

YOUNG ARTIST AWARD 2018

SUFRI JUWAHIR



'People Like Us' by Shahrin Johry, 2018.

Photo courtesy of Sufri Juwahir



'Decipher' by Soul Signature at the 31st International Choreography Competition in Hannover, Germany, 2017.

Photo courtesy of Ballett Gesellschaft Hannover e.V.

Sufri Juwahir (b. 1983) is a dancer and choreographer. He was originally trained in hip-hop and was part of a street dance group B.A'D in the early 2000s. His dance vocabulary has been enriched by his participation and victories in various competitions over the years. Fuelled by his interest, he has devoted much time and energy to understanding hip-hop culture and has also decided, over the years, to widen his dance vocabulary.

Sufri joined Maya Dance Theatre in 2008 as a full-time dancer and was involved in all of Maya's major productions during his time there. He had the opportunity to create new works for the company and was involved in local and international festivals like the M1 Contact Contemporary Dance Festival, Asia Tri Festival in Jogjakarta, Indonesia, Walking Distance Festival in San Francisco, United States of America and Accidental Festival in London, United Kingdom.

Sufri went on to further his studies in LASALLE College of the Arts. He was awarded the National Arts Council's Arts Scholarship in 2012, and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Performing Arts in 2013. In 2015, Sufri co-founded Soul Signature with his dance partner, Sheriden Newman, and together they produced two full-length works, 'Reverberate' (2016) and 'Gading' (2017). Soul Signature aims to not only be an inspiration to the younger generation, but to also prepare them for careers in the arts industry through the sharing of knowledge and expertise. Foreground, initiated by Soul Signature in 2018, is a platform for young artists to create new works under the mentorship of Sufri and Sheriden. Between 2017 to 2018, Soul Signature organised weekly open dance classes, studio showings of works-in-progress, presented a full-length work, 'Gading' in the studio, and engaged dance practitioners to practice their craft. Sufri's latest duet work, 'Decipher', bagged the 2nd Prize Award, Audience Prize Award and Delattre Dance Company Award at the 31st International Choreography Competition for Choreographers in Hannover, Germany, in 2017. The work was restaged with a larger cast of dancers for Delattre Dance Company in Mainz, Germany and for LASALLE College of the Arts' graduation showcase, 'An Unwritten Chapter', in April and May 2018 respectively.

Sufri is constantly expanding his movement vocabulary through exposure to different dance genres like modern contemporary and the Indian classical form *bharatanatyam*. He believes that maintaining and improving one's physical sensibility and expressiveness requires constant learning, practical experimentation and practice. This approach not only allows the body to discover new ways of expressing, but also keeps the dancer's mind open and nimble for the discovery of new perspectives and possibilities. ■



A CONVERSATION WITH SUFRI JUWAHIR

Tell us about your earliest memories encountering the arts. Who or what were your key influences?

My earliest memory of the arts was playing with a spoon. My mum would hand me two spoons and I would drum with them whilst watching her cook in the kitchen.

There were also times when I would place my head on the table and tap my fingers to listen to the rhythm. From a young age I enjoyed performing. I took part in storytelling and singing competitions during my primary school days.

Rhythm and the sound of beats have always been a part of my life. I enjoyed the rhythm of dance during performances at school, which developed more fully when I became part of the street dance group B.A'D. For the group's performances, I was the one in charge of editing and mixing different songs on my computer. This was a process that helped me to understand how to piece together different parts of a dance routine, which was how my understanding of choreography first came about.

“It gives me great joy to see an idea manifest itself through choreography. This manifestation not only comes through the physical realisation of the idea, but also through the internalisation of the idea and the discussions it has sparked between the dancers and the choreographer.”

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in your artistic journey, and how did you overcome them?

I remember that when I was learning the Indian classical dance *bharatanatyam*, there were mixed reactions from the people around me, and this affected me. I even questioned myself, I wasn't sure if I should continue with what I was doing.

Going back to school paved the way for me to venture into unknown territory, into new areas of knowledge and practice, and also to be comfortable and confident with my learning process. The guidance and support that I had received at LASALLE made it possible for me to free myself so that I could immerse myself more fully in the areas I needed to work on for my artistic development.

What is the most rewarding aspect of what you do?

It gives me great joy to see an idea manifest itself through choreography. This manifestation not only comes through the physical realisation of the idea, but also through the internalisation of the idea and the discussions it has sparked between the dancers and the choreographer. Every dance piece, to me, is a reflection of hard work and dedication by the people involved in its making.

What do you want the audience to experience through your work?

I would like the audience to experience a multitude of emotions, to engage with the physical expressions of the body and also the music. My work aims to speak to them through their senses, and what matters to me is that they will be attuned to the emotional resonance within themselves and be able to create their own interpretations of the work.



Please share what a typical day in your life as a dancer/choreographer is like.

I start my day with either a gym or dance training regime in the mornings, before heading off to teach dance in schools in the afternoon.

After the classes I return to the dance studio for rehearsals. I usually have dinner at around 10pm. Weekends are for winding down and meeting up with friends. But sometimes I have to work! I plan my schedule on a weekly basis.

What advice would you give to students who want to pursue a career in your field?

It is good to start off with dance as an interest and hobby. Take some time to nurture that interest through practice and performance experiences. If you want to develop further, there will be times when things get tough, and the way to get through those difficult periods is to remind yourself why you are doing this. The mind is a powerful tool and we can use it to overcome any obstacle. What happens next is part of the highly individual process of self-discovery. It's different for everyone.

What are your hopes and vision for Singapore's dance scene?

I hope that the young who are talented and serious about dance will pursue a career in the arts. I also hope that dance professionals will see that challenging ourselves artistically is how we can give back to dance, that this is important for the sustainability and growth of the dance scene in Singapore.



How does receiving the Young Artist Award change things for you? Tell us more about how you intend to further grow and contribute to the arts scene.

The award is an important validation for me and my commitment to dance. It will encourage me to carry on developing and honing my craft. The grant allows me to go for residencies or arts-related courses and other relevant long-term programmes either here or within the region. I also intend to expand my horizons by learning how to play the classical instrument, *mridangam*. Through these various avenues I hope to bring new ideas to the table when I'm developing Soul Signature's projects and training dancers.



SUFRI JUWAHIR



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

I would like to thank all my dance teachers who have guided me throughout my career, allowing me to view dance through different perspectives. Your lenses are beautiful.

Secondly, to my family members who have supported me in and out of the house, making it possible for me to pursue dance education and allowing me to grow in the arts. I needed that the most, and God bless you for that.

To my partner-in-dance Sheriden, the backbone of Soul Signature: Let's keep developing our practice and inspire the younger generation with our motto 'The Soul of our creations will define our artistic integrity and movement Signature'. ■