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All photos: Ludovic Des Cognets. Chisato Minamimura in BEATS.

Khamlane Halsackda in ACT 1.

Stepping out east

Jih-Wen Yeh, artistic director of Step Out Arts, explains what motivated the creation of a new showcase for British East Asian artists

The British East Asian Choreographer Development Scheme (BEACDS) is the start of something long overdue - the emergence of a British East Asian dance sector. The scheme was born out of a belief that the under-representation of British East Asian (BEA) artists in UK dance needed to be challenged. There's a serious lack of encouragement, opportunity and awareness within the BEA dance sector itself, and no significant promotion of choreographic talent. As a result it's difficult for BEA artists to maintain their visibility and stability outside the East Asian community.

To combat the status quo, and with funding provided by Arts Council England, my colleagues and I at Step Out Arts (SOA) developed Stepping Out East and the BEACDS as a project geared towards the development of promising BEA choreographers. The British East Asian dance sector may be under-represented on the national stage, but we're convinced that it's hardly under-staffed in terms of potential talent.

Following a nationwide selection process in early 2009, the scheme successfully supported four candidates in the development of their art. For me these four choreographers represent the very best in upcoming British talent, East Asian or otherwise. In her performance *Half Truth and Allegories*, Annie Pui Ling Lok explores the processes of

translation and mistranslation. In BEATS the deaf dancer Chisato Minamimura confounds preconceptions by focusing on what she calls 'visual sound/music'. Khamlane Halsackda reflects the universal experiences of love, childhood and memory in ACT 1, while in his work *Patient 319* Quang Kien Van portrays the dangers of social exclusion.

SOA's ultimate goal was to present the work of this quartet in front of an audience packed with industry professionals. In autumn 2009 the project culminated in two showcases - at the University of Bedfordshire and Greenwich Dance Agency. The result was a vibrant and eclectic programme of dance. The feedback we received was overwhelmingly positive, both about the choreography and the scheme as a whole. We're happy to share this in-house review from Greenwich Dance Agency: 'The event subsequently sold out with many of the audience members being first time visitors to gDA. The evening was extremely well received and was also critically important in raising awareness of the British East Asian dance sector and the artists involved.'

Our ambition at SOA is to become an advocacy organisation that supports and develops the careers of British East Asian artists and choreographers through Stepping Out East and the BEACDS. For the next phase of



Annie Pui Ling Lok in Half Truths & Allegories. Quang Kien Van in Patient 319.

Chisato Minamimura

Born 26/06 (the year is a secret) in Japan, living in Tokyo with my Japanese family until 2003. Afterwards I moved to London and live with my British husband.

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Khamlane Halsackda

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Annie Pui Ling Lok

Born 05/11/76 in the UK. Mum and dad are from China and Hong Kong respectively.

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Quang Kien Van

Born 18/05/76 in Vietnam. My parents were also born in Vietnam but we are of Chinese ethnicity.

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'The scheme was born out of a belief that the under-representation of British East Asian (BEA) artists in UK dance needed to be challenged.'

the scheme SOA aims to create a two-day symposium that offers the 2009 artists an opportunity to further develop their work into a completed piece. We hope as well to nurture another set of four BEA choreographers and set up training workshops for these and other artists to attend. Additionally we're planning to form partnerships with the main dance organisations in the UK, thereby increasing the awareness of BEA artists as a vital sector while also identifying opportunities and sharing existing resources.

For further information, including how to book the showcase or the individual artists, please **contact** Jih-Wen Yeh jw@stepoutarts.co.uk or 01525 371 907.

The following questions were posed via email to the artists.

How would you describe your practice and the work that you do?

Chisato Minamimura (CM): Regarding my choreography, I create one movement as one note at first and then build and develop it with my visual score. It's hard but interesting work given my limited knowledge about sound/music because of my deafness.

Khamlane Halsackda (KH): My work is personal and

drawn from experiences, moments and memories that I feel have had much influence on who I am. By sharing something vulnerable and of myself, and also questioning these experiences, I believe audiences will in turn do the same about what they have seen or even, perhaps, about themselves. I want to connect and communicate more with them via my work.

Annie Pui Ling Lok (AL): For me, up until this point, making and presenting work goes beyond the studio and the venue. There's a lifestyle that goes with it on a daily basis. It's not in a self-important way as much as it's simply a daily thing being done all the time. Without wanting to sound pompous, I'm thinking about the politics surrounding the opportunity and choice to be in this position even if the content of the work itself doesn't show this explicitly.

