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In Good Company: the world ahead

written by *Kwek Yi Xuan* | November 18, 2021



A Beautiful Day, T.H.E Dance Company. Photo Credit: Bernie Ng

It seems that we are nearing a post-pandemic world as we enter theatres again, witnessing microcosms and projections of new realities on the live stage albeit sat in safely-distanced bubbles. We are finding new ways to dance, and new ways to be. The pandemic's imposition on spatio-cultural relations and etiquette in public, social and personal spaces also implicates how live performance is created and experienced, whether in physical, virtual, or hybrid forms. As we mull over the near future, five leading Singaporean contemporary dance companies share their perspectives and artistic directions. Commissioned by Esplanade's *da:ns festival* this year for *In Good Company – A Spotlight on Singapore Dance Companies*, the mixed bill features live sounds and digital visuals alongside live movement, an indication of how performance and liveness might be gradually reframed.

The lineup consists of Chowk Productions, Frontier Danceland, P7:1SMA, RAW Moves and The Human Expression (T.H.E) Dance Company. Each with their own distinct colours, the five works offer a glimpse into the landscape of contemporary dance in Singapore, and its promising potential as a medium of commentary and reflection in turbulent times.

T.H.E's *A Beautiful Day* by artistic director Kuik Swee Boon features a camera downstage, angled ingeniously to expand and complement the proscenium stage with its projected live feed. The ensemble's slow, plushy movement creates a drowsy, meditative air, only punctuated occasionally by the reflected light of their holographic masks. Weaving in and out of frame, their undulating bodies create an alien terrain of magnified limbs on the screen behind. It is a luring image of this strange world they are trying to navigate, ironically established and expanded by their own movements and presences.

The optimistically-worded title gives way to an uneasy undercurrent. Dancers Nah Jieying and Haruka Leilani Chan sit with their legs dangling off the stage, gazing at the space through their masks in technicolor bliss, while the dancers behind them still hesitate to don the masks. It is a salient moment laced with poignance, and an astute reminder of how our world and world-views have been, and will still be, changed by the pandemic. As the music screeches to a halt, the stage is lit by the tiny purple lights on the dancers' torsos. Connected now (via their surprisingly stretchy trousers) as a singular amorphous organism, the dancers move with concerted effort to peel themselves out of their trousered web: moulting, shedding, perhaps evolving. Despite some murky sections of movement and what felt like a premature ending, the piece manages to convey a dystopian surreality of our endemic future. Our changing ways of being and relating to each other come to mind, even as one acknowledges the pandemic's resulting opportunity to savour the present. Perhaps then, *A Beautiful Day* is an entanglement of a rose-tinted now and an uncertain imminence.



The elements of juxtaposition and duality are carried into P7:1SMA's *Selamat Pengantin Baru* (Happy Newlyweds), choreographed by artistic director Norhaizad Adam. Outfitted in shimmers of silver and white, the dancers wield silver *bunga manggar* (decorative coconut palm fronds) that serve as both visual and aural props. Live music in the form of an acoustic guitar and a digital sound system pulses through the space – it is an unusual soundscape for traditional Malay dance – and lends the piece a futuristic dimension. In turn, the dancers move with an unhurried, measured manner, with movements comprising of abstracted gestures from Malay dance vocabularies. Their silver lips form exaggerated smiles on their faces, creating a somewhat bizarre, and disconcerting scene.

The piece is constructed through the exploration of three archetypes, posing an inquiry into the significance of traditional Malay nuptial blessing rituals, especially in contemporary circumstances. Projections on the cyclorama behind provide some contextual information for each archetype: a court dance once used for royalty is now also used to greet guests-of-honour, a processional ritual is accompanied by footage of bustling, bustling cities, of people and traffic shuttling through like clockwork. Could this be a wry hint at how these sacred rituals have become gradually debased in changing socio-political contexts? As the piece escalates towards its finale of a celebratory folk dance, the dancers groove in a circle to distorted beats. The projected animations are of pixelated hands and jerky, hyper-lapsed nodding heads, presumably a figurative bride and groom. Despite its rousing final section, a subtle note of loss emerges as the piece draws to a close. The clear research intent of *Selamat Pengantin Baru* contributes to its choreographic coherence, and its questioning of the notion of 'blessings' and the shifting values of such traditions and rituals rings pertinent as the pandemic restricts how communities gather and celebrate.

Both the works presented on the first weekend take on a slower, more tempered pace. While possibly a coincidental choreographic choice, it creates a visceral, felt experience that speaks to the warped sense of time one has come to associate with this pandemic. In the second weekend, Frontier Danceland further explores this stretched time-space in *The Span of Us* by artistic director Low Mei Yoke.



