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[Home](#) > [5L Latest News](#) > [Five's Company: Interviews for "In Good Company" at The Esplanade's da:ns festival 2021](#)

Five's Company: Interviews for "In Good Company" at The Esplanade's da:ns festival 2021

written by Akanksha Raja | September 30, 2021



Five dance companies are set to share one stage over two weekends at the *da:ns* festival 2021, responding to the festival's theme of "Finding New Ways To Dance". Taking over the Esplanade Theatre are P7:1SMA and T.H.E. Dance Company on 8 & 9 October, followed by Chowk, Frontier Danceland and Raw Moves on 15 & 16 October.

While every dance company is accustomed to working and performing independently on its own turf, this year's edition of the *da:ns* festival brings their varied voices together in a communal celebration of the vibrance of the local dance scene. It's something of a relief for the companies after the past year and a half of struggling in isolation. While there is still a continual sense of grappling with the still-unfolding ramifications of the pandemic, the festival's emphasis on searching and forward-looking optimism presents the groups with an opportunity for novel ways of considering space and movement. For example, one of the significant aspects of this commission for most of the companies is that their works will be staged at the Esplanade Theatre – a much bigger space and a different atmosphere than their usual venues. Indeed, our everyday spatial relationships and the way the city's square footage is used, has transformed dramatically during these times.

We spoke to the five company directors to find out more about their individual performances, their thoughts on the theme of the festival, and performing alongside familiar faces. For ticketing information, click [here](#).

How does it feel to be invited to create new work for da:ns festival 2021?

Raka Maitra, Chowk (RM): I love creating and making new work, and usually we need to write proposals and sell our work. So when festivals approach me with an offer, my instant response is Yes. I get extremely excited. I am never too busy to create something new.

Low Mei Yoke, Frontier Danceland (LMY): I am excited for Frontier Danceland's first *da:ns* festival commission, especially in view of the current volatile times. It is a very meaningful live performance.

Norhaizad Adam, P7:1SMA (NA): I am grateful for this opportunity to continue making performances in these pandemic times. This is our company's first time sharing in this festival and performing at the Esplanade Theatre. I feel anxious, but in a good way.

Ricky Sim, Raw Moves (RS): I'm delighted to be working with the Esplanade again!

Kuik Swee Boon, T.H.E. Dance Company (KSB): Every invitation is a unique one. My sentiments towards *da:ns* festival are rather special, because it is a festival where many of my ideas about choreography, dance and the body have been materialised. Even though this isn't my first time creating new work for the festival, I still feel a great sense of excitement, and I am filled with anticipation and hunger.

How does it feel to be "sharing" the stage alongside other different dance companies?

RM: This is unusual, and I think interesting for the audience, since they get to watch a whole range of works. Each of the companies has their own following, so I am curious to see how the audience will respond to works by companies that

they are not familiar with. It had to take a pandemic to get us all on the same stage, and I am hoping this is just the beginning of more interactions.

LMY: Singapore is a multicultural city that shares the co-existence and blending of diverse ways of life. On a micro level within the local dance scene, it is great to be part of the mixed bill alongside other dance companies. Sincere thanks to the da:ns festival team for the commission during such extraordinary times. It is an opportunity to reconnect, learn and discourse across movement practices and styles.

NA: I feel honoured to be a part of this curation alongside other prolific companies. It's humbling to observe the varied approaches and styles in performance-making by artistic directors in the local dance scene.

RS: It feels great working alongside familiar faces and friends.

KSB: I am curious to see the interesting, new and unique creations that my colleagues will come up with in the face of the uphill task of staging a work in the Esplanade Theatre (which is larger than spaces we're normally used to), and even more so during a time of transition to the new normal. This is also a great challenge for each of us — each company — to position our own dance practice.

Has this work been created specifically in response to the da:ns festival's theme of "Finding New Ways To Dance", or is it a continuation of something specific to your practice? Or both?

RM: The theme of "Finding New Ways To Dance" can be interpreted in many ways. For me, I was looking at the times we are living in now: the need of the times was to go digital, but that just caused an incredible sense of fatigue and loss, the loss of human connections. The only thing that kept me going was my daily practice, my very structured dance routine. So when I was given the theme, my first response to the theme was a variation of the routine and playing around with this very structured practice that brings one a sense of freedom and joy. We need to hold on to the light moments of our lives in these dark times.

