

The following works were referenced in our performance:

Text:

Chong Tze Chien. *The Book of Living and Dying*, The Finger Players, 2014.

Jennifer Homans. *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet*, Random House, 2010.

Verena Tay. *Lunar Interviews*, Math Paper Press, 2011.

Verena Tay. *Bumiputra Cina*, Math Paper Press, 2011.

Ovidia Yu. *Playing Mothers*, Epigram Books, 2011.

Music (order of appearance):

Devi thayeh, Madurai N.Krishnan

Enna thavam seithanai, Papanasam Sivan

Entree de Giselle, Adolphe Adam

La Plus que Lente, Claude Debussy

Pi's Lullaby, Mychael Danna and Bombay Jayashri Ramnath

We would like to thank:

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- Ma Yanling, Daniel Teo, Gwen Pew and Centre 42, for their patience and unwavering support
- Our lovely audience at the 18 August 2016 showing, for their generous feedback
- Our friends and family, for their patience as we embarked on the entire nine-month-long process!
- Everyone who has contributed to this endeavour in one way or another!

Centre 42 presents

THE VAULT

Becoming Mother

19 March 2017, 4pm

Synopsis

Who owns the art? Who owns the form?

Dance practitioner-researchers Dr Nidya Shanthini Manokara and Jocelyn Chng respond to themes of motherhood and artmaking in Verena Tay's and Ovidia Yu's works. Grounded in their dance practices of bharata natyam and ballet respectively, Shanthini and Jocelyn's devised performance draws on their personal experiences to playfully tease out their relationships with art forms and content, and creation and creativity.

I love the form, but cannot agree with... Who has been lying to me?

Programme Outline

PROLOGUE: INCUBATION

ACT ONE: THIS IS MY CLASSICAL

In the rehearsal, Shanthini performs a piece portraying two types of mother figures that are frequently evoked in conventional bharata natyam. Shanthini and Jocelyn discuss the different love relationships within bharata natyam and ballet.

ACT TWO: YOU MUST HAVE KIDS

Different worlds collide.

ACT THREE: CREEPER-PRICKING-ARMS

Jocelyn and Shanthini distill ideas and imageries from their research process and come to various realisations about their respective forms.

EPILOGUE: CREATION

Second Trimester (September - November 2016)

- We reconvene for a more targeted approach.
- Shan takes a trip to KL Temple of Fine Arts to better understand the mother archetypes that are frequently performed in bharata natyam.
- Shan shares the intimate details of the IVF experience. We visit KK and NUH maternity wards for observation sessions, and start to notice the "over-performing" of pregnancy.
- We interview five friends who continued their dance practice while being pregnant. They candidly share their experiences and provide us with imagery on what it feels like to be pregnant.
- During rehearsals, we draw on some of the interview imagery to conduct various movement explorations with our respective forms.
- 12 November 2016: Our second ultrasound!
- Nora Samosir, Melissa Quek and Pamela Lee sit in to witness the development of our baby. It is healthy! They agree to come on board to help us nurture it.

Third Trimester (December 2016 - February 2017)

- We take a babymoon to Batam in December. Olivia instigates us to question each other on what we really need for our piece. The script is finally forming!
- Our drama coach Nora puts up with our un-actorly instincts.
- Partially inspired by the interviews conducted in the second trimester, we work closely with Melissa on movement segments.
- Pam works tirelessly behind the scenes to help us prepare for the big day. Our home is being prepared for the new arrival.
- Our piece reaches the final stages of its development.

March 2017

- 10 March 2017: We anxiously await a third ultrasound. We can feel the kicking.
- 19 March 2017: Our performance is full term and waiting to greet the world!

Credits

Performers: Dr Nidya Shanthini Manokara and Jocelyn Chng

Dramaturg: Olivia Vong

Asst. Dramaturg: Pamela Lee

Drama Coach: Nora Samosir

Process

What you are seeing this afternoon is the culmination of a nine-month process - our own personal struggles, negotiations and coming to terms with “becoming mother.”

First Trimester (June - August 2016)

- Shanthini hits upon the initial idea of doing a piece about motherhood and photo-journals her 3rd IVF cycle.
- Jocelyn comes on board. Both of us do research on local plays and texts related to motherhood. We realise that pregnant mothers are not discussed a lot in local texts.
- Rehearsals for work-in-progress showing of *Becoming Mother*: Shan works on the alapadma mudra (flower-like hand gesture) that is representative of birth in bharata natyam. She then shares her movement phrases with Joce who responds to the movement quality through ballet.
- 18 August 2016: Work-in-progress showing - our first ultrasound!
- Some abnormalities are detected. Together with our helpful script-doctor Olivia Vong, we embark on a treatment plan for the next phase.