Strains of strings seep into the theatre as the house curtains raise, and the audience is greeted by the ensemble of five. Stood in a row, their bodies move in a peculiar staccato of stylised grooving and fidgeting. They retreat to rows of chairs upstage, lounging languidly, at times restlessly. As they wait, time feels adrift. Then the connections begin to happen: across, in spite of, space. Occasional moments of synchronicity between dancers positioned far apart from each other enliven the air between them, each exchange coming as a little surprise. The dancers' candidness is enjoyable to watch, whimsical and almost humorous, and I think of how we have found ways to connect to each other, amidst the pandemic: across, in spite of, distance. The delightful control and usage of space somewhat falters, however, as the piece progresses towards its final section. The ending duet begins with gestures of tenderness that pose a counterpoint to the previous apartness of the dancers, but as these gestures become sequentially brushed away, the movement reaches a plateau that offers no real development or closure. Although a seemingly underwhelming ending, it is perhaps reflective of our altered proxemics as we become more comfortable with communicating through distance.

In RAW Moves' *Overlap* by artistic director Ricky Sim, the creative use of sound and a live camera overhead fills and constructs the large theatre space. The sound of a pair of heels striking the floor reverberates throughout before the curtains rise, interspersed with the softer pad of running shoes. It loops a few times with the sounds audibly travelling across the space, and the curtains raise to reveal company dancer Natasha Fawzi in a bright pair of yellow heels, strutting in a circle, while dancer Matthew Goh sporadically crosses the stage in sprints and leaps. Eventually, Fawzi begins to run, tottering as she gains speed. The precariousness is discomfiting, and the repetition and increasing frenzy fosters a sense of entrapment.



Overlap, RAW Moves. Photo Credit: Bernie Ng

On screen, an aerial view of the stage is projected: an unusual mirror that dwarfs the performers. We see dancer Tiara Rahyuni crumpled on the floor in centre stage, slowly unfolding, rising, then gently tossing her hair left and right. A series of configurations and permutations ensue, involving the three performers, some metal clothes racks, yellow balloons and a thick black cable. Although the three move with enough purposefulness and sensitivity, the significance of this seemingly random assemblage remains lost. Overhead, a disembodied voice begins to read, the text at times muffled by the live soundscape. The audible wisps that float through speak of genealogy, parents' personality traits, results of our past; the who, when, where of what we are. It is a timely inkling of context, supported by a concluding series of actions that stand out with the most clarity. Fawzi initiates the process of substitution by taking over the live musician's station on stage left. The musician in turn replaces Goh, who then does the same for Rahyuni. As they attempt to stand in for each other, the piece ends with Goh shaking his head, a balloon in mouth, the motion very much similar to Rahyuni's movements of her head and hair in the beginning. The title *Overlap* becomes apparent in its meaning, seeming to suggest the circularity of personal and shared histories as they surface and resurface in the constant (re)establishment of self.

The mixed bill of *In Good Company* closes with Chowk Productions' *Variations on a Theme* by Raka Maitra. Performed by three dancers (including Raka herself) and accompanied by two musicians, the piece is an enthralling study of the dance form *odissi* through a contemporary lens. The dancers begin by flowing through a series of poses calmly, pensively, their movements gradually taking them downstage and into the light. Their undulating torsos are supported by grounded bases and strong feet, and their relaxed fingers and deeper pliés reflect the freedom they have come to find in their movement. *Variations on a Theme* is danced into being via an improvisational score based on three movements of Chowk's vocabulary, yet the supposed limitations make for constant discoveries of new openings and transitions in the movements. Each dancer stamps out her own journey even as they are all driven by the same beats, a mesmerising expression of the joys of live performance. As the dancers find moments of meeting and parting, an interesting duality emerges: in performing the three variations (sections) of the piece, they come to become variations of each other – a

self formed through the other, formed through the self. The piece draws to a close with the dancers returning upstage to their original positions, while Rizman Putra of visual art and sound duo NADA croons into the dimming lights.



Variations on a Theme, Chowk. Photo Credit: Bernie Ng

In Good Company showcases a laudable creative boldness from the five companies, matched by the curatorial tenacity of the festival programmers. Programming five vastly different contemporary dance companies in the same proscenium setting can be a challenging one, especially with constraints such as the duration of a work and limited staging feasibility. The choice to do so, at the Esplanade Theatre no less, speaks volumes of the growing significance and relevance of contemporary dance in Singapore. The diverse works make for an eclectic tasting palette, one that allows for audiences to discern their preferences. More importantly, a mixed bill like this sets up a premise for discussions on what contemporary dance is, and can be in Singapore.

In finding new ways to dance, we also find new and renewed ways of being. As the five dance companies reimagine performance and liveness for the hybrid world, the works communicate insightful observations about how we relate to one another amidst and beyond the pandemic. Their adept reflexivity reaffirms how dance can be a way of seeing and thinking about the world, and reassures that we are in good company as we move towards the world ahead.

In Good Company: A Spotlight on Singapore Dance Companies was performed at the Esplanade Theatre over two weekends, 8-9 and 15-16 October, as part of Esplanade's 2021 *da:ns festival*.

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