

# Sprouts 5th Edition

Currently in its fifth instalment, Sprouts is a choreography competition organised by National Arts Council and co-presented by Frontier Danceland. The final showcase was held at SOTA Drama Theatre and the audience was treated to eight works of diverse styles with contemporary dance at its core. The wide range of influences from Malay dance in Norhaizad Adam's *Jam* to flamenco in Daphane Huang's *Knots* is a testament to the success of the competition in drawing participants from a variety of fields and it also opens up more possibilities of what contemporary dance can be.

In the end, Mohamad Sufri Bin Juwahir's *All In Line* clinched the coveted title of Most Promising Work. Sufri's work was certainly bold as it was based on an ambiguous premise of "A strong vision./ A group of people./ Adjust./ Go." Before the performance started, I was apprehensive as the work could go horribly wrong with it being equally ambiguous as the synopsis. However, my doubts were unfounded as what unfolded was a strong performance being directed by a clear vision and enhanced by a palpable chemistry among all the dancers. In fact, *All In Line* can be said to be a microcosm of what goes on in a dance studio and the result is something that enthrals.

As for the Most Popular Work, Kenneth Tan's 惜 clinched the award with a theatrical tribute to the love that a mother has for a child which tugged at the audience's heartstrings, including mine. The dance portrayed the ever evolving relationship between mother and son, warts and all – the connection, conflicts, hurt, regrets and possible redemption. What stood out for me is the sheer artistry involved in all aspects of the work – choreography, soundscape and lighting design. I was surprised that the dancers, Zhuang Hanqiao and Chua Zhi En, did not win the Best Dancer award for they have a symbiotic synergy and strong physicality. The subtle changes of the different phases embodied by the dancers proved their skill as dancers. The sound design of the piece also needs to be applauded. The choreography and the soundscape of the conversation between mother and son in Cantonese worked beautifully. While most of the audience, including myself, did not understand the conversation, we knew what was said – the choreography had its own language that transcended any language or cultural barrier. The most affecting aspect of the soundscape was the repetition of the door closing. Not only did it represent the son leaving the mother, it also represented the mother retreating into herself and unravelling into madness. This led to the last scene when the son carries the mother and walks on a line of red light to exit the stage. James Tan, the lighting designer, must be commended for his work on this piece. The line of red light reminds the audience of the red string that was tied to the legs of both dancers – the umbilical cord and bond between mother and son. That last act of redemption parallels the earlier portion of the dance where the son walks on the red string towards his mother to eventually break away from her. 惜 is a beautiful depiction of traipsing the tightrope of parent-child relationships that speaks to us all.

While Sprouts mainly showcases the talents of choreographers, that of the dancers will also be on display. Germaine Cheng's nuanced physicality in embodying someone struck by Parkinson's disease was applauded by the judges as she won the Best Dancer Award for her performance in her own work, *Part-kinson's*. What was most refreshing about her work was that it did not focus on the symptoms of the disease but the determination to carry on with life. This was echoed in the recording of her grandmother, who has Parkinson's, talking about being able to take public transport and buying groceries despite her condition. This was also evident in her choreography with the repeated motif of dressing to highlight how one copes with the mundane when one suffers from the disease. Unfortunately, her work was slightly marred by the unclear trajectory of the piece and one only knows what she is trying to say in the second half of her work. Also, the opening line in which the dancer says "Dear Mr Parkinson" should be delivered with conviction and not be an expedient throwaway line to start the dance. Despite that, I would really hope to see this work being developed further and restaged.

For the first time in the history of the competition, two honourable mentions were awarded to Koustav Basu Mallick for *Fifth* and Tania Goh for *Deafening Moment*. Mallick's work revolves around the idea of not fitting in. This was established by one dancer failing to enter a group and every time one of the group members tried to reach out to the misfit, the others pulled him or her back in. The group dynamic between the dancers was strong and there was a beautiful flowing motion of the bodies within the group which created an illusion of waves pulling away whenever a connection was attempted. Yet, what was puzzling about this work was the significance of the title of the piece especially when there were six dancers on stage. As for Goh's work, she explored the need to find the silence in ourselves and "in there presents the choices we have./ Of vulnerability, truth and honesty." The dancers had a great energy and in depicting the noise that pervades the interior and exterior of our lives in a flurry of hands and bodies, the energy exuded was not frenzied but concentrated. What was slightly disappointing was the imbalance between noise and silence. The former went on for a tad too long and the "deafening moment" was found wanting when it came. It was unclear what the characters found or had to contend with in the end. Having said that, the judges rightly saw potential in the piece.

Finally, it would be unfair if Koh Jia Ler's *Interface* is not commended. Being the youngest finalist, her work is definitely impressive and one would think it was created by someone much older than her. *Interface* is an exploration of the intermingling between oil and water and the intricacies of this interaction as well as how the opposing entities "still retain their own characteristics." There was a lyrical beauty to the piece as the interaction between both entities created some beautiful stage pictures. The dancers also displayed strong body control and the choreography clearly played to the dancers' strengths. The choice to start and end the piece with water sliding on the floor and oil staying upright gave the piece a sense of temporality and it made me want to watch the piece again. What was lacking was not the choreography or the execution but the concept. Is she really exploring the intermingling of oil and water or merely two different entities? If it is really the former, more workshopping and devising are needed to bring out the portrayal of oil and water in dance.

I must confess that I vaguely knew of Sprouts' existence before this showcase and was surprised that it was already the fifth instalment. But what is clear is that there is no shortage of talents and I look forward to the sixth edition as well as the future works of the finalists in this showcase.

The sixth edition of Sprouts will be opened for entries in March and the deadline for proposal submissions will be in May 2014. For more information, please visit their [website](#).