

CULTURAL MEDALLION 2018

# LOW MEI YOKE



'Fade' by Frontier Danceland,  
Esplanade, 2015.

*Photo courtesy of Bernie Ng*

Low Mei Yoke (b. 1955) is the co-founder of Frontier Danceland where she is presently artistic director and choreographer. Low is one of the pioneer choreographers in Singapore who had the vision of creating a unique brand of contemporary dance with a distinctive Singaporean style. Fusing Eastern dance aesthetics with Western dance movements, Low's choreography focuses on honest portrayals of emotions, zeal and drive. Her works are contemplative, evoking reflection and introspection, and are celebrated for being bold, imaginative and thought-provoking. She also enjoys creating works that represent Singapore's vibrant and diverse society.

Low's choreographic works have been performed to great success and favourable reviews. Her work 'Cloud' met with much acclaim when it was showcased at the 2000 Feet – A Celebration of World Dance (1999), a dance festival held in Philadelphia, United States of America. Dance critic, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, praised it as a first-rate performance in America's foremost dance publication, Dance Magazine. In 2015, her work 'Fade' portrayed a chapter of Singaporean history which the young may be less familiar with: the Majie (妈姐) – the Chinese women who came to Singapore from Canton in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to work as helpers and, as part of their commitment to their families, took the vow of chastity. Low's other notable works include 'Abortion', 'Asking Dance', 'Crying Earth', 'Grandmother's Tale', 'Refugees', 'The First Emperor', 'In the Moment' and 'White'. Excerpts of her works have been performed in Belgium, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Portugal, Taiwan and other countries. Through dance, she has introduced her uniquely Singaporean narratives to other Asian countries, as well as to other parts of the world.

Low is often invited to sit on the judging panel in Malaysia's National Chinese Cultural Dance Open Competitions and the Hong Kong Bauhinia Cup Dance Championship together with other distinguished professionals.

An advocate of contemporary dance education in Singapore, Low is currently the resident choreographer and instructor of the modern dance groups at Nanyang Girls' High School, Raffles Girls' School and Raffles Institution. Under her tutelage, the schools have delivered consistently outstanding performances at the Singapore Youth Festival dance competition. Low has also set up the PULSE Scholarship and Dancers' Locker programme to enable young up-and-coming dancers to refine and showcase their work. Many of her mentees continue to play an active role in the arts today. ■

# ALWAYS A DREAM TO CHASE

BY CHOW YIAN PING



Community outreach performance with People's Association Cultural Dance Group 西湖春, 1973.

*Photo courtesy of Low Mei Yoke*



Low Mei Yoke with National Dance Company, Victoria Theatre, 1982.

*Photo courtesy of National Dance Company*

To many who are familiar with her work, there is no choreographer in Singapore who is more consistently engaging than Low Mei Yoke. In the 40 years of creating the visual language of dance in Singapore, Low has used her art form to go beyond what words or rhetoric can express. Her dance choreography conveys her contemplation and imagination of what it means to be a Chinese Singaporean, the poetics and aesthetics that matter to this part of the world, and the intricate manner in which traditions and modernity converse with each other.

Dancing never came easy to Low. Born to hawker parents, she remembers her first encounter with dance: looking on with wonder and longing at a girl, who was dressed in a beautiful tutu, dancing on the stage of a neighbouring English primary school. She had happened to pass by, and was immediately drawn to dance. However, learning to dance was considered extravagant as it was an expensive activity during the 1960s and 1970s. Low's first opportunity to attend a formal dance class arrived when she was 17 years old. She learned contemporary dance under Goh Lay Kuan at the Practice Performing Arts School. At the same time, Low had her first ballet class at the Singapore Ballet Academy under Goh Soo Khim.

In pursuit of her dream to become a dancer, Low worked hard to overcome obstacles and challenges. She grabbed every opportunity to engage with the art form – she joined the People's Association (PA), performed in community events and on television shows, joined the National Dance Company and learned from anyone who was willing to teach her. Unfortunately, life threw a curve ball at Low when she was diagnosed with an immunological disorder that gave her arthritis at 31 years old. Since her late teens, she had joint problems but symptoms worsened through the years. There were days when she got up in the morning and could not move her limbs. At times like these, she had to lie in bed to nurse her stiff and painful joints.

Arthritis continues to plague her today, and she has to be on constant medication to keep it at bay. During the 2017 MILIEU dance production of 'On and On Turn Turn Turn' by Hong Kong choreographer Victor Ma, she was asked to run



Dancing is about being present in movement and motion no matter what the circumstances may be.



Low Mei Yoke with National Dance Company, Victoria Theatre, 1982.

