

# A Tea Party, Farewell to Frontier Danceland

Upon entering the Esplanade Annexe Studio for Frontier Danceland's final production as a full-time contemporary dance company, *Milieu 2023-a. part*, the Artistic Director, Low Mei Yoke, wearing a beautiful translucent jade, coinciding with her last name Yoke (玉), enhanced her amicable, loving presence, with a hint of nervous energy while she sat on a white chair, anticipating what was to come. She smiled at each entering audience like she knew each one of them as an old friend of hers. It was as if an invitation to a tea party, a party to celebrate the beginning of the end, a farewell to the company she co-founded.



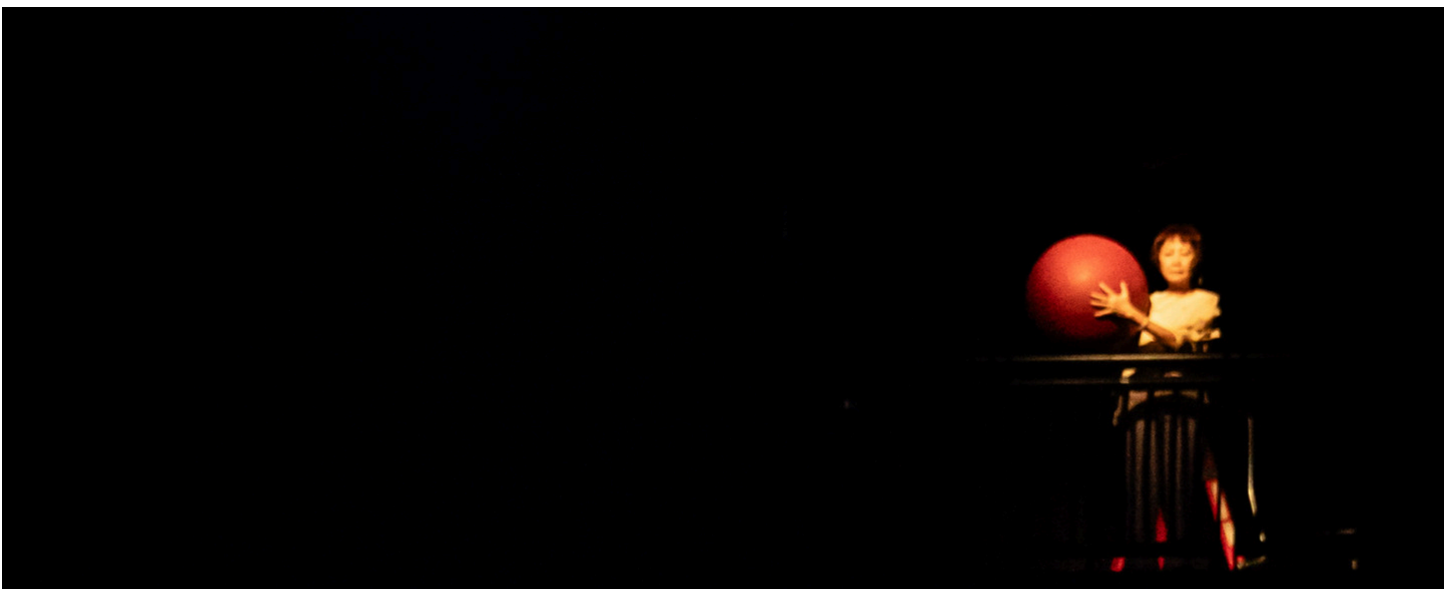
Low began her retrospective journey with the accompaniment of her own recorded voice-over while seated demurely on her chair. The same energy continues to exude from her, both hospitality and nervousness, perhaps because it was the opening night, of being the centre stage after many years of standing behind the company's works. She gestured with her jade-wrist small hands, looking into her past, inviting the audience into her beginning. She told the familiar story of her time. How she was charmed into the world of dance by her predecessors. Her fascination with the glam and glitz of performances on stage and more than that the freedom she could sense from the performers themselves. As she continued to gesture and traverse the space mostly at her own pace, it wasn't her small stature or movement that created the tone for the evening, but the depth of her story developed over decades. Six decades to be precise, as she told her story of passion-led persistence, resilience, adaptability, and absolute struggle from poverty to possibilities that are getting rarer in today's world with the younger generations. Her vision for a dance company that could lead the way into the future was shaped by her love and experience. Her perception of being frontier, as her company so aptly named (Frontier Danceland) began with the desire to merge oriental dance, ballet, and modern dance into a style that screamed Singapore, reflecting the people that lived at the time. As time changed, she depended on the younger generation to envision for themselves what that might look like. Low's significant contribution was the platform she aggressively protected and created for the generation after herself.



