

# Dancing to stay afloat



Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre dancers at a studio rehearsal in July this year. PHOTO: SINGAPORE CHINESE DANCE THEATRE

 PUBLISHED SEP 8, 2020, 5:00 AM SGT

## Four local dance groups share how they have been hit by Covid-19, reports Malavika Menon

Malavika Menon



(mailto:mmala@sph.com.sg)

### 'LONGEST AND MOST PAINFUL DISRUPTION' FOR DANCE COMPANY

A veteran in Singapore's dance scene, Madam Lim Moi Kim has seen it all.

Since the 64-year-old founded the Singapore Chinese Dance Theatre (SCDT) as a troupe in 1989, it has weathered highs and lows, including the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) epidemic which hit Singapore in 2003.

But nothing prepared her for the loss of income brought on by Covid-19.

SCDT estimates a deficit of \$300,000 by the end of the year, though it has tapped various government support schemes to halve the deficit. The company has lost 80 per cent of its income from shows, and 60 per cent of its income from school and community programmes.

A total of 11 shows have been cancelled because of Covid-19. These include the company's annual core production, large-scale community outreach events and its training centre's annual dance showcase.

Since the reopening of Singapore's economy in phase two, the dancers have returned to the studios to rehearse in small groups. There are going to be trials to have small-scale performances but there is no certainty of when patrons can return to watch shows in person.

The company plans to hold a virtual open house as well as a live-streamed performance next month.

The pandemic has been, as Madam Lim put it, "the longest and most painful disruption for the company in all its years".

### DIGITAL CONTENT A 'DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD'

Indian fine arts institution Bhaskar's Arts Academy has seen an income drop of about 70 per cent this year, stemming from cancelled productions, workshops and outreach programmes.

The academy postponed three core productions and its annual festival in the wake of the pandemic, focusing its efforts on digital content, which company manager and senior dancer Thava Rani, 51, described as a "double-edged sword".

Said Ms Rani: "Social media has opened up a new horizon and a lot more can be done in this path. But while we reach out to a wider audience through our free digital content, it does not bring us income. It is not sustainable for us in the long run."

Then there is the matter of synchronised movement and choreography, both of which are better achieved offline, she said.

"As a company, we want to continue creating, promoting and presenting traditional art. Artists living in their own silo are not going to achieve as much as when they get together," she added.

During the pandemic, the company has put up digital content such as its ongoing series of 10 digital mini projects called Dasha Tanmatra.

In phase two, it has also done commissioned works, with a mixture of in-person and online rehearsals, and received some inquiries from schools on outreach programmes.

### TAPPING THE COMMUNITY

The announcement of the circuit breaker brought rehearsals for Malay arts group Era Dance Theatre to a grinding halt.

Regular classes and co-curricular programmes at schools were also cut short, along with four annual projects and 10 commissioned works that the company had to push back.

According to artistic director Osman Abdul Hamid, 58, the company has suffered a 65 per cent loss in its income and had to depend on schemes from the National Arts Council to stay afloat.

To cope with the pandemic, the group tapped the Malay arts community, exchanging ideas with other directors on how best to keep the art form alive.

Noting that traditional art forms have minute details that cannot be conveyed digitally, Mr Osman said: "Looking through a screen, the audience will not feel the emotions expressed by the dancer. Seeing it in person is the most beautiful thing, as though the audience is looking at a live painting."

Despite this, the company's core creative team is planning virtual programmes in the future. In phase two, Mr Osman said the company has started physical training sessions in preparation for its October production.

"There are a lot of adjustments to be made going forward. We have to upgrade ourselves and remain objective about the art we do," he added.

### THRIVING ON INNOVATION

As an arts collective without a permanent studio space or full-time dancers, Sigma Contemporary Dance was able to minimise its costs during the pandemic.

Artistic director Hong Guofeng, 33, who has been with the company since it started in 2011, says the group was fortunate as this was a "down year" for them, with small projects in the pipeline, after a successful annual production last year.

After rehearsals stalled in March, the company went all-in with a digital endeavour titled Survei:ance, which aptly looked into surveillance in the digital age.

Mr Hong said the show allowed the company to extend its reach to viewers and dancers overseas. "We saw about 1,000 views for the show, which could not be accommodated in a physical blackbox," he added.

The company's dancers have returned to the studio for rehearsals and training with few dancers at a time. Company classes have also resumed, though all are online as Sigma does not have a big physical space to house all the dancers with the safe distancing measures in place.

The company hoped to put out a large-scale production next year to mark its 10th anniversary. It plans to host a show with several simultaneous performances in different parts of the venue, so small groups of audience members can be taken on an experiential dance journey fit for the new normal, one that is socially distanced.