

Embodying the spirit of a mythical always-flying bird

DANCE

SOAR: A DEVOTION

Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre
Goodman Arts Centre, last Saturday

Melissa Quek

The Persian mythical Huma bird found in Sufi poetry and Hindu scriptures is said to spend its entire life flying high above the earth, never stopping, until death.

Choreographers Benedict Soh and Jenny Neo find parallels between the bird's relentless perseverance and a dancer's journey in life, creating *Soar: A Devotion*, which embodies the spirit of the bird.

In a prologue, the dancers are scattered around the set of thin rubber and steel rods intertwined to resemble a nest, which is also reminiscent of the *barres* dancers train at.

Neo comes out to walk among

the dancers and, in a moment that is quietly touching and true to life, she adjusts their hair.

After her exit, Soh appears and passes a pair of canvas dance shoes to one of the cast members to wear. It is a symbolic passing of the mantle to this relatively young cast of nine, only two of whom are full-time company dancers with the Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre.

The youthful energy of the dancers makes them a good fit for the first part of the dance where, enclosed within the nest, their wing-like arms shiver with the vulnerability of hatchlings. As they try to stand on stiff legs, slipping and sliding, they have all the adorable awkwardness of chicks.

Later in the dance, when they rise, undulating their outstretched arms with pointed gazes piercing straight ahead as confetti snow blows towards them, their desire to keep dancing in spite of setbacks is palpable.



The dancers in *Soar: A Devotion* had a youthful energy, but the reconfiguring of the imposing set proved distracting.

PHOTO: STANLEY CHEE

I later learn that this situation echoes reality as one of the dancers was injured in rehearsals but chose to continue performing. His part has been modified to ac-

commodate the injury and a duet was recast.

It is difficult to say whether this greatly impacted the overall performance as the cast's strength is in

its ensemble dancing, which captures both the uncertainty and perseverance of the bird. But the work lacks impactful breakout moments from the dancers. When given

their moments to shine in duets and solos, the dancers, perhaps overshadowed by the set, do not stand out.

The partnership of Soh and Neo creates a strong compositional structure that easily conveys the message of the work with characterising gestures that show different phases in the journey. At points, there are descriptive Mandarin lyrics sung by Soh and composer Kailin Yong. Unfortunately, the performance fails to fully take flight, never quite reaching the emotional climax it hints at.

The experimentation with an imposing set, making it a kind of performed installation, is both a liability and an asset. The set can break into segments and be cleverly employed to reconfigure the space, changing from a nest to rising hills with a steep valley, at once being a wall that barricades or a precarious cliff to take off from.

But the way it is moved often distracts from the choreography. The performers mostly walk in a mundane fashion as they push or pull the pieces into place. The impact of the set is further dampened by the cramped space as its segments cannot spread out, lessening the contrast between configurations.

If this work were to be restaged, it would be interesting to see how the set might breathe in a larger space and whether more time would significantly alter the interpretations of the dancers.