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Dance review: Frontier Danceland's Milieu programme goes from quiet whisper to cacophony



Listening... – choreographed by Malaysian dance artist Loke Soh Kim – opened Frontier Danceland's annual year-end production. PHOTO: CRISPIAN CHAN

Germaine Cheng

UPDATED 4 HOURS AGO ▾

Milieu 2022

Frontier Danceland

Esplanade Theatre Studio

Last Friday

Frontier Danceland's 2022 edition of Milieu, its annual year-end production, featured the return of two veteran female choreographers to the company.

Malaysian dance artist Loke Soh Kim, who first choreographed for Frontier Danceland in the 1990s, shared the programme with Belgian choreographer Irene Kalbusch, working in collaboration with the company's artistic director, Low Mei Yoke.

Beginning with an intimate whisper, the evening built to a cacophony, but what it gained in volume, it lost in cogency.

Loke's *Listening...* sought to mine the body's capabilities for sense and sensibility. As electronic musician Ng Chor Guan shaped the piece's soundscape live, a trio of dancers slowly converged, their arms reaching out to embrace the space around them. Palms almost touched and feet brushed against the floor as Gabriel Chan's lights blinked open and shut.

When Loke joined in, the work took a delightful turn as she settled the uneven ensemble with her presence and movement choices. Moving from one upright stance to another, she used her hands mesmerisingly, caressing the space and bodies around her.

Ng sloshed, poured and blew into a fishbowl of water, seeming to beckon the dancers towards the sounds he created.

It was as though *Listening...* took place in a fishbowl – the action appeared to be overwhelming within, but for the audience on the outside, it demanded an acute eye and ear.

Incessant, co-created by Kalbusch and Low, was bursting with striking imagery from the traditions both choreographers have been immersed in and which they brought to their collaboration. Water sleeves, seen in Chinese dance and opera, carefully unfurled in a procession that bisected the stage. They were then stood on and scrunched up, binding the dancers' feet.

Guest performer Marcia Liu appeared in a Snow White mask, revelling in the storm of confetti she stirred up.

The celebratory mood was tinged with an uncanny sadness as Mervin Wong's soundtrack of operatic crying accompanied her frenzied waddling on the ground. This built to the work's climax, where the dancers compulsively showered one another with kisses and declarations of love.

Thereafter, one dancer was straitjacketed in the water sleeves while Liu mopped up the confetti around her.

Incessant's extremely varied scenes felt like pieces of different puzzles that, when placed together, made for a messy, frustrating experience.