

## Dance review: Frontier Danceland bids farewell to full-time status with Milieu 2023



The performance a . part by Low Mei Yoke. PHOTO: JUSTIN KOH

**Melissa Quek**

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UPDATED 5 HOURS AGO ▾

### Milieu 2023

Frontier Danceland

**Annexe Studio, Esplanade**

**Last Thursday**

The local dance community was shocked when contemporary dance company Frontier Danceland announced on March 31 that it would transition from being a full-time company to a project-based one.

Established in 1991 by Tan Chong Poh and Low Mei Yoke, it gradually developed from a haven for amateur dancers to a professional full-time company in 2011.

Milieu, an integral part of Frontier Danceland's annual calendar, is where international guest choreographers have created new works with the company.

Milieu 2023 is the company's last local performance before the company's artistic director and Cultural Medallion recipient Low takes time to slow down and reflect on her artistic practice.

The performance begins with an illuminated Low sitting dreamily in a chair, the audience closely surrounding her, turning the Esplanade Annexe theatre into an intimate performance space.

She sings Little Cowherd, a Chinese tune popular in the late 1960s. As she reminisces about her relationship with dance and Frontier Danceland, she rises and starts to move with light, spry steps that belie her 68 years.

This nostalgic hour-long dance titled a . part was conceptualised by Malaysia-born choreographer Ong Yong Lock as a way for Low to reconnect with significant people from her dance life, in acknowledgement of the farewell to Frontier Danceland's full-time status.

Low's solo transitions into a mesmerising duet choreographed by assistant artistic director Chiew Peishan in collaboration with the only remaining company dancers, Sammantha Yue and Filipino Kirby Dunnzell.

As Chiew's choreography contends with the duality of hope and hurt that is her journey with the company, Yue and Dunnzell grapple with a fragile red apple, balancing it on their faces and holding onto it by the stem while continuing to negotiate past each other.

The red apple is echoed in two red balls used by the dancers. The balls are simultaneously an assistance and a barrier, carrying the bodies forward but away from each other.



The red balls are simultaneously an assistance and a barrier, carrying the bodies forward but away from each other. PHOTO: BERNIE NG

In the final segment, a performance of meeting and parting, Low returns to invite three friends to share the stage in turn with her. These volunteers include students, former dance mates, collaborators and early amateur members of Frontier Danceland who have been planted in the audience.

Each performance has a different set of volunteers. Low's first friend drinks a cup of tea with her. Clinking their glasses, sitting back to back and linking arms, it is an idyllic scene of camaraderie. The second friend sings a song and dances with her. The third friend reads snippets from her artist biography as he tears pages out of the programme book to place around her.

A fourth friend runs in joyously. She is a long-time collaborator, Malaysian choreographer Loke Soh Kim. She brings with her a buoyancy that turns the melancholic atmosphere into a celebratory one. Loke and Low draw the three friends back onto the stage.

Company co-founder and Low's husband, Tan, dances with her. Soon, he invites Goh Soo Khim, founder of Singapore Dance Theatre (now known as Singapore Ballet) to dance with him while Low finds herself in an impromptu duet with contemporary dance company The Human Expression's artistic director Kuik Swee Boon.

As more and more of the audience members closest to the stage are pulled up from the floor to dance, the stage is filled with clearly trained bodies in a contemporary dance party.

With minimal prompting, the bodies move into a circle and fall back as Low steps into the centre. Everyone is moved to applaud as the lights dim on this final performance before Low's hiatus. A performance that we hope is not her swansong.

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