

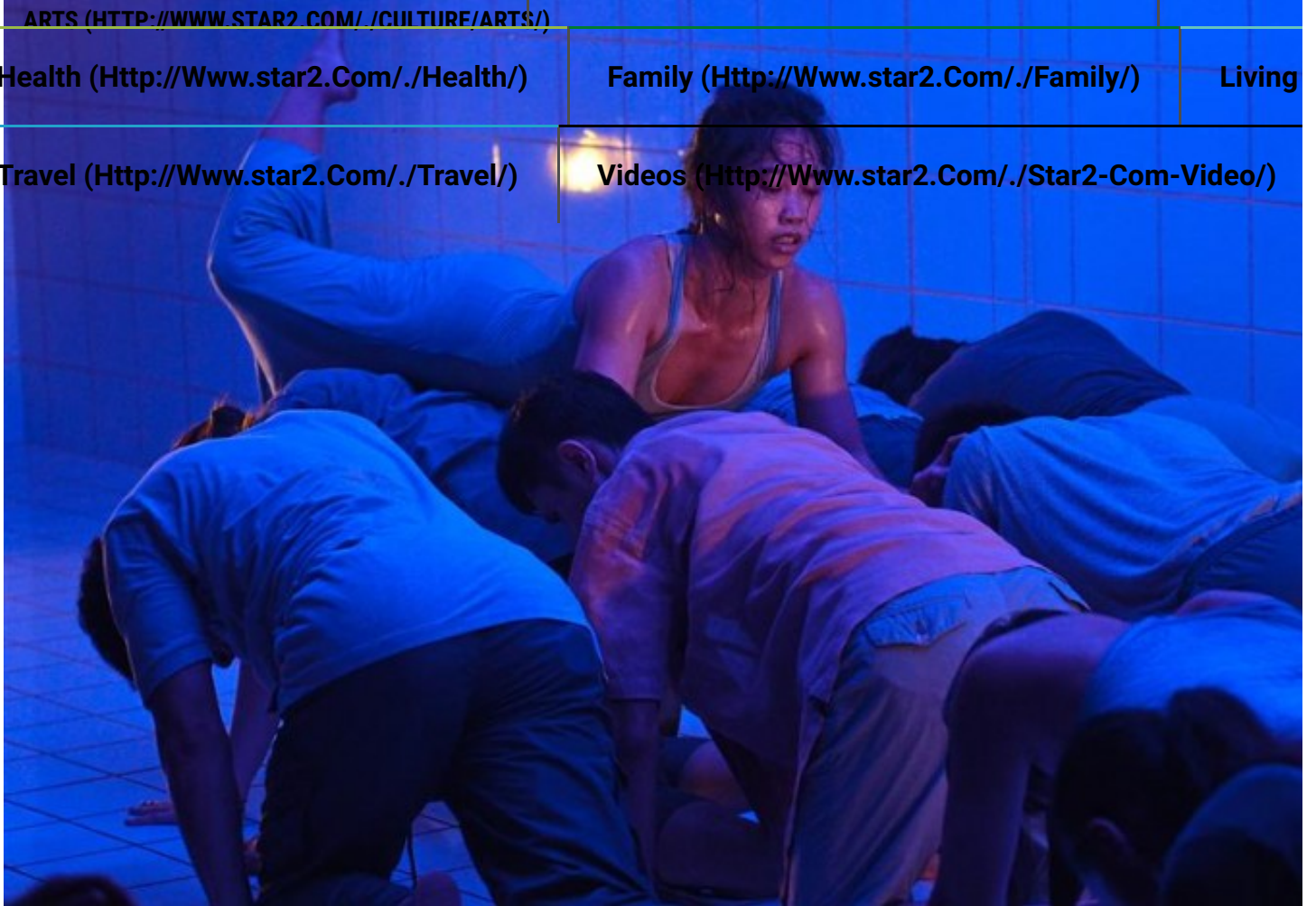
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'We can't make a performance where everyone is left happy due to the sensitivities of the subject and the stories we tell all the victims first-hand,' says Conrad, the creator of SKN. Photo: Darshen Chelliah

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Theatre's raw answer to human trafficking issues

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Provocative was an apt description for *SK!N*, the latest production from Kuala Lumpur-based theatre company TerryandTheCuz, which recently played at Art Print (APW) in Kuala Lumpur.

