

Review: MILIEU 2023 by Frontier Danceland



BY BAKCHORMEEBOY

AUGUST 13, 2023

COMMENTS 0



Swansong for Frontier Danceland takes a critical look at its history, and ends on a note of joy.

As the artistic director and co-founder of Frontier Danceland, Low Mei Yoke has seen the contemporary dance company through every single one of its ups and downs for over 30 years now. From its humble beginnings as a group of hobbyist dancers to becoming one of Singapore's key dance organizations, Frontier Danceland's story now enters a new chapter, as it ceases to be a full-time contemporary dance company from here on out.

Marking this momentous occasion was the final edition of their annual MILIEU production, this time presenting a single work, *a . part*, at the Esplanade Annexe Studio. Conceptualised by Ong Yong Lock, who co-choreographed the work with Low, Loke Soh Kim and Chiew Peishan, *a . part* is a reflective piece starring Low, as she reflects back on her time with Frontier Danceland.



Knowing the context of the work, *a . part*'s title inspires several ideas about what the work will thematically entail, including ideas of togetherness and separation. The work begins with Low seated on a chair, humming a tune called *Little Cowherd*, before she speaks in Mandarin, explaining to us her memories performing to a piece choreographed to that song, before demonstrating several movements she recalls.

In spite of her age, Low's posture and poise reveal her years of dance training that have kept her remarkably disciplined and lithe, posing with the chair and stretching out. There is a youthfulness to her body that performing this seems to bring, and it feels almost as if she has been transported back to her past just for a moment in time, a smile on her face as she really, truly enjoys the artform and the freedom it affords her body.

Low's subsequent speech explains the philosophy behind Frontier Danceland's artistry, born in part from Low's own dance training and openness towards multiple dance forms, be they Eastern or Western. For Low, Chinese dance is never limited to traditional forms alone, but have the potential to grow, change and amalgamate with other styles, finding just the right way of expressing precisely what one wants and pushing the artform into new frontiers.



Fifty years in the industry is a long time, and along with it, plenty of relationships built, and others cut short. It is at this point that company dancers Sammantha Yue and Kirby Dunszell enter the space, as if representing each new generation of dance artists under Frontier Danceland's wing, all of whom Low would no doubt have seen enter and exit the company's doors over the years. She guides them, teaching them how to move or allowing them to interact with the spaces around them, a joyous process.

Low now gives them the space to perform, while she retreats offstage to observe from afar. Sammantha and Kirby seem to embody the evolution of Frontier Danceland over the years, initially uncertain but always stretching themselves into extreme, precarious positions requiring utmost balance. As the work progresses, the two begin to interact more with each other, at times locked in a synchronous duet, at others seemingly at loggerheads as they compete with each other rather than collaborate.

Even the set references past productions, with red spheres and domes repurposed from Shahar Binyamini's 2022 work *MORE THAN HUMAN*, or a tiny origami apple from Chiew Peishan's *Re Apple Diary* (2021). Over the course of the performance, their purpose ebbs and shifts – the spheres are at one point almost toy-like as the dancers roll them around the space, before becoming obstacles in next, as they struggle to lift them on their backs, like Atlas holding up the world. Frontier Danceland has clearly had its fair share of ups and downs, and even in this final piece, is unafraid to acknowledge them both.



All this while, Low watches from a distance, and at one point, even climbs up to the second level, looking down almost in disapproval at the two dancers locked in combat, like some kind of divine mother figure. As Low lets go of a giant red sphere, Sammantha moves to catch it just in time, and we wonder what kinds of challenges and tough training Low has put her dancers through, and how she looks back on it all, where both the enriching and the toxic are present, equally capable of teaching important life lessons to those who experience them.

No matter how tough or tenuous things get however, there always seems to be hope waiting. Throughout their interactions, one thing is for sure – through it all, the dancers press on, filled with hope as they persevere. We watch as the delicate origami apple they try so hard to protect eventually become flattened and changed, symbolising the eventual acceptance that to grow, one must learn to accept change.

It is in *a . part's* final act that all the emotional buildup comes to the fore, and the result of Frontier Danceland's practice seen in full. All this while, Malaysian composer Kent Lee has been providing the music live, his sound often dipping into the spiritual and the surreal, as he adds his own voice to the atmospheric mix. At this juncture, he gets up, and fills a teapot with hot water before returning. to his place, waiting for the tea to brew. Sammantha and Kirby leave the stage, and Low returns, now showing us a placard that invites an audience member to join her onstage.



The audience is shy at first, and Low begins the process by selecting people herself. What ensues is a tender, intimate process of improvising, welcoming a stranger into the space, reassuring them of their place onstage, and engaging in a process of relationship-building. To an invitee, they bond over tea, their bodies intertwining as they drink, lean against each other, and play. Another invitee, clearly a seasoned dancer and close friend of Low's, comes onstage ready to perform, and the two reminisce over their years of friendship, never saying a word, only speaking with their bodies and old songs. Finally, a complete stranger begins to read from the programme booklet, while Low lies still, as if she is listening to her own obituary, somewhat awkward yet oddly poignant.

Eventually, the invitation opens up to anyone and everyone who wants to join in. Co-choreographer Loke Soh Kim comes onstage and brings an excited, joyous energy as she seems to almost glide about, dancing with Low. As Kent Lee's music swells, growing louder and more emotional, more audience members are brought to the stage, from dance students to Esplanade staff. The shyness quickly gives way to joy as they allow their bodies to be free and just move, living in the moment, regardless of their skill level.

a . part then, is not about drifting away, but about the idea of bringing people together. As much as one may have deviated from one's original intent, if one approaches the future without fear, change instead becomes an opportunity to bring new ideas and people into one's orbit. We may look on the past with criticality and regret, but more important is to also take note of the strengths and friendships forged along the way that do last. This is not the end of Frontier Danceland, but a new beginning, and with *a . part*, we know and understand the connection that people have felt to the company, and celebrate it one last time, cherishing the memories and looking boldly into the future as one united community.

Photo Credit: Justin Koh

MILIEU 2023 ran from 3rd to 4th August 2023 at the Esplanade Annexe Studio.

Production Credits:

Concept Director: Ong Yong Lock
Choreographers: Low Mei Yoke, Ong Yong Lock, Loke Soh Kim, Chiew Peishan
In Collaboration with Performers: Low Mei Yoke, Loke Soh Kim, Kent Lee, Sammantha Yue, Kirby Dunzell
Music Composer: Kent Lee

TAGS • 2023 • ARTS • AUGUST • DANCE • FRONTIERDANCELAND • REVIEW • SG • SINGAPORE