

CULTURAL MEDALLION RECIPIENTS

Cultural Medallion recipient: Overcoming the odds for her love of dance

Jazz musician Louis Soliano and dance choreographer Low Mei Yoke have been awarded the Cultural Medallion, Singapore's highest honour in the arts. The two veteran artists will receive the award at the Istana this evening. Five artists - playwright Faith Ng, visual artist Hilmi Johandi, sound designer Lim Ting Li, dancer and choreographer Mohamad Sufri Juwahir, and conductor and music director Zulkifli Mohamed Amin-will also receive the Young Artist Award. The Straits Times speaks to the award recipients.



Low Mei Yoke of Frontier Danceland is being recognised for her work as one of Singapore's pioneer choreographers and Louis Soliano is the second jazz musician to receive Singapore's highest honour in arts. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN



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LOW MEI YOKE, 63, CO-FOUNDER AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR OF DANCE ENSEMBLE FRONTIER DANCELAND

In her 20s, dancer Low Mei Yoke was told that she was too short for ballet. At the same time, the 1.52m-tall dancer also failed auditions for a Chinese dance troupe in Hong Kong.

Undaunted, she went on to pour her life into contemporary dance. "Contemporary dance doesn't worry about height, just as long as you can dance," says the co-founder and artistic director of dance ensemble Frontier Danceland.

She receives the Cultural Medallion for her work as one of Singapore's pioneering choreographers.

It is an accolade she did not dream of in 1991, when she started the ensemble with her husband, engineer Tan Chong Poh, 64.

After years of developing a repertoire that often blends Western and Asian elements - such as *Cloud* (1999) - and performing to critical acclaim in festivals in the United States and around Asia, the company turned professional in 2011.

Much of Low's life story follows the recurring theme of overcoming obstacles to pursue dance. Just as she did not let her height stop her, she also did not let her impoverished childhood impede her passion .

She was already interested in dance when she was in primary school, but could not afford lessons. Low was the youngest of 10 children of hawker parents. "I grew up watching Chinese street opera. Only very rich families could go to the ballet."

She recalls helping her mother sell food by the road in front of their attap-roof home in Geylang. "I was lucky because I could continue to go to secondary school," she adds, and this was because her older siblings had started working and could help out financially.

She attended the former Kallang Government Chinese Primary School and joined dance groups in Broadrick Secondary School. At 15, she got to dance in a TV variety show as part of amateur dance troupe Yun Wei Chinese Dance Troupe.

"After my O levels, I wanted to study the arts, but there was no one to advise me. Also, my parents said they couldn't afford it," she says.

Instead, she worked at a textile factory for \$600 a month and upset her supervisors by refusing to work overtime.

She had joined the People's Association cultural troupe and attending dance rehearsals three times a week was her priority. The troupe performed once a month - three or four times in August, in celebration of National Day - and she yearned to learn and perform more.

Hoping for better opportunities and lessons in Hong Kong, she saved up to travel there in 1981 and took classes in Chinese dance, ballet and jazz. Two friends who had travelled with her got into the Hong Kong Ballet Company and Hong Kong Dance Company respectively. Low, however, was told that she did not make the cut.

With funds running out, she returned to Singapore. Another trip out in 1982 fared no better.

To make a living, alongside performing, she taught dance classes in schools as well as aerobic fitness classes at community centres. In 1985, she performed at the Singapore Festival of Dance with pioneering dancer Goh Lay Kuan's troupe. It would be Low's last performance for decades - in her early 30s, she was hospitalised for an abnormal heartbeat that had caused her blood pressure to spike.

Surgery found no physical abnormality and, five years later, all was well. Still, Low continued to focus on choreography over performing. The mother of a 22-year-old son says: "Choreography is like giving birth to a child, giving life to the rhythm and pouring emotion into the action."

She wants to give young people interested in dance the guidance and opportunities she never had. Since 2010, the M1-Frontier Danceland Pulse Programme, sponsored by telco M1, has trained young dancers from secondary school and tertiary institutions, showcasing them in a yearly production titled Leap.

She is also the resident choreographer and instructor of the modern dance groups at Nanyang Girls' High School, Raffles Girls' School and Raffles Institution.

As a recipient of the Cultural Medallion, Low can access funds of up to \$80,000 from the Cultural Medallion Fund to support a single or multiple projects. She thinks she might make a dance film about her artistic journey.

She stays fit doing taiji and running twice a week. In 2016, she took to the stage again for Frontier Danceland's 25th anniversary concert. The stage is where she feels most alive.

"Standing under the lights, with the music, I really feel my existence," she says. "When I hear the applause... I can't describe the sense of accomplishment."