

Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre's ode to the forgotten

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DANCE

YE – ECHOES BEYOND TIME

Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre
Sept 19, 7.45pm
Drama Centre Theatre

Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre's nostalgia-filled *Ye – Echoes Beyond Time* provides a whimsical counterpoint to the current AI chatter and screen-based existence of an automated daily grind.

Gone are the animated projections and LED screens that lately have become the norm in many large-scale classical dance performances. This is a return to classic scenic design elements such as a long scarf extending and dancing in the breeze created by metal floor fans in creative director Benedict Soh's *Ah Ma (Grandma)* and some charming shadow-play in artistic director Jenny Neo's *Cut: Through Shadows And Light*.

The evening is an ode to the forgotten. In *Ah Ma (Grandma)*, Soh shines the spotlight on the women who silently contributed to nation-building by nurturing generations of children.

In a tender dance, consisting of three pairs of duets that illustrate the idea of "the woman behind every successful man", lies a tacit acknowledgement of the patriarchal social structures that existed during Singapore's early years of independence.

There is an arrested moment as the male dancers, in white singlets, balance on one another to construct a precarious multi-level structure with their bodies before breaking into an energetic interlude that injects a brief dynamic shift. It is an example of Soh's ability to accentuate the strengths of an all-male ensemble.

Unexpected tears well up in this



Ye – Echoes Beyond Time comprises *Ah Ma (Grandma)*, about the women who nurtured generations of children, and *Cut: Through Shadows And Light*, which focuses on the dying trade of paper cutting. PHOTO: ALEX CHUA

reviewer's eyes as Soh tugs at the heartstrings with stereotypical imagery (a woman sitting in a chair, rocking a baby; and children playing with balloons) and iconic songs, even including *Hai Feng De Lu Cheng (Journey Of The Sea Breeze)* by Toy Captain from the recent Teochew-language box-office hit *Dear You*.

Is *Ah Ma* really forgotten? The dance closes with a final image: The child, now an adult, remembers *Ah Ma* as a spotlight illuminates the motionless, empty rocking chair.

On the other hand, *Cut: Through Shadows And Light* focuses on the dying trade of traditional Chinese paper cutting.

Neo cleverly weaves this craft into her choreography through movement, set and costume elements. Red paper birds flutter down from above. Wreaths of paper cuts create an ornate banner over the stage. The red paper is cut into earrings, headpieces and collars for the dancers to wear.

Echoing the form of this traditional art is the theme of presence

and absence that appears in the often sculptural shaping of the dancers' bodies and the play with shadows. The silhouettes of the dancers' shadows turn them into paper cuts that float across the screen. They are buildings, geometric patterns and even birds that soon fly away. Rhythmic syncopation of movements and isolation of body parts when dancing foreground the precision and repetition of paper cutting.

A loose narrative connects the various sections that range from contemplative, as the character of a paper-cutting artist begins her journey, to childlike wonder as the artist introduces the character of a young girl to the beauty of paper cuts, to the free-spirited exuberance of a festive crowd and finally to composed elegance as the defined lines of the paper cuts are embodied in the grace of the dancers.

Together, the two works make for a charming though fitful ramble through time.

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