Quang Kien Van (QV): Over the last 15 years I've danced professionally for a wide variety of companies and projects such as Adventures in Motion Pictures, Cirque du Soleil, Michael Clark, Opera North, etc. I like the magic and possibilities of the theatre.

What would be a few of the most important things for audiences to know about you and your work?

CM: I'd like to provide the audience with a challenge to see >

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sound/music through dance movements, and consider and share what is visual sound/music through my piece from my deaf perspective. I'm always wanting your responses to what you see and to know what is visual sound/music for you.

Are you comfortable being represented under the umbrella of British East Asian dance, and why - or why not?

CM: The SOA showcase is a great opportunity to show my performance alongside that of other choreographers with different backgrounds, concepts and so on. I've been happy to choreograph new work for this unique project and share it with them. Through this showcase audiences could see an assimilation between British and East Asian cultures.

KH: In the past I was very determined not to be under any umbrella that promoted me as South-East Asian. I believed it detracted from the work I wanted to make. I still feel sensitive about this, but also I realise that I am South-East Asian. So I'm under that umbrella regardless. I'm more accepting of this now as I feel that my work will promote something that is South-East Asian in a new light - without fans, without classical South Asian dance, without the old stereotypes.

AL: I'm comfortable being placed within the context of, say, the SOA showcase because that was the whole premise for the application and selection process. I only wouldn't feel comfortable being represented within the British East Asian category if it wasn't thought through, and if it was irrelevant to the context. Like everything, though, there should be room to shift emphasis and category whenever necessary. After all, we all belong to the many.

QV: British East Asian dance is a gargantuan umbrella indeed! Actually, I'm not sure how helpful the term 'British East Asian' is since it describes such a large and disparate diaspora. I guess it's usefully vague in the increasingly 'globalised' society we live in.

What were the most valuable aspects of the SOA showcase last autumn?

KH: The showcase allowed me an opportunity to make work. This is always the most valuable thing to me - to continue the momentum of my creativity. But to have four very different South-East Asian choreographers removing old stereotypes would also be up there on the list of reasons to get beneath a British East Asian umbrella.

AL: One of the most valuable aspects of being represented under the umbrella of a British East Asian dance showcase as meeting Chisato, Kham, Quang and Jih-wen, as well as presenting myself and my work alongside theirs. It was

familiar and homey and something I hadn't experienced so directly before. My cultural identity and that of the work was emphasised in this context, and this was relatively new for me. Other than that, it was about having the push and support of producers (SOA) behind the work and very much, as usual, the opportunity to make and show new work at all. The feedback was really interesting and encouraging too. The feedback was encouraging and quite a lot of interest was generated about the piece.

QV: Patient 319, the piece I made for the SOA showcase, was my choreographic debut. I'm over the moon that I got the opportunity to make it and put it in front of an audience, since opportunities for 'emerging' or, in my case, entirely 'new' choreographers are very rare in the current financial climate.

What would be the best thing to happen next in terms of your work or career?

CM: At this moment I'm not clear or sure about my new work and my career. I hope to be able to continue choreographing new works, the aim of which is to research the relationship between the visual and sound/music - if this world could accept that. Also, I'd like to encourage an inclusivity between hearing and deaf people through art.

KH: I think it's every choreographer's dream to be able to make a full-time living from choreographing. It's certainly mine.

AL: The best thing to happen to me next would be to get more exposure and for the work to be seen much more.

QV: Being in a creative environment is very important to me. I've enjoyed being able to lead a creative project as a choreographer. I wish to continue to do so. The only snag is to make it into a viable business, which is no easy feat. But I'm workin' on that!

Is there a secret about you or your work that you would be willing to share?

CM: It's not a secret, but I would like to share more about visual sound/music. I hope it could open up a new world.

KH: When it comes to my work there are no secrets. I think that's the point - here's my heart, cut out and thrown onto a stage. But having said that, it's still up to audiences to pull what they can from what they see. It's much more interesting that way. And plainly, listening to me rant about myself would only make me seem narcissistic. It's very different when you rant with the body. It leaves room for things to be found by others.

AL: My secret? I love skiing!

QV: I believe dance as a theatrical performance is truly a bold and beautiful art form. I hope my work can live up to this conviction.