

**Eyes Open. Eyes Closed. (a.k.a. Traitriot)**

Choreographed & performed by Venuri Perera

**My Mother and I**

Choreographed & performed by Chey Chankethya

**1 September 2015 | 8pm | SOTA Studio Theatre**

**Reviewed by Valerie Lim**

Two female contemporary dancer-choreographers, Sri Lankan Venuri Perera and Cambodian Chey Chankethya, were paired in a double bill at the Singapore International Festival of Arts' Dance Marathon. Previously trained in traditional dance forms, both artists hail from countries with recent histories of conflict and bloodshed. Their pieces appear fragmented, highlighting the selective memory of the survivors living in the aftermath of the Sri Lankan civil war or the Khmer Rouge. Both solos place the human body firmly as the centre of attention proving that the body is both a site of violence and of resistance.

"Hello everyone. How are you today?" Perera asks the audience at the start of *Eyes Open. Eyes Closed. (a.k.a. Traitriot)*. She then invites the audience to open and close their eyes as instructed for the "optimum experience". She even does a test run — making sure no one steals a peek!

The staple movement of her piece is a stylized walk; with flexed feet she uses her hips to initiate the next step while a bent elbow and clenched fist is raised and lowered as the walk unfolds. With the instructed blinks, she disappears and reappears in different locations in this walk. At one point, she is on her knees, her forehead on the ground with her palms together on top of her head. As if bound by her arms, she is forced abruptly back down to the floor as her body tries to get up. In another instance, she reappears in what resembles a defensive boxing stance with clenched fists in front of her face revealing only her penetrating stare. Her body moves in spasmodic, sudden jerks as if receiving invisible blows while her arms are still raised in defence. Clearly, oppression is the main theme of the piece. In another scene, she appears with her bare back facing the audience. She thumps hard on the floor from behind a white table that has been tipped its side then disappears behind the tabletop. A video projection on the tabletop appears. It reveals her trapped in a box, struggling to free herself. After a long blink, she returns to her stylized walk; only this time she is visibly broken and assumes a weaker posture. She ends with a powerful image of her fist in her mouth — the oppressed silenced with violence.

While some of the effect intended with the closing and opening of the eyes might have been slightly lost due to the sound of her footsteps, the voluntary and participatory action forces the audience to be faced with the choice to obey or disobey the commands while becoming complicit in the violence.

In the second work on the programme, *My Mother and I*, Chankethya also explores oppression through recounting intertwining stories of her own, her mother and her dance master.

"My master's name is... I never call her by name. No, never," she says as she strikes various poses of classical Khmer dance. "Lotus, branches, fruit, smile, shy, love, sad,

cry." She recites the orders of her master and remembers her master's touch. "To destroy you is no loss. To preserve you is no gain," her teacher says while her mother reminds her, "No, I don't read. No, I cannot write. Don't have an opinion!" Tales of her childhood are mixed with the memories of the intellectual and artistic purges during the Khmer Rouge regime led by Pol Pot.

She tries to speak; her mouth moves but you cannot hear a sound — as if she was on television and her words have been censored out. She continues with her delicate finger movements on the floor with her knee bent and feet flexed. Fear and panic shows on her face as she persists in her attempts to talk. "I put a cloth in my mouth to suppress my cries"... Chankethya speaks in the voice of her mother who witnessed a rape by a soldier. Throughout her life, her mother constantly drilled into her the importance of modesty. "No touching! Don't touch my butt! Don't squeeze my boobs!" She fights her own hand as it tries to touch her whole body. "If there was no Pol Pot who would you be?" She recalls asking her mother.

Although Chankethya is a modern Cambodian woman, emancipated by education and has lived abroad, it is painfully obvious how much Cambodian history has shaped her life and her dancing. She is stunning to watch. Seamlessly fusing Khmer classical with contemporary dance, she dances with the grace of a classical Cambodian dancer and the freedom and power of a contemporary dancer.

"Do I have enough right to reveal the stories people are trying to hide? But I am ready to listen." It is Chankethya's ability to listen and relate these stories in a sensitive yet riveting manner that makes *My Mother and I* a timely and poignant masterpiece.

