

★★★★☆ Review: MILIEU 2021 by Frontier Danceland



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(<https://bakchormeeboy.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/screenshot-2021-10-19-at-12.42.49-pm.png>).

Only time will tell.

Over the course of the pandemic, the concept of time has become a blur, where one can't quite tell 2020 from 2021. For Frontier Danceland, their annual production *MILIEU* presented two recreations of past works, transforming them and adapting them, as they intersect on the theme of how one's past feelings and memories have an effect on our perception of time, making it a subjective experience, and how we deal with past traumas and fears in our lives.



The performance opens with *Re Apple Diary* by Frontier Danceland's Assistant Artistic Director, Chiew Peishan. Previously recorded as a film in the form of *Apple Diary (2021)* (<https://bakchormeeboy.com/2021/02/04/review-sides-2020-by-frontier-danceland/>), *Re Apple Diary* continues to explore ideas of trauma, power and agency, and attempts to confront it and heal through absurdity. Onstage is a single tub, while a dancer methodically and diligently lays out red apples on the dance floor, at times taking a step back to ensure its neatness. Disappearing into the back, he reappears on the second floor, now admiring his work from above.



From out of the bathtub, a female dancer emerges with an apple in her mouth. Exiting the tub, she carefully meanders her way through the mine field of apples, before arriving at a single blank spot, filling it with the apple in her mouth. The dancers now gather near the bathtub, as if drawn to it, wanting to cleanse themselves with water of some unknown, metaphorical filth that clings to them.



But with so many dancers, the tub is surrounded, far too crowded to accommodate them all, their legs comically sticking out. Sometimes, we too get caught up in the rush to follow the lead of the one who seems to have it all together, in this case, the clean person; can we then somehow find the space to all come through ok together, the space for redemption, and find salvation through 'cleanliness'?



The music now leads the dancers to new climates, while the spotlight falls on the single apple the dancer placed. Perhaps, we are all striving to be the apple of another's eye, and avoiding becoming the 'bad apple'. Amongst these seemingly identical fruit, it is impossible to tell which ones are the good apples, and which ones are the bad.



Chaos ensues, and the apples roll all around. Try as he might, the male dancer at the beginning attempts to put them all together to no avail, an endless cycle of disruption. We think about the mistakes we make, where the more we try to make things right, the more we make it worse. Yet beyond the chaos, somehow, the two dancers seem maintain their calm and poise, while we watch the dancers carefully picking up the apples again and keeping them in a bag, to face again some other day, wondering if they will they eventually exorcise their inner demons and dispel their fears.



MILIEU then segues into *Unlock*, by Frontier Danceland Artistic Director Low Mei Yoke. A rework of her 2012 choreography *White*, *Unlock* attempts to bring to the fore parts of one's identity that were previous ignored or suppressed, and in so doing, use this 'shadow self' to better understand and shed light on one's being.



The piece begins as whispers fill the space, and we wonder if we are floating in a vacuum. The dancers show their uncertainties with their bodies, while the white lights cast the space in an almost hospital-like atmosphere, sanitised and cold. The soundtrack urges the dancers to carry on, and we see the confusion and fear in their eyes and movements.



The dancers appear to be clad in hospital gowns, wanting to escape this strange, surreal world they're in. Their fear of the unknown is overwhelming – one dancer tries to stand up, struggling to do so. How can we find salvation in these circumstances when there is so much holding us down, keeping us from moving, and somehow overcome the inner darkness?



The theatre is now quiet, as the dancers surround the body on the floor. She seems to awaken from a strange dream or nightmare, her soul seemingly leaving her body and joining the spirit world. The remaining dancers are hit by a strange gust of wind as they arch backwards in slow motion, and we are left to imagine that these shadow selves have been vanquished or faced head on, leaving the dancers a better version of themselves than before.

As a double bill of work, both *Re Apple Diary* and *Unlock* deal with our deepest, innermost fears, attempting to put on stage our struggles to confront them and come to terms with them. The process is by no means an easy one, as seen from the amount of effort the dancers display through the twisting and control of their physical selves. Yet, there is a kind of hope in the way they try any way, in spite of the difficulties, and perhaps, all we need is time and courage, if we are to find ourselves amidst the darkness again.

Photo Credit: Justin Koh

MILIEU 2021 played from 12th to 13th November 2021 at SOTA Studio Theatre.

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