Hong Kong-based Malaysian Ong Yong Lock sensitively arranged the following section after Low took a backseat away from the stage into the front row with the audience who were all seated at an equal level in the high-ceilinged almost circular Esplanade Annexe Studio. The performance transitioned with her interaction with the oversized props of red spheres purposefully stacked at the upstage right corner. Here, Ong introduced the movement-punched choreography by Chiew Peishan, former assistant artistic director and dancer of the company, in collaboration with the last two Frontier Danceland's full-time dance artists, Sammantha Yue and Kirby Dunnzell. A seasoned contemporary dance performer and almost the face of the company, Yue, with her hair tied up in a high ballet bun, echoed Low's desire to formally train through classical ballet at the beginning of her dance journey. Yue's movement vocabulary contrasted completely with Low's. Yue moved with highly trained Westernised technique, but not without a hint of "flow" that hallmarks oriental dance's emphasis on fluidity. Chiew intended to showcase her bitter-sweet relationship with the company with full honesty, working with the themes of "hope and hurt" extending from her previous work for the company, *Re Apple Diary* (2021) using an origami apple which was organically squashed amid Yue and Dunnzell's duet representing change; and red spheres of varying sizes that were incorporated as the visualised versions of hope as well as hurt throughout the piece, supported and dropped by all three performers including Low who dropped a medium-sized sphere from the second story of the space with a loud boom as the dancers continued to morph and move with the ideation of hope and hurt through their own bodies and interpretation. While Chiew's work contrasted and disconnected from the narrative full of hope and a sense of achievement that was set by Low from the beginning, one could appreciate the expression of the generational gaps that existed in the dance world, perhaps, shared by many of Chiew's generation working with the generation before. After all, thanks to technology-aided accessibility, the world changed so drastically that a vision no matter how noble, could become obsolete. That is a challenge for the current and future generations in all industries, including the performing arts. In a way, Chiew had the amazing privilege of being brutally honest about the state of being a part of a full-time dance company struggling to play catch-up. She had the opportunity to envision the future by facing her "hurt" head-on to find a new hope with her own and future generation that sorely needed a new direction in the ever-changing world, that is changing faster than ever, and facing obstacles never before experienced.



In the final act, the whole performance was halted by the standing up of the live musician, Kent Lee, who in a casual manner started brewing a cup of tea in a transparent teapot set for two using the out-of-place water station that had taken up a rather big chunk of the performance space. And so, the tea ceremony began. He invited Low to join him. And as if prompted by the environment, Low, this time reaching for A1-sized papers, one page after another, with visible hand-written speech prompts, began to read out loud in her formal diction of Mandarin (apologies for those who cannot understand the language), essentially expressing her appreciation to those who showed her support and camaraderie in her quest in co-founding Frontier Danceland. One by one, she invited her old friends from the audience to join her on stage to have a cup of tea while celebrating their private encounters. It felt as if the performance was over, and this was a private post-performance tea party. Low laid down on her back in the centre of the space, before the party went on for too long for those who may not understand what was going on, to conclude the performance marking the dissolution of the company she co-founded and sustained as long as she could with every resource she could gather.





The last collaborator of the company since 1996, Loke Soh Kim, entered as the performance seemingly had come to an end. She reignited the flames in *Low* by moving her into standing skillfully through her improvisation technique. The space transformed into a very different energy that was somehow more present and relevant. Loke then started to encourage the audience onto the stage to keep dancing, knowing that most of the audience were *Low*'s previous mentees, friends, young and old, who were either performers or dancers themselves, to join in and continue to just dance. Lee who was invited by Loke to be a part of this production as the live music composer understood right away to continue to respond to the spontaneity of what transpired with his sound. *Low* may have started with a simple love for dance that grew into a full-fledged contemporary dance company. But the friendship, platform, and legacy she left behind, was more than simple. *Frontier Danceland* may be performing its final season, but it has gathered a group of artists who have the desire to be a part of the change that the

unpredictable future holds. The end of the company marks the example for young Singapore movement and dance artists to take a bold stand to shape the unknown future of dance. Low could not have done it all by herself, it would take a united community made up of strong independent individuals to continue to come together for a dance “tea party”, started by Frontier Danceland.



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*Milieu 2023, a . part*

Performance reviewed: 3 August 2023 (Thursday), 8 pm, Esplanade Annexe Studio

Produced by: Frontier Danceland

Artistic Director: Low Mei Yoke

Concept Director/Choreographer: Ong Yong Lock

Choreographer/Performer: Loke Soh Kim

Choreographer: Chiew Peishan

Music Composer/Performer: Kent Lee

Company Artist/Performer: Sammantha Yue

Company Artist/Performer: Kirby Dunnzell