*Photo courtesy of National Dance Company*

around onstage non-stop for 15 minutes. A small stage made negotiating the circles especially taxing for her. After the first night's performance, she was in great pain but persisted for subsequent performances without disclosing her condition to anyone. To Low, this is about a dancer's single-minded devotion to her art. Dancing is about being present in movement and motion no matter what the circumstances may be.

Low treasures the dream to dance, and "to become". She has been inspired by many individuals to be a better dancer and choreographer. She cites dance pioneers Lee Shu Fen (1925-2012) and Lim Fei Shen (Singapore), choreographers Loke Soh Kim (Malaysia), Helen Lai (Hong Kong) and Lin Hwai-min (Taiwan) as a few people who have inspired her. They set her imagination alight on the endless possibilities of dance choreography in Asia, and what it means to be a cultural leader, promoting and encouraging dance appreciation and participation in Singapore.

**Her creations contained a narrative arc of some kind, drawing inspiration from her own life experiences and articulating stories of herself and others around her.**



Studio photoshoot, 1988.  
Photo courtesy of Low Mei Yoke



Studio photoshoot, 1988.  
Photo courtesy of Low Mei Yoke

LOW MEI YOKE

She recalls how much she admired Lee's dedication towards nurturing younger generations, how Lim disciplined and motivated dancers from PA, how Loke was able to create magical moments on stage with minimal budgets, the unbelievable aesthetics in Lai's works, and how Lin redefined "Chinese-ness" and modernity in dance.

Choreography comes naturally to Low. When listening to music, her mind conjures up visual images continually, one appearing after another much like an immersive cinematic or theatrical experience. After which, it is only a matter of time before Low pulls these images from her mind and recreates them visually for all to enjoy.

Low ventured into choreography in the late 1970s. Until the 1990s, her creations contained a narrative arc of some kind, drawing inspiration from her own life experiences and articulating stories of herself and others around her. Many of her earlier works were expressions of feelings of loss and helplessness as a result of the change in Singapore's education and language policies. Having attended Chinese medium schools, Low remembers how she had to code switch from the Chinese language to the English language and faced difficulty in expressing herself fluently and comfortably in English. She remembers feeling looked down upon in class by the English teacher and the accompanying crushing sense of inferiority. And, only in dance did she find her solace and her platform for self-articulation. Her choreography, such as 'In Search of Self' (1983) and 'Grandmother's Tales' (1989), comes charged with such powerful emotional tension.

It was also in the 1980s and 1990s when Low pondered about the role of dance in expressing national and cultural identity. She experimented with telling the Singapore story through a *rojak* (mixed) combination of ethnic dances, which she later deemed superficial and unnatural. Instead, she started digging deep into her own Chinese cultural roots, trying to understand what being a Chinese and a Singaporean meant. She wanted to find out how dance could meaningfully express the multiple identities that she embodied. She also wanted to understand the kind of moving visual language that would be representative of Singapore, being Chinese and being modern at the same time. In the end, she found all these elements present within her. She came to the understanding that as a modern Chinese Singaporean, her works will naturally tell such a story of identities, as long as she believed in herself and continued to search deep into her soul. It was during this period that Low gave up emulating traditional Chinese dance, and introduced uniquely personal touches and feelings into standard Chinese dance routines. She even invited other dancers to reinterpret these routines.

'Cloud' (1998) was one of Low's experiments in this direction. Conceptualised around the Chinese traditional *shui xiu* (water sleeves) dance technique where dancers captivated audiences with masterful manoeuvres of long draperies attached to the end of their sleeves, Low's choreography allowed the *shui xiu* to be freed from the arms and hands. The drapery was wrapped around the



dancer's body and she played with it in all possibilities – kicking it, flying it through the air, catching it and sliding it across the face. The dance moved away from a technical showcase of *shui xiu* to a modern interpretation of life's ephemeral existence.

These creations were unconventional at that time. Low remembers being chided by some members of the dance community for choreographing works that resembled a pantomime horse, and which did not seem to have any direction. Some might have thought that Low had shifted her focus from Chinese dance to modern dance. However, Low believes that there is no boundary between being Chinese and being modern. Her practice and choreography stems from her Chinese Singaporean roots, and she does not see a need to prove her identity by strictly abiding by traditional moves.

In 2013, Low experienced a creative renaissance. She moved away from the narrative style of choreography and started to focus on the pure visual language of the body. She felt that she had told enough stories and wanted to go back to the nascent and untainted way of embracing dance – a dancer with his or her body in movement.

"Never have I felt so free in spirit. When there is no baggage, there is pure joy in making dance. I just need to be myself!" she exclaimed.

