

Dancing Diversity: Creating Friendships Across Borders

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Friendships across borders

Singapore is a regional hub uniquely placed as a meeting point between the East and the West. With an extensive calendar of dance events from companies and independents embracing diverse dance practices and artistic traditions, a vibrant dance scene that challenges audiences with a matrix of forms, concepts and productions is ensured. Dance across the ASEAN region is a continuum with networks of exchange, shared stories and experiences linking countries and cultures, time-honoured heritages and evolving practices. Eclectic synergising of embodied traditions with globalised dance genres like classical ballet, urban street dance and contemporary are the 'toolbox' of Southeast Asian choreographers who are attracting audiences and international attention through bold innovation.

These interactions have resulted in performances and festivals that feature artists from Asian countries/regions such as China, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Thailand, Cambodia, India, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and further afield to include Australia, Europe and the United States. Such ventures provide a refreshing necessity for Singaporean artists who work within a small spatial and geographical frame. Shared performances, master-classes, showcases of works-in-progress and after-show dialogues, along with follow-up reverse visits are part of almost every independent choreographer's and local dance company's annual schedules. Historically the dances of the major Singaporean ethnic groups (Chinese, Malay and Indian) have their geneses around the Asian region and it made sense to visit the country where the traditional roots are practised. In Singapore's

context, transmigration has resulted in a nuanced, hybrid combination of forms and narratives that are explored and repositioned. Personal beliefs and questions about the contemporary world that exist beyond cultural specificity underpin these interactions. Critics, dance festival presenters and scholars have embraced these developments, recognising a new wave of distinctive choreographic practice.

Continuing traditions

Common to the countries of Southeast Asia are traditions that include tribal, folk and court dances. There exists myriad ethnic, religious and language groups in what has been a dynamic and often volatile political region. Continuing traditions occur alongside new forms of expression brought about initially through colonisation and more recently, globalisation and digital sharing.

Traditional dances from Southeast Asia are alive with symbolism and metaphor. These can be seen in the dancers' representations of gods, animals, mythical beings and the characters from the great epics of the region such as the *Ramayana*. While the narratives of the dance are on the surface descriptive, sophisticated semiotic coding is embodied within hand and eye gestures, postures, and phrases of movement. A dancer is trained to perform the characters with detailed clarity while audiences recognise the attributes of each character and the ability of the dancers to bring these to life in their rendition of the role. Iconic imagery is portrayed through mimetic and metonymic signs in a dance language where complex meaning is navigated through the combination of gestures that extend to abstracted sequences of dance.

Watching a dance performance in the ASEAN region involves a mesh of threads and pathways incorporating different movement vocabularies, dance philosophies, techniques and narratives that interweave. Dance is moving rapidly with a creative confidence that is stimulating audiences and revitalising an interest in the next wave of Asian contemporary dance.

Contemporary expression

In the global village of the 21st century, cultural exchange is an important factor in understanding, celebrating and preserving the diversity of cultures around our region. Diversity emerges from incorporating the sensibilities of Eastern practices such as yoga, martial arts and t'ai chi with Western forms. For instance, Javanese

choreographer Eko Supriyanto, a prolific regional collaborator, imbues his creations with new vocabulary based on amalgamating traditional Javanese dance and the martial art form *pencak silat*. This juxtaposition contrasts the calm serenity of one form against the powerful, directness of the other. Another Indonesian choreographer from Sumatra, Boi Sakti, also creates new vocabulary based on these traditional forms interweaving thematic reflections on tradition and change. Both dancers have choreographed in Singapore; Sakti with The Human Expression (T.H.E) (2009) and Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT), (2000 and 2001) and Supriyanto with Maya Dance Theatre in *ANWESHA – The Quest* (2013), and with Raka Maitra, artistic director of CHOWK, at the Graey Festival in 2010. Sakti's poetic choreography *Reminiscing the Moon* (2001) for SDT is doubly significant as it was a special commission for the opening of Singapore's Esplanade Theatres on the Bay (Esplanade) in 2002.



Reminiscing the Moon, Singapore Dance Theatre, 2002. Image courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay.