Made as an exploration of the human trafficking trade, the *SK!N* experience share of mind games as the show shoved the audience into the shoes of a victim.

Billed as an experiential installation, *SK!N* was just that. At APW on the show night on Aug 9, the audience did not sit back comfortably and have the narrative to them, instead, they were made the subject of their own show.

This began at the venue's "registration counter", where, like any understaffed office, the audience was made to fill up a series of forms. The questions began with age, height, weight – but quickly became bizarre ("list four things wrong with you") and downright sinister ("how much would your family pay for you, if you were kidnapped?").

Another curveball was that the audience was required to surrender their possessions from bags to phones and even their identity cards.

Stripped of their personal effects, the audience was subjected to a cruel scene. As if they were criminals being processed, they were measured and weighed (additional for ladies, their weight was shouted and listed on a scoreboard), had mugshot

then, actors mocked them using responses from their registration forms.

SK!N director/creator/writer Terence Conrad assured us that the banter was mostly off the cuff, thanks to the questions on the forms. Participants who claimed to dance were even ordered to show off their moves (or lack thereof) and audience members laughed at or applauded them.



Much to the horror of some audience members, part of the registration process had the crew weighing them, and show to be written on a scoreboard in open view. Photo: Darshen Chelliah

For further dehumanising, the participants were referred to by number, never their name.

Based on the forms, the crew sorted the audience into groups – green, yellow and red.

As we found out, Tenaganita, a human rights NGO, worked with TerryandTheCuz to add insight into the realities of human trafficking.

Aegile Fernandez, Tenaganita director, explained that the green, yellow and red groups represented safe, at risk and victimised migrants.

“Splitting groups apart, taking away what little you have, reducing you to a number, not a person; that’s how traffickers systematically break their victims down into cargo to be trafficked,” explained Fernandez.

The green group was marched out of the sorting area into a dimly lit container on a lorry at the venue – a former plant and warehouse. The yellow group joined later, after being made to walk around in circles. The red group was seen again for the duration of the performance.

Finally, the promised contemporary dance came on, an impressive showing by dancers Suhaili Micheline, Wor and Lee Ren Xin. The performance was choreographed by Australian-based Ashley Mark Dyer.

The stage was a container on an adjacent lorry, equipped with lights and speakers, and lined with eerily clean. After the trio finished its intense dance, sweating up a storm, the line between performance and personal space against breached – dancers crossed over into the audience space and selected all the yellow and even some members, hauling them back to the performance area.

The lorry then drove off. The dumbfounded looks of those still at the venue said it all.



The audience also got a taste of what human trafficking victims suffer as their 'abusers' at the APW venue dehumanising referring to them by number not name.

Literally, this was a show depicting the realities of human trafficking. After the dance, the crew led the remaining members out of the container and treated them like paying theatregoers again, ushering them to chairs and serving refreshments. The actors that previously mocked them now praised the audience for simply sitting through the experience.

Meeting some red group members later, it was revealed they had been blindfolded, led to the lorry container there in the dark, then marched back to holding area to experience nothing in particular for the remaining hour and a half performance.

And that was the brilliance of *SK!N*. Conrad and crew depicted the nature of privilege and unfairness through the performance. People who had the chance to enjoy the dance would only realise it was a privilege after seeing that others who had a ticket got nothing.

Conrad explained the work was meant to provoke reactions and make the audience discuss them. Whether that experience was immaterial.

"We can't make a performance where everyone is left happy due to the sensitivities of the subject and the stories from all the victims first-hand," said Conrad.

He noted that some who missed the dance complained on social media, but interestingly, others responded to say that the injustice of the situation was something central to the *SK!N* performance.

SK!N! ended up an experience that required some navel gazing to appreciate. But the audience's continued discussion proved the effectiveness of the production, which is set to play at the Oz Asia Festival in Adelaide, Australia, from 22-27 September.

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