In 2017, Low's 'In the Moment', showcased at the Kuandu Arts Festival hosted by the Taipei National University of the Arts, reflected the possibilities of dance and its limits. Movements at times seemed to be the most effortless expressions, and yet at other times, the judders and undulations within contortions were exhilarating. Where one expected a smooth and coordinated *pas de deux*, one was offered a couple in entwining arms moving through limitations imposed by the other's presence. It was an intriguing visual experience that extended into the psycho-philosophical realm, mirroring human minds and questioning the relationships between alienated beings.



'In the Moment' by Frontier Danceland, School of the Arts (SOTA), 2016.  
Photo courtesy of Bernie Ng



'In the Moment' by Frontier Danceland, School of the Arts (SOTA), 2016.

Photo courtesy of Tan Ngiap Heng



In rehearsal for 'Fade' by Frontier Danceland, Goodman Arts Centre, 2015.

Photo courtesy of Tan Ngiap Heng

In 'What is an Author?' (1969), Michel Foucault wrote that writing as a creative practice is not something to be completed and then appropriated – it is an endless practice. The same can be said of choreography. Low's creative practice starts in the mind. She used to keep notebooks of every choreographed work, complete with instructions, notes and drawings of dance moves. The actual choreography would continue to evolve with all the other components that complete a dance. These include the technical skills and personalities of the dancers, the music, costumes, lighting and many other aspects. These days, the smartphone has replaced Low's notebooks.

In July 1991, Low and her dancer husband Tan Chong Poh set up Frontier Danceland, a non-profit contemporary dance company. Despite continually encountering challenges such as financial difficulties and the lack of a permanent studio space and facilities, their resolve towards developing the company and advancing the local dance scene never wavered. In 2011, the company, now housed at Goodman Arts Centre, gained professional status – a celebratory milestone for Low.

From the little girl watching by the stage to being awarded the Cultural Medallion in 2018, Low has come a long way. She acknowledges that she could not have done it without the support of her family, her dancers, and friends who have stood by her as well as others who have inspired her from near and afar. After almost half a century, Low is still dancing, and her ideas for choreography continue unabated. Dancing is an endless practice and to Low, in dance, there will always be a dream to chase. ■

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*About the writer*

Chow Yian Ping is Senior Correspondent at *Lianhe Zaobao*. She is also a literary and arts writer and was a curator at the Singapore Art Museum.



## WORDS OF APPRECIATION

I am very happy to receive this honour, and am pleased that my career is being understood, supported, and recognised. I would like to thank the people who have supported me in my life, especially my husband Tan Chong Poh. I would not be who I am today in my artistic journey without his support. It is of utmost importance for a person to have his or her family's support, the same way the arts in Singapore need to have the support of fellow Singaporeans in order to flourish.

Thinking back on my time in dance over the last 40 years, I have been through many trials and tribulations. It is indeed difficult to be a dancer, trainer and choreographer all at the same time. In the early years when I first started out in dance, it was very difficult for people to understand dancers. The profession wasn't highly respected then. It was only in recent years that this perception has changed, with more openness and understanding in the wider society towards the arts. There is now more tolerance and even respect for dancers.

I would like to extend my special gratitude to the National Arts Council for this honour, and members of the community for the support and help they have shown and provided me. I have learnt that we need to be determined in times of hardship. It is only with perseverance and courage that one can continue to make art. It's been a difficult journey through and through, and it will continue to be tiring. But I know that I will regret it if I don't carry on. Thank you, everyone! ■

这份荣誉让我感到很兴奋，感谢大家给我的支持与肯定。在此我要感谢在我人生中扶持过我的人，更感谢我的丈夫陈春宝，在我的艺术道路上，没有他的支持，我肯定不会走到今天。一个人最重要是要有家里人支持，本地文化艺术也一样，要有本地人的支持，才会更加好。

回顾自己四十年来的舞蹈生涯，这几十年的风雨给了我巨大的历练。演、教与编聚于一身，的确是非常辛苦。刚开始从事舞蹈工作的那些年，常有一种被视为“另类”的感觉。从事舞蹈工作者属于偏门事业。近年来，让人庆幸的是这种歧视逐渐淡化。新加坡文化水平的提高，对我们舞蹈艺术工作者来说，最明显的现象就是得到社会人士的宽容与尊敬。

今天，得到这份殊荣，我特别感谢国家艺术理事会，社会各界人士给我的支持、帮助。我这一生的经历是我对艺术的坚持。深信在困境中一定要坚持，要有这份坚持的毅力和勇气，才能继续前进。这条路走的不易，走下去会很累，可是不走，我会后悔。谢谢大家! ■