The spectrum of choreography from literal narratives to more abstract work is vast. In August 2017, Era Dance Theatre (Singapore) created *Temasik* in collaboration with the Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris in Malaysia, reviving the traditional art of *taridra*, (a drama presented in the form of dance). An interdisciplinary approach was adopted, featuring a large group of Malay dancers and musicians recounting various parts of the history of the establishment of Singapore as a trading port in the late 13th century during the majestic Sriwijaya era. This was a special opportunity for the young musicians to work together on a large-scale production that incorporated dance-drama elements in a larger narrative. Contemporary dance company T.H.E also explores local stories about heritage and culture in their works shifting between literal and abstract elements. *As It Fades* (2011) for example, looks at loss of heritage through diminished use of dialects and local customs. The

Arts Fission, led by artistic director Angela Liong, has an extensive repertoire that has often sought inspiration from rural Asia and is exemplified in its Barefoot Dancers Initiative from 2007, whereby the company travels to seek critical engagement across borders. Other local companies like MAYA Dance Theatre have forged links with the artists Dangnan Pamungkas and Eko Supriyanto from Indonesia while Esplanade's annual *da:ns* festival has commissioned new productions from leading regional artists, such as Cambodia's Amrita Performing Arts, *Brodal Serei (Freestyle Boxing)* (2016), Pichet Klunchun, a traditional *Khon* trained dancer from Thailand, *Dancing with Death* (2016), and Jecko Siompo, dancer/choreographer from Papua Indonesia, *We came from the East* (2011).

Such multi-layered, deeply contextualised works by contemporary choreographers and dancers of the ASEAN region embody many of



Dancing with Death, Pichet Klunchun, 2016. Photo by Bernie Ng. Image courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay.



As It Fades (2011) by T.H.E Dance Company at Esplanade Theatre – choreography by Kuik Swee Boon. Photo by Matthew G. Johnson.

the challenges that occur in collaborations that transcend countries, dance traditions, ideas and philosophies. These journeys of cultural exchange are potentially full of risks, defining moments and surprises as artists move out of their established physical and philosophical comfort zones. They are not without controversy, particularly within well-established traditional dance forms where re-interpretation might be considered radical.

Future directions

The development of new Asian movement vocabularies arises from working within the traditions and philosophies of the ASEAN region, and also in response to current societal issues and personal concerns. Like all dance

makers, choreographers of Southeast Asia seek to find a unique voice in concept and form. ‘Contemporisation’ is a trend within the region and the diaspora, with dancers working within their embodied practices as well as travelling internationally to explore new techniques and creative processes. Research and performativity are central to this direction, and the role of dramaturgy in redefining the context as the dialogue between artists and audiences unfolds and shifts has become crucial. Technology is playing an increasingly important part not only by enabling innovative performance options but also as a means of connecting artists. Instances of dancers rehearsing together in different countries and sharing material through online platforms are common in a region where studio space is scarce and resources expensive.

Dance artists across ASEAN are negotiating their place as they join the diversity that is contemporary Asian dance. The current generation of artists work with and within tradition to re-build, re-invent and make unique dance statements utilising training in both Eastern and Western dance forms, bringing new approaches. Innovations in movement vocabulary evolves through a deep-rooted personal understanding of tradition. Rather than simply exploiting the East and West in a confluence of styles, choreographers use imagination to build, select, re-invent, re-define and re-contextualise their identity, giving unique creative voices to their ideas.

Regional performers and choreographers, dance faculty and researchers, as well as students and teachers increasingly come together in gatherings initiated by international organisations like the World Dance Alliance, Dance and the Child International, World Alliance of Arts Educators, Study Group on Ethnochoreology, and many more to share practice, experiences and dialogue about the changing ecology of the art form, opening new conversations and enabling fresh perspectives.

The healing role of the arts and the empowerment of peoples through creative expression cannot be ignored as an element in the current cultural landscape. In Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia and other countries, dance has been crucial in supporting traumatised children and engaging disenfranchised youth through workshops, community programmes and performances in schools and communities. In Singapore, there is a growing awareness of empowerment through dance in the special needs sector, and several dance artists are contributing and finding creative stimulation in this field.

Historically artists repeatedly seek new forms of expression, and have been inspired by the new and the unfamiliar. Asia is a rich resource with a multiplicity of dance genres and traditions. In an increasingly borderless world they flow through dance experiences across borders. Dance in ASEAN countries is expressed in parallel; continuing lines of focus with the avant-garde occurring alongside traditional and community dance activity. Dance is a continuum that expresses all aspects of life, tradition and change. □

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