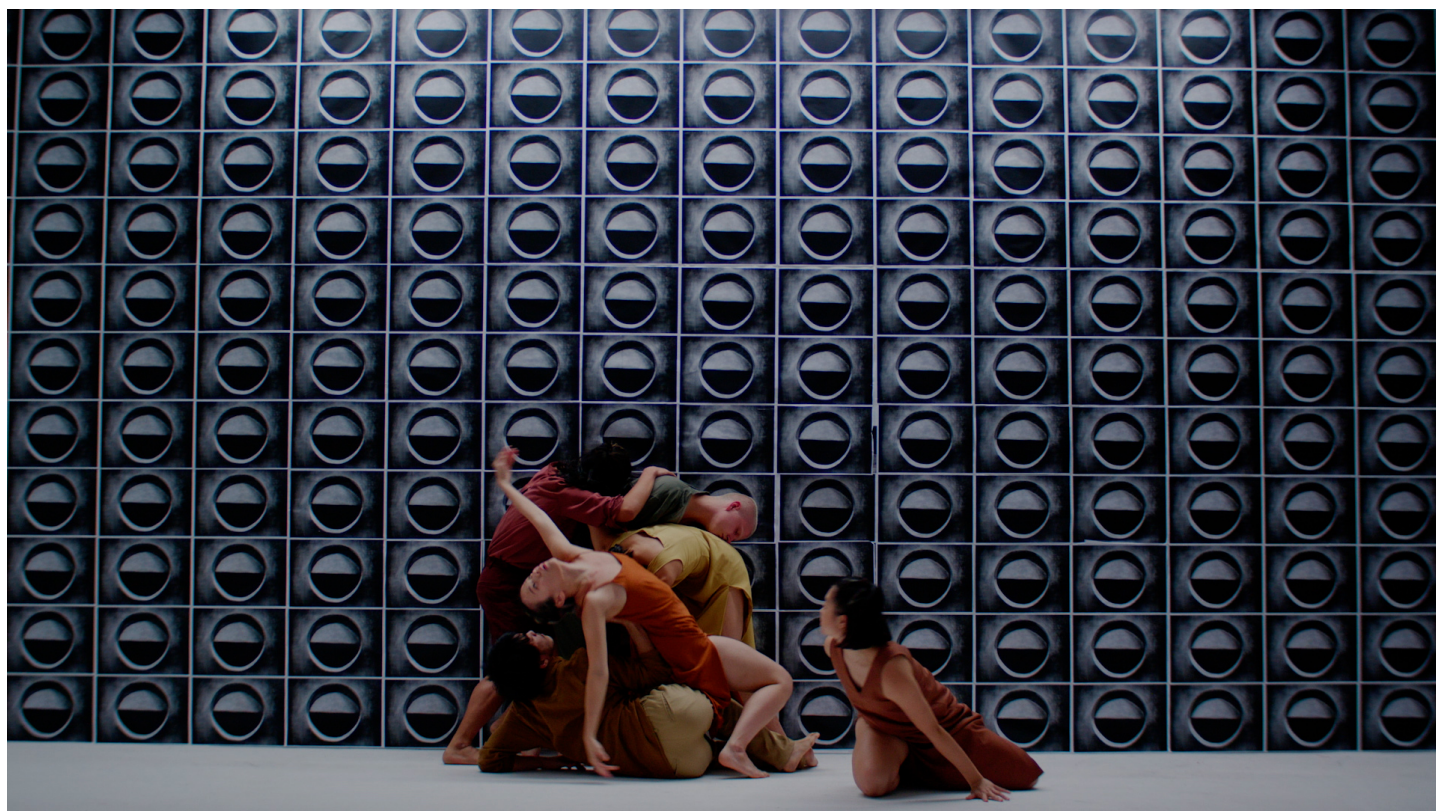
CONTEMPORARY DANCE SINGAPORE

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## SIDES: A close-up look at sentiment and trauma

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Images provided by Frontier Danceland

Undeterred by the global pandemic, local dance company Frontier Danceland presented a digital double bill of their annual production SIDES which featured the works: *B( ).I( ).O( )* by Zhuo Zihao, and *Apple Diary* by Chiew Peishan.

