

A small step back to LIVE arts performances!

Yasuko Yeung

About a month ago, I had the great pleasure of attending a pilot trial performance given by Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT) live at the Esplanade Theatre. Although all concert halls and theatres have remained closed even after Phase 2, Esplanade Theatre are now testing the possibility of public live performances through a series of pilot performances cooperating with the Ministry of Culture Community and Youth and National Arts Council.

The trial performances began in their outdoor theatre on 12th September, followed by a concert by Singapore Symphony Orchestra (SSO) at their concert hall on 13th September. After these successful trials, Esplanade decided to hold two ballet performances with SDT as their partner on 23rd September with only 50 people allowed to attend each performance. Admission was free and tickets were booked through SISTIC. We were all very grateful for this first step back to normality.

From the viewpoint of the Government and Esplanade Theatre, the purpose of these pilot performances was to test how they could open arts performances to the public safely. Safety precautions were abundant! For example, when booking seats, SISTIC would automatically assign seats using a “bubble wrap” system. Ticketing was only through e-tickets. There were two SafeEntry points before the theatre entrance. We were reminded to keep our social distance and ushers led us to our designated seats on entry, and a staggered exit system was also introduced. We were also requested to fill in a detailed feedback form after the performance. For SDT too there were many challenges.



Curtain Call with Akira, Etienne, Min Yi, Satoru, Chihiro and Kenya (from left to right)

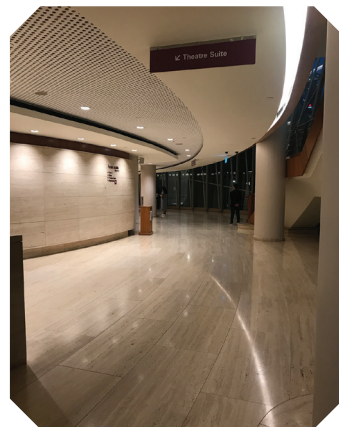
First, the dancers had been forced to stay home for over 3 months and even after the reopening of SDT’s studios, there were restrictions on space and time to get back to performance level. Second, there were severe restrictions on how dancers could interact which made putting together a dance programme very challenging! In the end, the cast was restricted to only three “fixed” pairs who would dance pas de deux. And even behind the curtain, social distance was strictly maintained. Finally, the official announcement was made just 10 days before the performance date giving SDT little time to prepare. But SDT and dancers and ballet lovers were all extremely grateful to be given the chance to participate in a live performance again.

This special production was aptly named “From Here On”. The programme consisted of 4 different pas de deux dances including Choo San Goh’s Configurations, The Nutcracker, Swan Lake and Don Quixote. These were performed by 3 pairs of dancers, Chihiro Uchida and Kenya Nakamura, Akira Nakahama and Etienne Ferrère, Kwok Min Yi and Satoru Agetsuma.

When tickets were released online, all seats were snatched up in seconds so SDT arranged a special preview on 22nd for guests including Mr. Edwin Tong, the new Minister of Culture Community and Youth. After the performance, Mr. Tong commented the evening was extra meaningful for him and his wife as one of the first ballet performances they watched together was SDT’s Nutcracker. Later he wrote “The stage is a performer’s



“Configurations, Pas de Deux”
Chihiro Uchida and Kenya Nakamura
(2020 SDT)



Esplanade Theatre on the day of performance



Social Distancing inside the theatre

life. I know it's been extremely challenging for our artists during this period to be taken away from their comfort zone. I'm glad some normalcy has returned for them, albeit on a smaller scale. Like them, I hope we can resume normal service once it's safe for everyone. Until then, stay passionate".

Esplanade is a world class arts venue affectionately known as "Durian". The right durian is a concert hall and the left one is the theatre where SDT performs. In between there is a concourse where in the good old days there would be a free concert. Esplanade is usually a place blessed with music. However this time, the silence in the space reminded me of Sleeping Beauty. One must have felt like this before Aurora's 100 year sleep ended. It was quiet and when we excitedly descended the stairs looking for activity, there they were.... the ushers in their familiar black uniform smiling at us holding barcode readers. We beamed at each other (you can tell smiles through masks, can't you?). And before we could say "Hello" they said "Welcome back". As we moved into the theatre we saw more familiar faces, SDT's staff and ballet fans. All smiling and chatting quietly but excitedly.

The performance began with SDT's Artistic Director, Janek, who casually walked on stage and talked to us as if to old friends rather than an audience. "When we performed Romeo & Juliet here back in March, we had no idea it would take this long to be back on stage". We all nodded in agreement, each of us treasuring the moment. This week should have been the week of SDT's popular Ballet Under The Stars had it not been cancelled, yet another victim of Covid-19.



"The Nutcracker, Pas de Deux Act II"
Akira Nakahama and Etienne Ferrère

The performance was limited to just one hour, and it went past so quickly. It was a mixture of nervousness, happiness, and love for ballet that bonded the dancers and audience together on this special evening. And at the end, we were led out by the ushers to leave the theatre without the chance to chat with one another. However quiet though, it was an overwhelming hour. Online performance is convenient but the feel of sharing the time and space with performers and fellow audience members is an experience on a different level. The energy and inspiration we received from them was tangible. The programme illustrated SDT's commitment to "remain progressive and adaptable in times of change and difficulty" and "to stay committed to inspire, unite and persevere through the toughest time". I am sure Singapore Symphony Orchestra, who performed earlier at the Esplanade Concert Hall planned their programme with a similar message to their audience.

After the performance, Chihiro, one of SDT's principals sent me a message:

"I have never performed in such silence. Silence everywhere..... on stage, back stage and audience...it was a surreal experience but I feel so grateful that we made a step forward in this safe environment. No matter what restrictions we had to work around, we are absolutely delighted to be given this opportunity to perform again on stage. I hope that very soon, we will be able to perform in front of an audience with all my colleague dancers."

Based upon the great success of this pilot performance, the authorities continue to come up with more schemes for opening up safe performances. We are grateful for this and I hope by the time you read this column; our daily life will have opened up even further.

Photos and information: Singapore Dance Theatre

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"Swan Lake, Pas de Deux Act II"
Chihiro Uchida and Kenya Nakamura (2020 SDT)



"Don Quixote, Pas de Deux Act III"
Kwok Min Yi (2020 SDT)



Singapore Imagine



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