



# FiveLines

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## A Ritualistic Rave: Unlocking Frontiers of Being and Time

*written by Dominic Nah*     July 1, 2021



Photo Credit: Bernie Ng

In previous iterations of Dancers' Locker by Frontier Danceland, company dancers made individual proposals to pursue choreographic and conceptual explorations, resulting in a combined showcase. In this year's edition, all four current company dancers (Sammantha Yue, Mark Robles, Ma YueRu and Tan Xin Yen) co-choreographed and collaborated on *Elemental Beings*. Along with Ecuadorean music composer Omar Khalife's summoning soundscape and local lighting designer Liu Yong Huay Faith's haunting vision, the live performance transformed the Aliwal Arts Centre Multi-Purpose Hall into a ritualistic rave, immersing audiences in a journey through being and time – searching for new frontiers of encountering and experiencing the self.

Upon entry, we were greeted with a cuboid sea of scattered white boxes. A single, asymmetrical tower stood upstage right. Here, Omar's and Faith's lighting and sound design established the later states of rapture in the dancing. Vertical strips of LED lights lining the walls and idyllic sounds framed the opening of the piece with prelapsarian and mythological echoes. I felt as if I had been ushered into a sacred chamber: the 3-metre safe distancing restrictions and staggered audience seating seamlessly integrated into the world of the performance.

Having settled atop our cushions and portable raised platforms, a grainy orange projection began illuminating our backs. The spillage of light invited us to turn around and orient ourselves to a 360° viewing experience. Against sunset hues and a gravelly texture, composites of torsos and limbs began emerging first as a mound, and later more fully upright. The silhouettes of two bodies contorting in shadow projection conjured ancient forms of storytelling and myths: Indonesian *wayang kulit*; cave paintings; ancient Greek pottery paintings; Plato's Cave; Aristophanes' creation myth of the two bodies as missing halves of each other. I wondered: would my focus on interpreting these cultural and historical references result in over-intellectualising my viewing experience?

This luminous echo of creation myths was then contrasted and complemented by the arrival of live bodies entering the stage. A coursing orange horizontal LED line, a cold blue wash of light, and a lone hanging bulb, downstage left, ushered in the first duet – two bodies bound by string, carrying over the earlier motif of bodies being bound together. Through the pair's alternating tautening and loosening of their torso and limbs, they conjured a lingering sense of unease which seemed to be taken up in the second duet, who emerged in largely quadrupedal and floor-facing stances. A spasmodic and writhing quality began to materialise. The self tied to another: the entanglements teetered between conflict and coexistence.



Photo Credit: Justin Koh

Thus began the ritualistic rave. Omar's soundscape shifted into a liquid-like bass in overdrive and a thumping syncopated beat – which quickly grew dissonant as two beats started interfering with one another. For the first time, the bodies interact with the surrounding white boxes. They provided purposeful interactions when each performer moved away from their interpersonal encounters and ventured into their individual explorations. One crawls in reverse from an orange-lit box; another yokes boxes into a linear apparatus on the fringes by the audience; one constructs a

tower of boxes while blocked by another who threatens to usurp control. I could not quite resolve whether the performers considered themselves as hybrid beings and composites with the boxes? Or did the boxes serve as external stimuli to interact against? For even as the colour scheme invited the viewer to associate them as one, the inanimate structures needed to be acted upon, as if in service of the individual's search for inner transcendence.

At one juncture, a fourth dancer moves away into the sidelines while the remaining trio venture centre-stage. Omar's cavernous suspense of dark echoes fills the central arena, now awash in red. On the fringes, separated in their own world of exploration and oblivious to the trio of tension, I am drawn to this retreat of the self from the forces and manipulations of others. But this aside seems short-lived. As soon as the fourth dancer re-enters the fray, an ensemble movement ensues, as if the demand of dealing with others proves too strong to resist.



*Photo Credit: Bernie Ng*

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I am particularly struck by the performers' visceral presence when they line up in pairs opposite one another – across the 10 seated audience members. The energy is most palpable here. I feel caught in the crossfire of verve and vigour, yet I cannot discern if this is a joyous zeal or an untamed turbulence: it is difficult to ascertain the quality of the ecstasy I am witnessing with their faces obscured. I imagine the performers reaching far into the caverns of their internal mental states as they arch their backs and propel their limbs.

I am reminded of *ekstasis*, ecstasy, of being beside oneself. In this embodied yet out-of-body trance, the performers seem to be continuously generating streams of physiological sensations, relishing this careless abandon. Deep, resonant taiko drums send them (us?) into even more hypnotic trances, as arms continue to spread open and encase themselves. One has heart-pounding hands close to the chest, another reaches outwards almost in supplication. Far from indulgence, in each rise and fall, each arm and head cocked back, each quadrupedal strain or roll, I am captivated by this earnest collective reverie.



