

Review: Lithe Bodies Display Immense Potential

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liTHE 2014

T.H.E Second Company

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The issues that the three works presented in this showcase are nothing new. Issues of time, a response to a horrific event as well as questions about personal identity have been explored over and over again. So what can a young troupe of choreographers and dancers add to the conversation without it being trite?

Lots.

Notes of Last Thursday by Marcus Foo



In this piece, Foo invited his audience to peek into his journal as the dance evolved out of scraps of musings that he has written over the years. The piece is structured in a series of vignettes that creates an illusion of glancing into various pages of someone's diary.

The dance took off to a promising start with a collage of different scenes on stage. The dancers were dimly lit and one can only see silhouettes moving on stage. The simple set-up effectively created a process of remembrance as our memories tend to be snapshots and they often meld into one another. With time, the way we remember changes and it all becomes nothing more than silhouettes.

I was struck by the strong sense of physicality displayed by the dancers which will prove to be the company's strongest suit as the show went on. I sometimes forgot how small the black box was as the strong physical presence of 12 dancers made the space seem immense. Having said that, the synergy between the dancers was a little patchy with occasional lapses in synchronicity in the beginning. However, the dancers became increasingly self-assured and the synergy was quite palpable towards the end.

While the dance is based mostly on Foo's text, I love the artistic choice of not having a clear central character as different dancers took on that role in different vignettes. This gave it an everyman appeal as different members of the audience will be able to relate to different vignettes.

Unfortunately, the bold choice of combining text and dance is a fatal flaw of the piece. Scant attention was paid to the delivery of the text as the enunciation, both in the recording and live delivery, was poor. I could hardly hear most of the text and the delivery had rather odd rhythms. It was clear that the text was wholly in servitude to the dance as the text was rushed as if they had to fulfil a certain time limit to fit the dance.

Additionally, the text was giving too much away and it imposes on the audience of how to interpret a particular dance sequence. This was most clear in a duet between a couple sitting across each other at a table. I found the poem too telling and it took away the artistic enjoyment of the dance which is a pity because the dancers were really competent. The real poetry was in their movements rather than the overbearing text. To top it all off, the acting was completely unconvincing and those speaking were not grounded which resulted in a very shrill delivery that grated on my nerves.

The saving grace of the performance was the last vignette which had no text and one could sit back and really appreciate the artistry of the dancers.

112319892416856 by Goh Shou-Yi



In the post-show dialogue, Goh mentioned that the title of his piece was a conscious decision as he did not want words to define what his work is. He felt that numbers are universal and those in the title are vital information that is part of the identity of the collective group. Are numbers really universal?

On the one hand, our language seems to go against the idea as one is dehumanised when merely reduced to digits. On the other, the vital information such as our birth dates, height, and weight are inextricably linked to us. Yet, this piece is a personal response to what he saw at the Holocaust History Museum and the prisoners were clearly reduced to nothing more than the Star of David and numbers branded on their bodies.

Such an observation by Goh is both contradictory yet insightful at the same time. This sets an interesting premise that was wonderfully reflected in performance.

The most striking thing about Goh's work is its sense of corporeality. The dancers executed a splendid display of physicality with an organic synergy throughout the piece. There was a fine balance between uniformity and individuality. The ensemble felt like a single organic animal or distinct individuals struggling in the same situation at various points of time.

Goh also made two dancers assume the roles of the oppressor and the oppressed. The skills of the pair were manifested through the subtleties of their movements. There was a beautiful interplay between resistance and obedience and the dancers were really in tune with each other. This made me wonder whether there are times when those oppressed continue to put themselves in that situation by assuming the role and playing along.

Goh must also be commended for the apt choice of soundscape that blend seamlessly into each other which resulted in a beautiful marriage between choreography and music.

Overall, *112319892416856* is an evocative piece and its success was due to sound choreography and sensitivity of the dancers.

She's Chinese, And I'm Twenty-Five by Lee Ren Xin



Lee's work is the boldest among the three works presented because it is multi-lingual in all senses of the word. She employed the languages of movement, flowers, speech, and sound to create an arresting visual and aural landscape in search of self-identity.

The employment of the various elements was carefully thought out. The interaction between the dancers and the flowers that were thrown to them or sounds emanating from backstage illustrated the struggle between finding oneself and one's identity being defined by the environment, circumstances, and society.

There was also a nice contrast between the various sequences which helped in retaining the audience's attention throughout the piece.

As for the choreography itself, it is admirable how she successfully pieced together distinct stage pictures which was borne out of improvisational workshops with her dancers. These workshops definitely paid off as there was a nice dynamic among her dancers which resulted in a presentation that intermingles different facets of what it means to be a woman and a unique person.

The most striking sequences of the piece were the two duets between two dancers. In the first duet, one of them introduced herself by saying her name while the other replied by revealing her age. In the second duet, one of them says, "I love you." While the other, "I hate you." The repetition of the minimal speech in tandem with the choreography beautifully illuminated ways in which we define ourselves as well as the love-hate relationship that we have with ourselves and others.

Lee and her dancers must certainly be commended for being able to put so many things together without it being overwhelming. In fact, I found it to be a refreshing exploration of the self.

The only bone to pick with this piece was that it was a tad long and certain sequences could be streamlined. There were moments when the audience thought the piece ended only to be surprised by the start of another sequence.

If these three works are a reflection of the future of our local contemporary dance scene, there is much to look forward to. The lithe bodies of T.H.E Second Company certainly showed immense promise.

liTHE runs till 29 June. Email marketing@the-dancecompany.com or call 6345 8454 for tickets.

Standard: \$25 Concession: \$15