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## Dance review: In Good Company unites the best of S'pore contemporary dance



The Span Of Us by Frontier Danceland at the Esplanade's da:ns festival. PHOTO: BERNIE NG

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### In Good Company

**T.H.E Dance Company, P7:ISMA, Frontier Danceland, Raw Moves and Chowk Productions**  
**da:ns festival**

**Esplanade Theatre, Oct 8 and 15, 8pm**

This Esplanade commission brought together five home-grown contemporary dance companies on a single platform, a showcase that highlighted the spirit of camaraderie in the local dance community even as it raised questions about how best to present new works

created amid pandemic restrictions.

The new works were split over two weekends, the first shared by T.H.E Dance Company's A Beautiful Day and P7:ISMA's Selamat Pengantin Baru (Happy Newlyweds).

Immediately noticeable as A Beautiful Day opened was the large video projection that filled the entire cyclorama, showing a view of the empty stage. A video camera was located downstage left in view of the audience. As the dancers entered the stage one by one, it became clear that the projection was a live feed from the camera.

The simultaneous view of the dancers' live bodies on stage and the video projection showing the same movements from a different angle expanded the conventional view of the stage. The dancers' constant spiralling movements reminded one of a screensaver - even, persistent and calm.

As the work drew on, however, the projected bodies seemed to dominate - they were several times larger than the bodies on stage - and it was easy for the eyes to be drawn to the projection, which offered a more close-up view of the dancers.

This raised a question about the domination of screens in the contemporary world, something brought to the fore by the physical restrictions necessitated by the pandemic.

In the second half of the dance, pink LED lights glowed from beneath the costumes, forming constellations that dotted the dancers' bodies in what felt like a gimmicky ending and an unfinished thought to a beautifully danced work.

Selamat Pengantin Baru took as a starting point the gesture of sprinkling water at traditional Malay weddings in Singapore. Projected text provided some contextual explanation for those unfamiliar with the rituals and gestures being explored.

The dancers were dressed in white-and-silver futuristic-looking costumes and often held shiny sticks of tinsel - individual fronds of bunga manggar (decorative arrangement resembling palm fronds) - as props.



Selamat Pengantin Baru by P7:ISMA at the Esplanade's da:ns festival. PHOTO: BERNIE NG

The work was in three segments. The first referenced a court dance and the second a procession, while the final part was a rousing celebration of joyous bodies.

The progression from most to least formal meant the piece moved towards a high-energy ending. Live music by musicians Syafiq Halid and Azrin Abdullah contributed to the immediacy and synergy of the piece.

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On the second weekend, Frontier Danceland's Low Mei Yoke exhibited a mastery of space in *The Span Of Us*, while Chowk Productions' *Variations On A Theme* wove a somnambulant spell that transported the mind into a meditative state even as the body responded to the persistent rhythm of the dancers' stamping feet, a reminder of the grounding quality of repetition and routine.

But the most delightful surprise was introduced even before the curtains rose on *Overlap* by Raw Moves' Ricky Sim. The sound of footsteps reverberated loudly round the theatre as if a giant in heels were clomping overhead, a clever use of sound engineering that had the eye

darting across the space in search of the source.

Then the curtains revealed sound designer Ng Jun Han sitting onstage with his laptop while dancer Natasha Fawzi walked in an endless loop, high heels clacking monotonously. A projection of the stage, shot directly from overhead, formed the backdrop, an alternate perspective that alienated the bodies below in a manner similar to the disconnection wrought by enforced isolation.



Variations On A Theme by Chowk Productions at the Esplanade's da:ns festival. PHOTO: BERNIE NG

Midway through the work, Fawzi, teetering in her bright yellow heels, balanced a metal clothes rack on her head, skewing her body to keep it in place as it swivelled around her. This fascinating concentration and care offered a foil to Matthew Goh busily running around, trying to enclose another dancer within the bounds of a cable threaded through the clutter on stage.

Rizman Putra, half of the visual art and sound duo Nada, delivered a standout performance from the edge of the stage, face painted white. His trance-like immersion in the rhythm he sang was engrossing.

The showcase allowed each of the companies to play to its strengths, from Chowk's hypnotic odissi-based approach to Raw Moves' strong understanding of cross-disciplinary collaboration in balancing the contributions of sound, video and movement.

But one questions whether the proscenium stage and 30- to 40-minute duration of each work gave the companies the best platform to present their ideas.

Many of the works felt simultaneously too long and too short - 30 to 40 minutes is longer than the usual 15 to 20 minutes of a mixed-bill piece, but too short to allow the development of ideas that a full-length work would.

As a result, ideas were sometimes dragged on for too long, such as in the repetitive structures of *Overlap* and *Selamat Pengantin Baru*, while at the same time leaving more to be explored.

*The Span Of Us* started with five dancers making good use of the large proscenium stage by dancing on and moving rows of chairs to reconfigure the space, but the duet of its last movement, though danced with much feeling, was overly extended and concluded abruptly.

*In Good Company* would have been a welcome introduction for a novice audience to some of the leading contemporary dance companies in Singapore, but unfortunately the theatre seats were mostly filled with familiar faces from within the scene.

It is a sad commentary on how the local contemporary dance scene has struggled to reach a wider audience during the pandemic, but simultaneously a bracing reflection of how the arts community has rallied around its own.

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