

## ★★★★☆ Review: MILIEU 2022 by Frontier Danceland



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*Double bill of new introspective dance work looking at coexistence and cultural traditions.*

In the new edition of Frontier Danceland's signature MILIEU programme, veteran female choreographers Low Mei Yoke (Singapore), Irene Kalbusch (Belgium) and Loke Soh Kim (Malaysia) produce and choreograph two intimate reflections on the interconnections of identity, place and culture, as they look towards the future, paying attention to what's happening on the ground, and referencing the past for answers.



Loke Soh Kim's *Listening...* 《聆听》, is described to navigate affective, cognitive and behavioural processes, and holds space for each being's connection of sensibilities. Taking inspiration from the passivity and limited understanding towards global events, *Listening...* then mulls on how we can learn to "listen" to one's body, and how the extent of the feelings, emotions and experiences of others may be translated if one were to sense with sincerity.



Featuring dancers Sammantha Yue, Mark Robles, Tan Xin Yen, and Kirby Dunnzell, *Listening...* begins with live music being mixed onstage, forming the soundscape for the piece. The dancers on onstage one by one, seemingly strangers to each other, as they ponder over what to do next. Listening to the music, they seem to go with the flow, while the pitter patter of rain begins, created live onstage by composer and performer Ng Chor Guan.



Each of them are now clearly wearing different clothes, each one an individual in their own right, and we wonder if they are able to co-exist and live together. They begin dancing with each other, but two of them seem more controlled, while the other two seem to be more ferocious in their movements. As we see the single fish tank being brought to the middle of the stage by Ng, he produces that almost hypnotic sound of bubbles, almost apocalyptic and foreboding, a creative instrumental addition to the soundscape.



We are left to wonder if they can get back together, to mend these friendships and relationships that pull them further apart. Yet there is something noble in watching them continually try to bridge the gap between each other. An older woman comes onstage, seemingly in her own world, and the true test comes into play as we watch the dancers to see if they will accept her into their world. She appears calm, at least, before the chaos ensues.



As the lighting shifts to show that the impending gloomy atmosphere, as if dark clouds are rolling in, the soundscape shifts, resembling the tracks from retro video games. It is chaos, and the dancers begin reacting to this new atmosphere, their hope for co-existence seemingly swallowed by the darkness.



The lights dim, and *Listening...* ultimately offers no answers for us, only more questions. In the darkness, all we hear are the sounds of air bubbles being blown. Is it a sign of life or people drowning in the chaos? Who knows, as we imagine the infinite possibilities we can create, if only we choose coexistence over competition, to feel and empathise rather than ignore.



Low Mei Yoke (Singapore) and Irene Kalbusch's (Belgium) *Incessant* 《无间》 draws from each of the two choreographers' connection to the elements of water sleeves, and mask and confetti from the Chinese and Belgium traditions of Chinese dance and carnival respectively. Transcending the original symbolism of water sleeves, mask and confetti, the work juxtaposes the exploration of contrasting states of freedom and oppression to relook the socio-cultural norms in our lives.



Featuring dancers Sammantha Yue, Mark Robles, Tan Xin Yen, Chia Poh Hian, Kirby Dunnzell and Marcia Liu Man Sze, the performance begins with some form of traditional cultural music (composed by Mervin Wong), signifying the start of a journey. The dancers begin by walking in a line, and we wonder what obstacles they might be about to face in their path ahead.



We begin to imagine them perched on the side of a mountain, while we hear the sounds of waves. They unfurl a cloth in front of them, extending the pathway, yet about to face more difficulties and problems. They try to escape, yet their legs become entangled and they fail to leave, left unable to move or fully express themselves.



Children's laughter rings out, and one of the dancers dons a mask from Disney's *Snow White*, splashing confetti on herself. It feels oddly sadistic, as if forcing herself to celebrate amidst the pain, and we think of the Belgian carnival traditions, decompressing and fully indulging before beginning the fasting period of Lent. There is a darker, hedonistic side that emerges, the dancers making exaggerated kissing sounds, almost as if mocking the idea of being given the kiss of life, with Snow White herself awakening from death to fully live without restrictions.



The dancers begin blowing air kisses to the audience as well, an outpouring of 'I love yous' but these seem to be empty notions. At this point, the water sleeves make their appearance, and almost seem to resemble wings as they 'fly' across the stage, enjoying themselves. But we cannot help but wonder if they are truly free, as we see one of them suddenly unable to fly, her wings clipped and emotionally crushed as the others rush to console her.



In the background, 'Snow White' begins cleaning up the mess left behind, not at all caring about the brokenness of her fellow dancer. In her dying breaths, she gives a final grunt as the lights go out. Could she still be alive amidst it all? Again, no answers, as we ponder her eventual fate.

Through MILIEU 2022 then, Frontier Danceland asks the question – what does it mean to live if we do not relate to others, if we do not take their thoughts and feelings into consideration? Both *Listening...* and *Incessant* leave us wondering about how we can learn to free ourselves of potentially harmful old habits and traditions, and chart a path towards a new future where we can fully express ourselves, and show care and concern for others in a better world.

**Photo Credits: Crispian Chan**

MILIEU 2022 played at the Esplanade Theatre Studio from 9th to 10th December 2022. More information available [here](https://www.frontierdanceland.com/whats-on/milieu/) (<https://www.frontierdanceland.com/whats-on/milieu/>).

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