

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

If It's Now, a performance by Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre, opens in a tranquil space made to look like a Chinese garden. PHOTO: ALAN NG



Huayi – Chinese Festival of Arts

Light-footed trip through history

Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre's If It's Now looks at women of different eras through their footwear

DANCE
IF IT'S NOW
Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre
Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay
Last Friday, 5pm

Melissa Quek

Turning the corner into the Esplanade's Annexe Studio, I enter not the inky darkness of the theatre that I expected, but the tranquillity of a Chinese garden.

The floor of the entryway is dotted with floral arrangements, leading me to a painted screen, behind which unfolds the real world of the space.

As I settle into my seat, my eye is drawn to a tree covered with pink blossoms while soft spots of light float across the white backdrop.

This world, created by space styling and experience design studio HelloFromFour and lighting designer James Tan, is all about balance. Reflective surfaces are set

against dark shadowy corners, while the harsh lines of mirrors contrast with the curved edges of a circular painted screen and chair.

The balance of masculine and feminine, traditional and contemporary, is fitting for the 45-minute dance *If It's Now*, co-produced by Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre (SCDT) and the Esplanade as part of the Huayi festival.

The work is choreographed by SCDT's new creative director Benny Neo, who was both appointed to their roles at the start of last year.

Drawing from classical Chinese and contemporary dance styles, it uses the evolution of women's

footwear in China to reflect on archetypes of feminine beauty and comportment across different eras.

The journey begins with the flowerpot shoes of the Manchu women, who could not bind their feet, but thought small feet were beautiful and hid their own under long skirts. SCDT junior artiste Gabriella Gleichenia Gautama performs the swaying walk of those who had to wear the tall, narrow platforms with a gentle elegance.

While beautifully ornamental, the shoes are also an impediment, restricting the women – clearly the central focus of the performance – from any attempts at jumping. They have to be lifted by the male

dancers, who can easily leap and travel across the stage.

In an energetic solo, dancer Sabri Amin winds his way over and under a stretched line of pink elastic, slicing through the air with his long limbs. When he cannot pull the elastic any farther, it snaps back out of sight.

The freedom he embodies emphasises the limitations and the weight of expectations portrayed by female dancers such as Low Kaihong, who depicts the Fan woman with bound feet in lotus shoes.

Seated on a chair in centre stage, she stares at her hand, tightly wrapped in a red scarf and at what appears to be a tiny shoe peeking

out from under her hemline. She rises and glides forward, pain etched on her face, then collapses into a dust with Amin, who supports her with ease.

Low is followed by junior artiste Wong Wen Ru, who represents the modern woman in red high heels, confident and unafraid to take charge.

If It's Now signals a turning point in SCDT's focus, moving from outreach and education to creating and performing new works, developing a contemporary dance style that is nevertheless rooted in classical Chinese dance aesthetics.

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