

Old Telok Ayer comes alive through dance

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DANCE

IMPRESSIONS OF TELOK AYER

Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre
Sota Drama Theatre
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As Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre moves into its 11th year, the company's performance on Aug 1 is a nostalgic reflection on the history of Telok Ayer.

A neighbourhood synonymous with the immigrant Chinese community during colonial times, the cultures of the various dialect groups who lived there have left their imprint on the surrounding area. Such a theme certainly aligns with the current zeitgeist of SG60 celebrations.

Impressions Of Telok Ayer is presented in four distinct segments, each giving a treatment of a different aspect of life in old Telok Ayer.

After a short prologue, the first segment, Strokes Upon A Faded Page, conjures up the challenging circumstances of Chinese immigrants in post-war Singapore, for whom home and family would have been distant yearnings.

The scene is presented against the backdrop of letter-writing. Calligrapher Koh Eng Tat performs the role of a letter-writer who helps illiterate clients write letters to their families back in China.

The audience hears a voiceover in Hokkien narrating phrases communicating that the sender has sent money home and misses their parents. Soon after, an image of a letter being written in Chinese is projected on a translucent screen in the foreground, while two



Strokes Upon A Faded Page is one of the segments in Impressions Of Telok Ayer (2025) by Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre. PHOTO: KUANG JINGKAI

dancers perform behind it, their bodies forming shapes and lines in beautiful juxtaposition against the Chinese characters.

This is especially meaningful considering that Chinese characters are ideograms, some of which are based on the human body itself.

The second segment, Gentle Combs, Silent Wishes, revolves around majie, Cantonese women who took vows of celibacy and usually worked as domestic helpers, forming close sisterhoods.

Set against haunting music by Eri Sugai, the dancers are dressed in the typical white tops and black trousers of majie.

Most wear their hair in long pigtails, contrasting against the traditional "hair-combing" ceremony re-enacted in the foreground. The young majie-to-be approaches the ceremony with trepidation yet resolution, highlighting the gravitas of the tradition.

The Lasting Brew is somewhat lighter-hearted, telling the story of a young man from current times who time-travels to the 1970s and meets his grandfather during the latter's days as a young man running a coffee shop in Telok Ayer.

This segment is bright and cheery, complete with polka-dot dresses and a charming duet between the young "grandfather" and his sweetheart.

While these first three segments

together paint a coherent picture of nostalgia for the Telok Ayer of days past, the last segment unfortunately disappoints.

Titled Beneath The Beams, Beyond The Realms, this segment pays tribute to Thian Hock Keng Temple by conjuring up a fantasy scene of fairies holding balls of light, and several other mythical dragon-like creatures.

The temple is, of course, a key landmark in the neighbourhood, and undoubtedly one that holds profound memories and meanings for residents past and present. However, the abrupt leap from the everyday scenes in the first three segments into an entirely mythical context is bewildering.

Even within this segment, one struggles to make sense of the disparate sub-scenes – beginning with girls playing and dancing with red clogs, followed by a section evoking the construction of the temple with the collaboration of four guest Malay dancers, and then the mythical scenes.

Nevertheless, the company's endeavour to provide a performing opportunity for a large number of dancers, and of varying age groups, is recognised.

Barring some instances where the movements and handling of props can be tighter, the performance is generally engaging, and a reflective way to start the nation's birthday month.