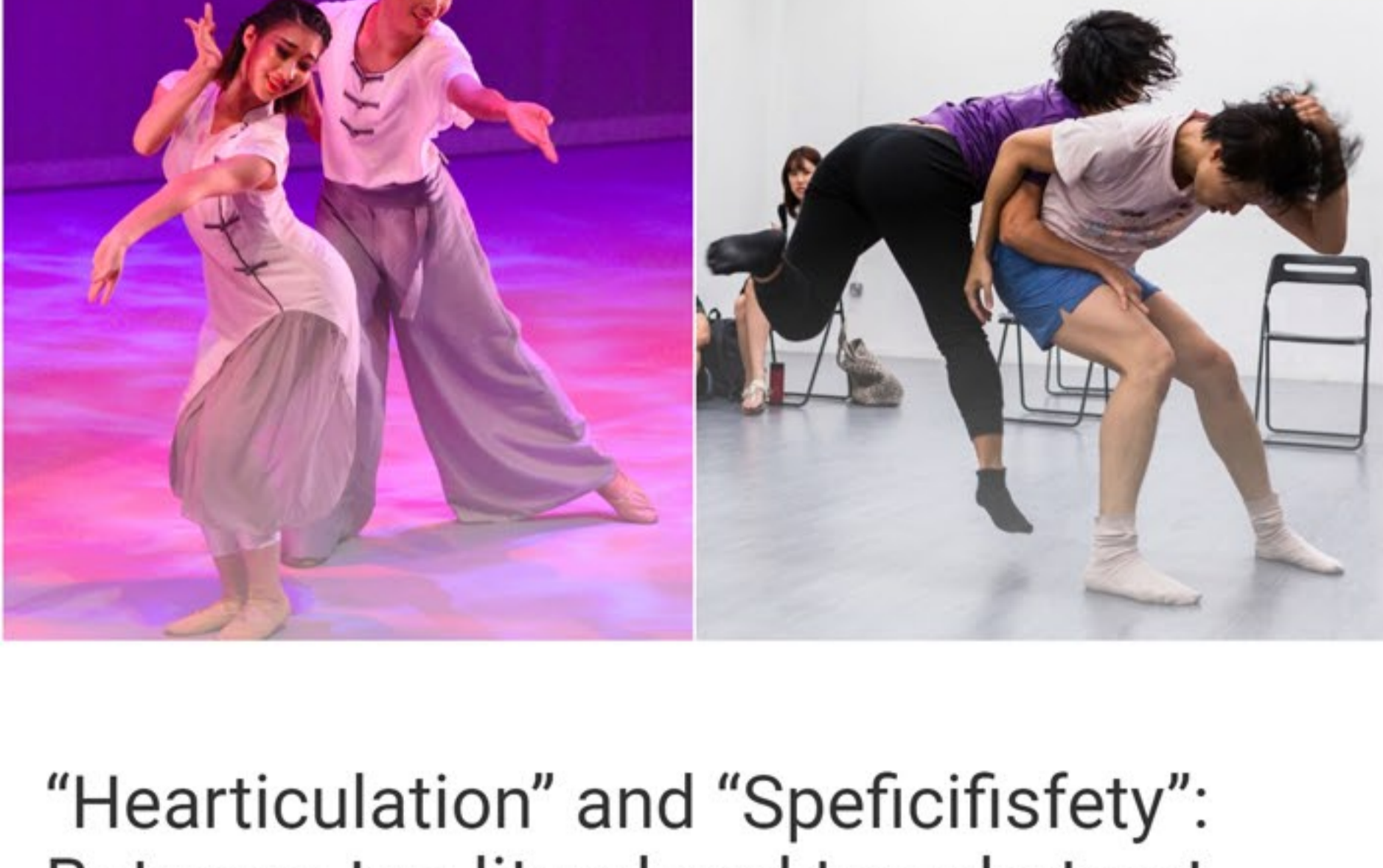




THINKING AND TALKING ABOUT ARTS AND CULTURE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

ARTICLES



"Hearticulation" and "Speticifisfety": Between too literal and too abstract

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In March 2017, Hokkien Huay Kuan Dance Troupe morphed into Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre, receiving the highest accolade in the history of Singaporean Chinese dance. The only other professional dance company in Singapore bearing the country's name is Singapore Dance Theatre, the descendant of the ballet group of National Dance Company. Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre's position in the field of Singaporean Chinese dance is assured because of its continued efforts in legitimizing its artistic identity, consecrating Chinese dance as highbrow art. The young professional company is authenticating its own distinctive style of Singaporean Chinese dance that plays to the strengths of its dancers, as evinced in their fifth major production "HEARTiculation".

