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Cheok: A Festival of Korean Dance 2024

Ae-Soon Ahn

The National Asian Culture Centre Foundation

The Lowry, Salford

3–4 June 2024

Recent dance productions have incorporated theatrical aspects, such as spoken passages or video screens, to tell a story rather than communicating purely by physical movement. Ae-Soon Ahn's *Cheok* is a sharp return to traditional wordless dance, although one might question the extent to which the production achieves communication with the audience as the choreography moves close to the abstract.

Advance publicity indicates the dance is intended to reflect new connections between humans. Yet the striking feature of *Cheok* is how one of the primary strengths of dance—the troupe working in pairs or as an ensemble—is absent. The six dancers work in isolation as if no-one else is on stage. Even when facing each other, they behave as if the other dancer does not exist. On rare occasions when they physically come close to another dancer, they are regarded as an obstacle, and swerved around, rather than a potential partner.

An indication of the unusual nature of *Cheok* arises as the audience enters the theatre: a sign warns of both loud noise and periods of silence. Sure enough, the show starts in silence with a screen showing shapes resembling the basic 'blocky' designs in early video games. The production ends in the same way: a puzzling sequence of the cast sitting onstage watching the images on the screen while a plank of wood rotates slowly overhead. It is very hard to see a point to the sequences unless to suggest, depressingly, no developments have occurred from the start to the finish of the dance.

Cheok is the traditional Asian standard of measurement, meaning 'span of the hand', and the isolated performances of the dancers can be taken as an indication of distance. There may be examples of frustration at the obstacles to making a connection. One of the dancers adopts moves similar to a wrestler, stamping feet and holding an aggressive stance. Another dancer trembles in what looks like religious ecstasy.

One wonders if each dancer is meant to represent a specific body part. Ae-Soon Ahn's choreography assigns the first dancer to enter a series of movements based around the hands and arms. The second dancer may represent the trunk and head, as his arms lie flopping at his sides while his upper body sways and contorts. Other dancers may be the legs: one set skipping and hopping around the stage, another pair twisting around a body which remains seated onstage. But if this interpretation is correct, and the dancers are behaving as individual limbs, then logic demands they unite and form a 'body', which cannot occur in a dance where no-one touches.

Cheok, therefore, demonstrates the tremendous technical skill of the dancers but not their communication and storytelling skills. Whilst technically impressive, without a clear narrative, the

dance becomes a sterile viewing experience—like watching acrobatics or a particularly energetic Pilates class.

Cheok is ultimately a frustrating experience. Whilst one can appreciate the peerless techniques on display, it is disappointing a production that prizes obscurity over clarity denies the audience the chance to experience and comprehend Korean dance.

Reviewer: [David Cunningham](#)