COVID-19 has resulted in much introspection around the world. Zhuo put sentiment under a microscope while Chiew dived into past trauma and mused over her agency to speak out when silenced. Both films take on very different approaches: Zhuo's entire piece was located in a blackbox setting and feels like a staged work that has been translated into a film while Chiew's film occurred often outdoors, with what feels like an autobiographical film diary that recounts traumatic episodes in the protagonist's life.

*B( ).I( ).O( )* began with dancer Ma YueRu dressed in a lab coat and peeking into a microscopic world of sentiment – one filled with a sense of disorientation and confusion. Throughout the entire film, we see jerky camera work, distorted effects, a single take around the stage, multiple scene changes to close ups and wide views.

Dressed in a long coat coupled with sunglasses, feather boa and holding a carrot as a microphone, Mark Robles's satirical performance of a diva superstar questions if what dancers do really matter? Filled with self-aggrandisement, Robles makes sure his (male) backup dancers do not show their faces as their purpose is to hype up the energy and make him look good. Dancers as a mere tool of a puppet master and the question of agency, particularly the female body's agency, is further explored when Sammantha Yue lay limp, while the men shifted her body about. They raised up her limbs, shook them, combed her hair, shifted her body to stand up, maneuvered her to walk then laid back onto the floor again. All these happened while Yue maintained a dead, dissociated look in her eyes. In reference to how often dancers are subjected to the whims and fancies of choreographers and artistic directors, the silent puppets in their creations; the questions about power dynamics are hard to ignore. The themes of agency, control and the potential for abuse of power are also explored in *Apple Diary*.



In *Apple Diary*, we see Keigo Nozaki (seen above, in *B( ).I( ).O( )* by Zhuo Zihao) as the power-wielding authoritative figure. As he stood on the purple box, the other dancers gathered swiftly around him, each executing the same precise actions. In cult-like fashion, a single simple gesture made by Nozaki resulted in the dancers standing up, punching their fists in the air then laying back down on the floor. The dancers were kept on their toes and responded promptly to each of his cues. Like a circus master distributing wages, Nozaki held up a bag of apples and individually handed one to each

of the dancers. The dancers all watched in eager anticipation. When it reached Tan's turn however, the apple was held towards her throat and she was forced to retreat backwards, stumbling over the purple box and the scene cut to her falling through a dark abyss.

Dealing with psychological abuse and mental health issues is challenging, partly because finding the words to articulate the harm experienced is often arduous. And perhaps that's where the power of *Apple Diary* lies – in place of words, we see striking imagery that captures a sense of what living with trauma can feel like. In a tub filled with apples, Tan is silenced by an apple in her mouth, and suffocated with a plastic bag over her head. This scene is interspersed throughout the rest of the film, haunting the viewer.

The isolation often faced by victims of workplace bullying is also felt in the film. While the other dancers were laughing away and having a picnic of apples, the abuse happened right in front of them, hidden behind blinds. Tan, with an apple in her mouth, was seated across the table from Nozaki. Tan traced the edges of the table with a single finger as if trying to carefully toe the line, afraid to make any misstep. The submission in her hunched posture conveyed a feeling of having to walk on eggshells around an abusive boss in a toxic work environment. Nozaki repeatedly blocked her off, preventing her from continuing on the path she traced. Often, these actions were executed with an air of indifference, an emotionally abusive silent treatment — his back turned, his leg raised onto the table, his head in his hand.

Recounting past trauma through dance perhaps offers the artist space to cope. Peeling back the semi-circular tiled walls, we see images of many different apples – apples that have been bitten into, bruised and chewed up apple cores. This powerful visual embodies the devastating effects of emotional abuse – a person may appear fine on the outside but are badly bruised in the core. Surely Chiew is not alone in living with trauma, and her courage to confront her past might empower other victims to do so too.

**SIDES by Frontier Danceland premiered online from 29 Jan – 6 Feb 2021.**

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