Gearing up towards what felt like the climax of the performance, three dancers move in a mound, except for a single body obsessed with stacking boxes into new towers. This recalls the beginning projection of Aristophanes' composite halves. A video projection illuminates the performers in what appears to be celestial stardust or underwater particles. A wave of elemental calm washes over temporarily. But here, I found the yearning and reverence for construction by a lone dancer on stage right slightly jarring. Perhaps I did not like the building blocks' reminder of urban civilisation and wanted to remain fully immersed in pre-modern worlds.

In the penultimate sequence, the central trio forms what appear to be social towers: alternately entering and exiting headstands or holding another up. Simultaneously, the lone dancer journeys beyond the last audience member to retrieve a final stray box, before returning to the tallest tower. I particularly appreciated the restraint at the end to not default to a destructive vision by collapsing the tower of boxes. Dancer/choreographer Xin Yen confirmed this as an intentional choice in the post-performance dialogue, likening it to a cyclical process of evolution. Yet I still desired a different ending: watching three dancers recede into the sidelines as one slowly pushed the unsteady tower across the stage seemed incomplete, its open-endedness too ambiguous.

Ultimately, rather than searching for and producing an idealised aesthetic, *Elemental Beings* managed to evoke a sacred, timeless portal through an immersive blend of light, sound, set and movement. In this otherworldly (or sometimes underworldly) movement odyssey, it was enrapturing to witness this ritualistic rave that embraced, reconnected and expanded my sense of self.



Photo Credit: Justin Koh

**Dancers' Locker – Elemental Beings** by Frontier Danceland played at Aliwal Arts Centre's Multi-Purpose Hall from 3-5 June 2021. The writer attended the final live performance on Saturday 5th June, 9.00PM and the post-performance dialogue on Zoom on Tuesday 8th June, 8.00PM.

## Post-script on *Elemental Beings*' post-performance dialogue:

During the post-performance dialogue moderated by Assistant Artistic Director Chiew Peishan, each performer and co-choreographer introduced their own curiosities and personal fascinations. This ranged from YueRu's consideration of the contrasting modes of embodiment between modern human life and cavemen or even primal animals; what Sammantha terms the "soft devotion" and "playfulness" of [Japanese photographer Rinko Kawauchi](#)'s composition of chaos, stillness and renewal in nature; to Mark's fascination with projections, perspectives and alternative conceptions of the origin story of Adam and Eve; and to Xin Yen's set design stemming from wanting to produce an absorbing, immersive experience for an audience, one originally inspired by her personal experience of the sculpture and 2019 installation [Museum of the Moon](#) by [British artist Luke Jerram](#) at the ArtScience Museum.

Questions taken during the post-performance dialogue ranged from interests in the lighting design choices, the performer's relationship with the audience, how they negotiated with the absence of facial expressions in performance, what key aspects of the research process and the co-choreographers' identities and situatedness in Singapore made its way into the final performance, and whether the co-choreographers felt on hindsight if they wished to reconsider parts of the performance.

These were welcome conversations surrounding the various aspects of the production, which revealed the performers' reflexive attitudes towards their individual explorations and overall co-creation. For instance, while it was unsurprising to learn about how the zentai suit heightened other senses whilst limiting sight, it was heartening to listen to Sammantha share how as a performer she felt she could transform and take on any character or personality without fear of being judged. Yong Huay's written reflections of lighting design considerations showed how intertwined the elements were, as she believed "the space should breathe with the dance, and journey with the beings through the various episodes in the dance piece". Xin Yen and YueRu vocalised my desire for the performers to have experimented with embodying and exploring non-human animations, but I also noticed that the research references were mostly human myths or related to natural phenomena. I partially agreed with Mark's sentiment concerning the work's incompleteness, having sensed that the show's ambiguous ending was more of a turning point and had arrived prematurely. Even then, the performers were unanimous in noting how the constraints of the work empowered them to take risks in being honest with their movement quality. This reviewer looks forward to the filmic version of *Elemental Beings*, to see how this ritualistic energy can be channelled in a digital production.

*At the time of writing, **Nah Dominic** is a first-year PhD student at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, examining student responses to Literature pedagogies in Singapore schools. His movement practice lies in breaking, which he sees as an outlet of expression after spending too much time with words. In 2018, he performed an autobiographical b-boy monologue "dead was the body till i taught it how to move", produced by Bhumi Collective. Currently, he is also Company Dramaturg of The Second Breakfast Company, a not-for-profit theatre company founded by youths, for youths. He has worked as a freelance dramaturg for RAW Moves on Alice, Bob & Eve (2018), RawGround: Reference (2020), XITY (2021).*

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