

YOUNG ARTIST
AWARD
2014

LEE MUN WAI

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Born in 1982 in Singapore, Lee Mun Wai graduated from LASALLE College of the Arts with a Diploma in Contemporary Dance (2006) with support from the Georgette Chen Arts Scholarship. Following this, he was awarded a scholarship by the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts where he graduated with a Bachelor in Fine Arts (Hons) in Contemporary Dance (2008).

In 2008, Mun Wai was one of the founding members of T.H.E Dance Company, with Kuik Swee Boon as the artistic director. Mun Wai has performed over 20 dance works with the company, displaying technical finesse and style marked by a unique fluidity and acute sense of musicality. He has toured extensively with the company at festivals such as the SIDANS Festival, Seoul, South Korea (2013), Les Hivernales Festival, Avignon, France (2012), Beijing Dance Festival (2012), Chang Mu Dance Festival, Goyang, South Korea, (2011) and the 17th Annual Dance Conference and Performance Festival, Bytom, Poland (2010). Mun Wai has also collaborated with seminal international choreographers including Dimo Kirilov, Xing Liang, Kim Jae Duk, Zhang Xiao-Xiong, Wu Yi-San and Boi Sakti.

As a choreographer, Mun Wai's works possess an intellectual depth underscored with identity and cultural discourse.

Besides creating new works for T.H.E Dance Company, he has also choreographed for School Of The Arts (SOTA), as well as the National University of Singapore (NUS) Dance Ensemble. His exceptional ability to characterise concepts with physical vocabulary has also found him working across disciplines such as when he used literary artist Gopal Baratham's short stories as the basis for *City of Desire* commissioned for the Singapore Writers' Festival (2012). Mun Wai also co-choreographed *Command Pattern* (2013) with renowned local dance artist and choreographer, Jeffrey Tan. This piece incorporated technology with dance. His critical eye for dance is also reflected in his writings as a regular contributor and reviewer for online arts magazines such as *The Muse* and *The Flying Inkpot*.

Mun Wai inspires young talents through his mentoring work with young choreographers at platforms such as *SPROUTS* (2013) and the *NUS Arts Festival* (2012-13), and adjunct teaching at the SOTA (2009-2010) where he spearheaded and planned the dance faculty's dance theory and contextual study curriculum. Mun Wai continues to engage young people through regular dance technique classes with organisations such as NUS Dance Ensemble and SOTA.



As it Fades by Kuik Swee Boon (2011)
Photo credit: Matthew G Johnson



A CONVERSATION WITH LEE MUN WAI

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

I have had a creative mind from as young as I can remember. One significant event was watching the afternoon matinee of *The Nutcracker* in 1992 by the Singapore Dance Theatre. I was very attracted to the stuff happening on stage. Throughout school, all my extra-curricular activities were artistic in nature. I was in the Chinese orchestra, choir and the drama club.

I look up to many artists and creatives so it is really very hard to name one. But I know one thing for sure, the creatives I look up to hold a deep conviction for their art. Their works always deal with extremes and they seem to have a very all or nothing attitude. I want to emulate this attitude in my work.

What are some of the biggest challenges you face as an artist?

Honesty to myself is something that is difficult. Facing myself and evaluating myself through my work are difficult. The process of art-making is always very revealing and sometimes I have to face the aspects of myself that I do not necessarily enjoy. Another challenge is to always be better than before; to not stagnate.

What motivates you to continue creating and inspiring, in spite of facing these challenges?

Unanswered questions. These are what keep me going. Art is about finding answers to the questions around you. The day I have all the answers I need, I will stop doing art.

If approached by an up-and-coming artist who wished to learn from your experience, what advice would you give to him/her?

The ideas of 'passion' and 'loving what you do' are necessary but very overrated. Passion almost always gives one a fuzzy warm feeling, like everything has to be sweet every day. The truth is art is such a difficult path to walk. If you are in it to seek warmth and comfort then my advice is to go somewhere else. Being true to art actually requires dedication and commitment more than passion. There are some times when the going gets tough, that your passion and all your fuzzy, warm thoughts might wear thin; but you carry on, because you are dedicated to your art. So many young people 'love' and 'are passionate' about art, but few have the mental and physical tenacity to see it through long-term. Local society loves to paint artists as happy-go-lucky people. But I say that the art industry is the hardest one. Because art is perhaps the

only profession where one cannot lie to one's self. It is a profession where you question your very being, existence and worth daily. It is a profession that demands absolute honesty to oneself if one is to be successful. This is not easy and not for everybody.

What is your vision and what are your hopes for the arts scene in Singapore?

I hope that Singapore will eventually be a society that recognises that art is not entertainment. That, in order for Singapore to function as a complete society, art and artistic expression has to be an integral part of it. Because, art reflects life.



Within Without by Kuik Swee Boon (2009)
Photo credit: Matthew G Johnson



In The End We Strive to Convey Meaning by Lee Mun Wai (2013)
Photo credits: Bernie Ng | T.H.E Dance Company

WORDS OF APPRECIATION

“My family: For giving me the freedom to carve my own path. You have always guided wisely but never controlled or held me back. You all mean the world to me.

All my teachers: Encountering each of you at various stages in my life has helped shape me; without any of you, I would have been a very different person. I cannot emphasise enough how significant and noble your role as a teacher is. Keep on awakening minds and hearts.

Kuik Swee Boon: Your strong belief and conviction has made me learn what it means to excel both as an artist and as a person. It has not been easy but it definitely is worth it and I hope this spirit will go on for a long time.

All my friends, for keeping me sane and letting me to be who I am.

Seniors, for lighting the way ahead.

Detractors and haters, for making it so clear where I should not go and what kind of a person I should not be.

Most importantly, Charles Lee: Friend, lover, mentor. For the understanding, patience and unconditional care and concern you show me. This journey would have been impossible without you by my side. I love you.

Lee Mun Wai