LMY: Both. Each new creation is akin to the festival's theme – to start anew, like a newborn baby or an adventurer; to reposition and relearn; to be curious; to seek varied forms of expression; to allow the imagination to run wild. I hope the work can invite audiences to experience the infinite charms of the arts within the limited run of the programme.

NA: At the moment, finding new ways to dance to me means finding a new purpose and intention for Malay dance to exist or question. For *Selamat Pengantin Baru (Happy Newlyweds)*, I'm interested in the connection between dance and philosophical traditions. In this case, I am curious about how micro gestures in customs may have a diasporic impact on a community. My realisation started from my observation of blessing ceremonies in Malay weddings.

RS: Our work is not specifically in alignment with the festival's theme; but it is somewhat in the same spirit of rediscovering new forms of expression.

KSB: *A Beautiful Day* is a continuation of both my own and the Company's direction and style, which is basically built on the HollowBody methodology. This work is an attempt to make sense of our current predicament in a different light, both in the macro and micro sense, in a way that questions our most genuine thoughts about the situation. Through this work, our hope is that we will embrace the potential of humanity and have faith in the wonder and beauty of life.

The main difference between this work and past works that I've created lies in the use of bold visuals, be it in the costumes or props. This is something that I would never have attempted before. But if the festival is entitled, "Finding New Ways to Dance", then why should I hold back?

How does your process of creating work for this particular platform differ from the process of creating work in your company's regular season? Are there any new or different considerations, artistically or logistically?

RM: Our company is very small and we don't have any one process of working. I make a conscious effort not to repeat or fall into a pattern. For this festival commission, the greatest challenge was the space. The vocabulary that has been developed at Chowk demands small intimate spaces. We are just three dancers and two musicians, we have no props or sets or projections – it's just five performers in this space – but I have always loved taking on these challenges, hoping it will work.

LMY: The process has not been greatly different but there have been new considerations of collaborating with a project artist alongside Frontier Danceland's full-time company artists, as well as crafting the work for the proscenium stage of the Esplanade Theatre.

NA: Logistically, our studio space is much smaller than the Theatre. So I wanted to find a motivation for creating a work in the large theatre. I am glad that for *Selamat Pengantin Baru*, the theatre stage and its prestigious architecture is integral in the making of this work as it elevates and supports the idea of a joyous wedding with loud music and many guests.

RS: There is an overlap created for the proscenium stage when compared to Raw Moves' regular presentation in more intimate venues.

KSB: The process of creating the work together with our dance artists, costume designer Loo An Ni, music composer Kent Lee and lighting designer Adrian Tan was unexpectedly smooth and enjoyable, and this is perhaps because a strong rapport in this creative team already existed before we even started. The work includes a digital projection set-up, and there were some resource constraints, so we were not able to follow through with some creative ideas. However, it was not a huge issue that we could not accommodate.

Does the experience of the pandemic have any influence on the theme of your work, or in choreographic choices? If so, how?

LMY: Social distancing and safe management measures that came about with the pandemic inspired me to ponder on the spatial relationships between people. The work's concept has evolved from distance to space. It delves into the different realms of personal territory and explores the potentiality of proxemics in communicating human connectedness in daily living.

NA: During the circuit breaker in Singapore, the state's restriction of large gatherings affected our existing wedding customs. We are expected to have a minimal wedding, void of grandeur and performances. I'm interested in the function and bodily movements in nuptial blessing rituals.

KSB: Our dance artists had to wear masks and maintain social distance during the rehearsals, so this is a work that perfectly corresponds to the COVID-19 safe management measures for rehearsals and everyday life. This was a deliberate choice, but at the same time, it was also something that naturally came to mind. There are also questions that I often think about in this process of creation. What are some beautiful and important traits that need to be reiterated and surrendered in the midst of quietness, chaos or despair? Through dance, are we propagating distinctive and necessary values in society?

In Good Company will take place at 8pm on two weekends: 8-9 October and 15-16 October 2021.

P7:1SMA and T.H.E Dance Company perform on 8 and 9 October 2021.

Chowk, Frontier Danceland and Raw Moves perform on 15 and 16 October 2021.

Book your tickets [here](#).

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74
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