

Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre celebrates 10th anniversary with ambitious show

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DANCE

A SYMPHONY OF LIFE

Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre
Singtel Waterfront Theatre
at Esplanade
Sept 7

On the dark stage is what appears to be an oversized roll of burlap. With projection mapping, it becomes a scroll unfolding a story against a majestic soundtrack.

The image of Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre (SCDT) artistic director and choreographer Jenny Neo appears on the giant gauze backdrop as she shields her water-sleeves like paintbrushes forming Chinese words that gradually appear behind her.

Because Neo conceptualised the multimedia with set designer Tan Hwee Bin and illustrators from Collateral Damage Studios, it fits perfectly with the dance.

Presented at Esplanade's Singtel Waterfront Theatre as part of

SCDT's 10th-anniversary celebrations, *A Symphony Of Life* seamlessly blends sets and props, multimedia projections and intercultural music compositions with Chinese dance.

The performance uses the surge of a river as a metaphor for the journey of the company and its search for its place within the Singaporean dance scene.

Previously an amateur performance group founded by Madam Lim Moi Kim, the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan dance troupe rebranded and was incorporated in 2014 as a professional dance company to promote and explore the role of Chinese dance in Singapore's cultural identity.

In keeping with the anniversary theme, the performers are a mix of company artistes, trainees, interns, project dancers and their various performance troupes (youth, junior, children's), with the youngest performer being eight years old. They flow through the various moods of Neo's well-crafted choreography, moving



A Symphony Of Life blends sets and props, multimedia projections and intercultural music compositions with Chinese dance. PHOTO: ALEX CHUA

from gentle to elegant to tempestuous, emerging into a charming drum dance by the junior performance troupe and concluding in a colourful and celebratory finale choreographed by Benedict Soh.

The company continues to experiment and explore. Neo cleverly uses long rattan sticks to unfold the burlap scroll, and makes the risky choice to use the flexible but unwieldy sticks to represent resilience, connection and the undulations of the waves.

While rattan has a significant place in Chinese poetry and painting – often symbolising harmony and nature's vitality – the dancers struggle to comfortably engage with it as an extension of their limbs when partnering, and this distracts from the meaning behind

the choreography.

It is utilised more successfully in depicting chaos when the whipping action adds power and a sense of danger to the dancers' actions.

A highlight is the rich sound of diverse ethnic flavours gelled together by Sulwyn Lok, with collaboration with fellow established musicians Ghanavenothan Retnam, Megat Muhammad Firdaus and Tan Qing Lun coursing through the performance. It energises the performers and audience, particularly in a segment of live drumming and when a duo of suona players enters.

These all combine to make a pleasant performance, but this reviewer wishes the dancers could have performed with greater assurance and synchronicity.