Shanthini's Thoughts

*“You’re still young... Don’t worry there is still time”
“When are you dancing again? It is such a waste if you don’t”*

Perhaps one of the most difficult decisions I have made to date, is to embark on *Becoming Mother*. It was a conscious decision to draw on some of the darkest and most intimate parts of my life – as a way to heal and grow.

Barely in my late twenties when I discovered I had fertility issues, pregnant bodies and nation-wide campaigns became painful reminders of my situation. I started moving away from what used to be the most comforting thing- bharata natyam. I couldn’t dance as much when I was trying to conceive. While keeping that issue under wraps, I was also growing tired of the relentless portrayal of Hindu Gods who fulfil devotees’ wishes and quintessential mother figures who nurture and pamper their children. The gap between that mythology and my reality was too wide. I feared going into that world because I had to come back to mine.

Encouraged by Dr Loon and Yanling during the initial discussions about The Vault series, I was determined to face my fears. I conceived *Becoming Mother*. I needed a friend to be with me in this daunting journey of reconnecting with dance (and life) and so I approached Jocelyn. Stepping into bharata natyam that was steeped in its own socio-cultural peculiarities, right after my IVF experiences ignited a new kind of love and respect for the form. Having Joce and Olivia with me in every single step was a great luxury and they constantly challenged me to rise above the self-indulgent. After this nine-month process, I may not have necessarily slain all my fears and that is okay. What is most fulfilling, is that I have embraced them. What is most enriching, is that I have started to find nuanced ways of dealing with maternal narratives – in the dance form and in reality.

*“No, I’ve not stopped dancing. I’m simply taking a long pause..”
“Yes, I am young...young enough to become a mother.”*

Jocelyn's Thoughts

When Shanthini first approached me to do this project, I was intrigued, but my initial thoughts were, “I think you’ve got the wrong person!” Because, much as I sympathised with her concerns as a friend, I would have trouble getting into the skin of someone who really wants to be a mother.

Something about the project drew me in nevertheless, and that was the idea of working with form. My personal relationship with the dance form with which I am most familiar, ballet, has been complicated. I have gone through the usual ups and downs - the highs of examinations and performances; the struggles with inconsistent training, bodily limitations and injuries. When reality collided with the already hazy dream of being a professional dancer, I almost gave up dancing completely.

It was only with embarking on this project, thanks to Shan, that I started to engage in a deeper questioning of the form, and to see the practice through the lens of metaphorical motherhood. Seeing how inextricably linked Shan's practice was to her culture and tradition became disturbing for me, because... whose child was I?

Classical ballet, in the traditional sense, cannot be disassociated from its historical and cultural specificity; but what happens when that history and culture is not something that you can claim to be yours? In the way I experienced ballet growing up, there was a troubling disconnect between the form in all its cultural richness, and just learning steps - typical of the way the dance form is taught and learnt in Singapore.

My own trajectory within this project, then, became an interrogation of my personal relationship with a form I thought I knew so well. Along the way, Shan's and my paths sometimes crossed, sometimes ran parallel, and sometimes diverged (although it seemed mostly the latter). But through our many long discussions, rewrites, rehearsing and re-rehearsing, we came to realise that wherever our paths took us, it was okay.

I do not believe that we have arrived at an answer, for there are never easy answers. I do harbour the hope, however, that we have achieved a more nuanced level in the relationship - both mutually and in relation to our forms and that this relationship only continues to grow.

About the Performers

Dr Nidya Shanthini Manokara

Dr Nidya Shanthini Manokara (PhD NUS) is a dance researcher-practitioner. Having completed her arangetram (solo inaugural presentation) and Diploma in bharata natyam, Shanthini holds the title Natya Visharad from Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society. Informed by her classical training, her academic research interests include evolving Asian performance practices and their affective registers. Shanthini has taught a range of theatre, film and dance courses at NUS, NTU and Lasalle College of the Arts. She has completed a Dramaturgy Apprenticeship with Centre 42 and is currently the Resident Dramaturg with RAW Moves contemporary dance company. Shanthini is also an External Assessor for dance with National Arts Council.

Jocelyn Chng

Jocelyn holds a double Masters in Theatre Studies/Research. She is currently building her portfolio career as an educator and practitioner in dance and theatre, while pursuing an MA in Education (Dance Teaching). She is also a founding member of the Song and Dance (SoDa) Players – a registered musical theatre society. Her work with SoDa has included performing, stage and production management, and choreography. A lover of mountains, both literal and metaphorical, she hopes to one day fulfil her bucket list dream of reaching Everest. Well, at least the base camp.