

**Encore** The Straits Times' weekly review feature chronicles how Singapore's performing arts scene edges its way back to recovery in the wake of Covid-19 restrictions



# Stunning dance theatre

New creative team at Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre is off to a strong start with its first full-scale digital production

## DANCE

**THE SUSURRATIONS OF THE TREE**  
Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre  
Sistic Live/Last Friday

Chan Sze-Wei

This double bill marked a new dawn for the Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre, as it attempted its first full-scale digital production and marked its transition to new artistic leadership.

Jenny Neo, 42, recently succeeded her mentor and mother Lim Moi Kim as artistic director, while new creative director Benedict Soh, 47, came over from Dance Horizon Troupe.

Neo and Soh each created a 30-minute piece for this double bill, the awkward English title of which belied the more elegant Chinese one (Qing Sheng, Shu Yu) and its evocation of whispering nature. The company opted for a stage

performance aesthetic, filming in a traditional black box with theatre lighting and the dancers in full stage make-up.

The streamed performance was a hybrid of a documentation-style frontal view, filmic close-ups and some creative moving camera angles that took the viewer within and above the textures of the set.

Neo's *The Susurrations of the Tree* was a stunning dance theatre piece that transported the viewer into a fantasy realm ruled by a monumental tree spirit played by herself, perched on a tall platform in a voluminous orange dress that billowed and enveloped the whole stage.

Five tree spirit characters concealed beneath the fabric undulated as an extension of Neo's body. The camera followed the sprites into the glowing fabric cocoon, where their lithe and angular solos were layered and multiplied through video effects.



Emerging from the fabric canopy, the dancers flowed between sculptural poses from Chinese classical dance. In a distinctive section, they took on martial arts elements, wielding long tree roots as whips, lunging and spiralling.

The choreography integrated a beautifully evocative musical score, created in collaboration with home-grown musicians Yong Kailin, Tan Qing Lun and Jeffrey Tan for violin, voice and a combination of Chinese wind instruments.

In a wonderful touch, the musicians entered on stage on a few occasions, appearing to be mythical figures themselves.

Soh's *Tempting Hearts* enacted a sentimental story of a childhood romance turning to adult longing and loss. The piece was set to an aching soundtrack packed with excerpts of Chinese and English love songs and film dialogue. The dancers laid out rows of calendar pages in a metaphor for passing time.

The work was saved from cliché

by Soh's eye for dynamic tableaux and movement counterpoint, as well as the young cast who performed the choreography with nuanced acting and fine dance technique. Notable were two emotive solos by Wong Zhuo Qin and Neo Ke Xin.

This digital venture was a strong start for SCDT's new creative team, with an appeal that spoke to audiences beyond Chinese dance.

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The *Susurrations of the Tree* (left) takes viewers into the realm of fantasy while *Tempting Hearts* (far left) is a sentimental portrayal of a childhood romance turning into adult longing and loss. PHOTOS: ALAN NG, KUANG JINGKAI

## THE SUSURRATIONS OF THE TREE

WHERE Sistic Live  
WHEN Till Sunday, 11.59pm  
ADMISSION \$19, \$12  
(concessions) via Sistic  
(call 6348-5555 or go to  
[www.sistic.com.sg](http://www.sistic.com.sg))  
INFO [www.scdt.com.sg](http://www.scdt.com.sg)