

★★★★☆ Review: Dancers' Locker 2021 – Elemental Beings by Frontier Danceland



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(<https://bakchormeeboy.files.wordpress.com/2021/05/screenshot-2021-05-13-at-9.31.57-am.png>)

Rebuilding the world as a community in this intimate, introspective work.

In the midst of a pandemic, it can be all too easy to hit the panic button and think only for ourselves. We've seen that happen in the mass panic buying that takes place at supermarkets – it's often a case of every man for himself, and survival of the fittest.

Frontier Danceland however, think otherwise, as expressed in the latest edition of their Dancers' Locker programme. Co-created by company dancers Sammantha Yue, Ma Yueru, Tan Xin Yen and Mark Robles, *Elemental Beings* sees the dancers exploring what it means to remain connected in a crisis, find community in others, and rediscover the confidence in one's self to boldly move forth in a brave new world.



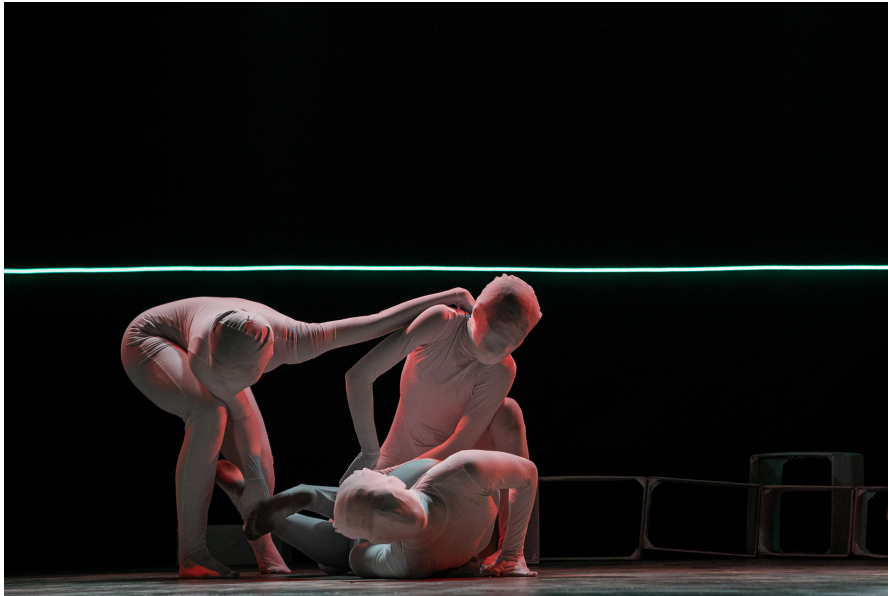
Due to the Heightened Alert measures, each show was limited to just ten audience members. Seated on cushions on the floor, we could see city-like 'structures', a spotlight shining down on us while Omar Khalife's soundscape reverberates around us, it almost feels like we are the ones under scrutiny, as we take in our surroundings and immerse ourselves in the space. Furthermore, seated on the floor on cushions, we are given the freedom to 'move' around in our seats to observe all that is going on around us and take it all in.



Liu Yong Huay Faith's lighting design is key to this production, clearly directing our attention to each scene's focal point, such as the performance's opening. The wall behind us is illuminated, and we watch bodies projected onscreen, appearing as black silhouettes against the light. One was reminded of Indonesian wayang kulit performances, and as they writhed and struggled, these figures almost appeared to be souls attempting to break free from their physical shells, perhaps from suffering some kind of natural disaster.



As the lights fade out, we shifted our attention back to the front of the space, where two figures in white full body suits enter the space. Covering their entire bodies, their identities ambiguous, facial features blocked, and even their gender a mystery to us. One sees them as a blank canvas, two individuals given a chance to start anew in this new world, yet, they are afraid to show off their true selves, almost blending into the background, as if trying to hide away from us and hiding behind their 'masks'. There is something alien about them, and it evokes fear in us from not knowing their true intents. Both dancers are also bound to each other by a rope, their movements restricted, as if they are helpless and infantilised, and unable to survive unless someone else helps them out in this new reality.



Khalife's score becomes more frenetic, and the second set of dancers arrives, similarly dressed in full body suits, but wild and animal-like, with no rope holding them back as they explore the dystopian world before them. Suddenly, one of the structures around us is brought down and destroyed, as the two dancers separate from each other, selfishly looking out for themselves as they wander off, just wanting to be the best and stand out on their own. It is all too easy to let our pride and greed get the better of us, and before we know it, society itself may face literal collapse.



But no man is an island, and with this performance, *Elemental Beings* hammers home the importance of bonding and interpersonal relationships, as the four dancers finally come together as a group. The lights go out, and a steady drumbeat almost "forces" them to move together in tandem. As a group, they now seem less lost, and more hopeful, braver than before. Illuminated by spotlights, they each begin to feel their own bodies, sensually and more in tune with themselves, and comfortable in their own skin than ever before. By possessing the confidence and freedom to express themselves, and emboldened by their newfound community, they are ready to face the challenges of this new normal they now live in together.



Even as the cacophonous music begins to get louder, and repeats over and over, the dancers remain undeterred and press on. Eventually, the music goes quiet, and it seems the storm is finally over. Tentatively, one dancer begins to reassemble the structure that was knocked down, and starts the process of restoring what was lost in the chaos. Images of the universe are projected onto the dancers' white suits, reminding us how they all belong to the same world, connected to each other even if they appear different. One dancer pushes a large structure to the middle of the stage, and it seems the dancers are learning to work together to survive as one, growing together and rebuilding their fallen city to venture forth into the great unknown as one species, unafraid of any obstacles.

As a viewer, there is the utmost respect for these dancers, as they perform such choreography wearing both bodysuits and masks. It's no mean feat, but in spite of such adversity, they push on and push through, determined to show off the work they've rehearsed so hard for, and ensure it is both seen and heard. This is what being in the arts scene is all about: to put one's best foot forward even with such limiting circumstances, and to put on a good show for all those present. And much like how in the performance, they move and work as one community to navigate their new normal and rebuild their world, it seems that we too can do the same with our arts scene in the wake of a pandemic, one step at a time, together as one.

Photo Credit: Justin Koh

Dancers' Locker 2021 ran from 3rd to 5th June 2021 at Aliwal Arts Centre. More information available [here](http://www.singaporedancetheatre.com/performance/madel/) (<http://www.singaporedancetheatre.com/performance/madel/>).

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