Surprisingly, the evening's works by artistic director Lim Moi Kim, resident choreographer Jenny Neo, and guest choreographers Wu Kam-Ming, Ho Ka Man and Yong Yong Xin are devoid of 'signature technique tricks' (*jiqiao* [技巧]) or acrobatic sequences of flips, turns, and leaps. Dazzling displays of superhuman virtuosity are absent, but being a traditionalist, I welcome this change. In its place is the company's attempts to realize the Chinese aesthetics that is manifested in *yijing* (意境) or the aesthetic state: the merging of external images and internal emotions, reality and virtual. The thread binding the four works is to express inner emotions "from the heart."

The program's most appealing work came from Wu in his solo performance "Palace: Behind the Forbidden Walls". Wu is an award-winning dancer formerly with Hong Kong Dance Company. Costumed in resplendent layers of blue and red that flap and flare when he turns, leaps, and rolls, Wu fills out the brilliant dimensions of the role of a palace eunuch. Images of despair and conflict are evoked with flashes of pirouettes intersected by swift and controlled falls, twirling of his ponytail (tied at the top of his head), and delicate and almost exaggerated *lan hua zhi* (兰花指) or orchid hand gestures, commonly executed by female dancers. Jia Peng Fang's "A Water Lily", with its soulful strains of erhu and emotive motif, effectively enhances Wu's emotionally intense solo. In the end, a literal image of hopelessness and resignation appears: a video projection of a candle that gradually extinguishes while Wu ties an imaginary knot.



Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre's "Hearticulation". Photo by Lim Sau Boon

Besides Wu, the other prominent performer is the statuesque Jiang Wei, who displays dramatic expressivity and formidable technique in his role as the lonely emperor in Neo's "Palace: The Void Within". Trained in Chinese classical dance at the Beijing Dance Academy, Jiang's body clearly embodies the institutionalized art form: The spiralling flourish of his torso that leads into a vertical circle (*liyuan* [立圆]) and figure-eight movement (*baziyuan* [八字圆]), and the radiant but subdued 'rising and sinking of breath' (*tichen* [提沉]). Jiang's commanding performance is accentuated by the sumptuous score by Ma Shang You. The gifted eight year-old Chan Yu Kai Marcus, playing the role of a young emperor, almost usurps the limelight from the three adult performers (the other two were Neo and Zeng Xiang). Chan kicks and lunges and strikes before ending his solo in a valiant pose (or *liangxiang* [亮相]).

Lim effortlessly crafts an elaborate luscious visual spectacle for the ensemble of ten engaging amateur dancers (and soloist Guo Shiyang in an opulent headdress and red costumes) in "Palace: Silk of Destiny": intricate patterns, overlapping rhythm and bodies, innovative casting out and tugging back and swirling of the water sleeves. Death, as a motif, comes to the fore. The ensemble costumed in white, resembling ghosts, is a reflection of Goh who hangs herself in the end. And, composers Wu Tong and Zhang Lie's melancholic "Song of the Central Qin Province" lends a gloomy aura.



Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre's "Hearticulation". Photo by Lim Sau Boon

In the joint choreography of "Speechless Sorrow" by Ho and Yong, company dancers Zeng and Guo perform a lyrical duet interjected with stylized contemporary dance movements such as angular arms and temps levé with deep-curved backs. Composer-violinist Yong Kai Lin and dizi performer Tan Qing Lun, standing on a platform, perform Yong's riveting score (as well as recorded music). Admittedly, I question the choreographers' choice of the video projection on the screen of an unknown woman, and on the floor of rapid, unclear images, as well as four huge dangling cloths, sadly underutilized.

While storytelling, evoking themes of emotions and human relations, is salient in "HEARTiculation", abstraction and distilled emotions dominate the contemporary dance performance "Where's the speticifisfety?" by Lee Mun Wai and Lee Ren Xin. Contrived simplicity and athleticism mark the 50 minutes' work. Lee M. is a first-generation dancer at T.H.E. Dance Company, the institution of contemporary dance in Singapore known for churning out proficient technicians, among them, two Young Artist Award recipients; Lee M. is one of them.. Lee R. is an emerging independent choreographer. Their paths intersect when she was a guest choreographer at the T.H.E. second company.

The duo, dressed in sloppy dance practice outfits, compounded by the sparse multi-purpose studio with sunlight seeping into the space, appear to be presenting an informal showing rather than a performance per se. The walls are whitewashed, on