

Singapore swings

An eclectic potpourri of Chinese, Malay and Indian cultures, Singapore is eager to lead the Asian performing arts renaissance. By taking two steps back to yesterday to explore its colonial heritage, the city is creating its own unique theatrical voice in a dance odyssey that transcends language, culture and time

WORDS • MIKE MACEACHERAN

I sit alone in the dark. My eyes are lost in the blackness. Hemmed in by four surrounding walls, the room is so silent I can hear the thud of my heartbeat. Three effervescent gold lights suddenly sparkle like gems, cutting the room into diamonds of ebony and charcoal. Korean drums ache out a hypnotic rhythm like the pitch of a Parisian guillotine. I am in a black box theatre in the heart of Asia. My nerves are like ribbons.

From out of the shadows, four Singaporean dancers glide across the empty floor: crimped-back raven hair capers in front of me and patters of tiny feet whisper past. The artists are like fawning black swans stretching their necks, stretching their feet, stretching their balletic wings. White dove-feather boas wrapped around their necks spiral onto the dark stage from their motionless black satin dresses. Without a breath, the dancers fly effortlessly across the floor.

Chinese fans crack into life in their caressing hands, syncopating their movements, creating music from silence. Exploring feminine forms and a flurry of curves and demeanours, the girls are somehow liberated from traditional Asian aesthetics to something that is more avant-garde and Western. It is like watching a menagerie of nocturnal butterflies.

As the dancers leave the stage past a line of velvet-red cushions, a 30-something male crosses the empty lacquered floor. "This is what contemporary Asian dance is like in Singapore," says Danny Tan, Odyssey Dance Theatre's artistic director and choreographer. "Did you like it?"



IMAGE: IRFAN KASBANI

Danny Tan is something of a renegade amongst his peers in the Asian dance scene, and I have been privileged to watch the world premier of *Dancing Demeanour*, his new contemporary routine specially commissioned by Singapore's Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts. "When an audience looks at the movement and vocabulary of the dancer," says Danny, "they can sense the humbleness and the intimacy of the human interactions. These characteristics point out to people that it is Asian dance they are watching."

Images of watercolours, cherry blossoms and tea ceremonies quickly evaporate from my mind. This is something more subtle and transient – and very different from what I was expecting. "Asian contemporary dance is about looking at a collective history and bringing it into the future," says Danny later.

"My own roots are traditional Chinese but I was born and grew up in Singapore and I trained in Australia and in China. Through 25 years of practice, I have learnt my own body language and that has evolved from telling traditional stories into something that is purely and uniquely Singaporean."

Later that day, I meet Angela Liong, artistic director of The Arts Fission – and the same cultural themes are present. "As far as our creative effort in Singapore is concerned, we constantly look to heritage and traditional dance as material for experiments in new movement language and ideas," she says. "Since our inception in 1994, we have been consistently exploring and re-creating the dance movement expression in tandem with topical concerns about cultural identity and the alienation and tension derived from the rapid urbanisation we are experiencing." ▶



IMAGE: THE NECESSARY STAGE



As such, in this former colonial entrepôt, dance is as much about diaspora. To understand the context of Singaporean performing arts, an audience must journey back along the abacus past Chinese umbrellas and beaded slippers to 1819 and the founding of Singapore by Sir Stamford Raffles. It is a story from junk to jewels and of taking the past forward.

Singapore was wrenched from historical obscurity by Raffles, when he recognised the potential of this quiet but strategically located southeast Asian backwater. The port city became a hive of activity where spices, people and commodities flowed. Heaven and earth met and the streets flowed with ivory roses, birdcages and cracked chopsticks.

As the months passed, the city bred interaction and encouraged cultural exchange. Attracted by this dialogue of Sanskrit, Javanese,

Tamil and Malay, Indian Muslims, Hindu traders and Chinese Baba groups poured in from across Asia. Although many only stayed for a short time, some traders ended up immersing themselves in wine, women and song and their ancestors (Peranakans) remain in the city today.

As an emporium of creative energy, it was only a matter of time before culture started to trade into dance, theatre and Chinese wayang (opera). Opera troupes, performers and puppeteers followed. Public spaces became concert halls and festival sites.

Where performances may have differentiated in terms of dialect and music, the immigrants shared similar stage conventions and stories, which were often derived from Chinese literary epics and Asian folk mythology. Sin Sai Loh, a puppetry troupe that arrived from Fujian, China, in the 1930s, had a portable



IMAGE: TAN NGIAP HENG

theatre lit up by 1,000 electric light bulbs and flanked by pillars of adoring dragons. The theatre is now on public display at the National Museum of Singapore, which sits majestically below Fort Canning Park. Named after the first viceroy of India, Lord Charles John Canning, the museum – like all Singaporean performing arts – fuses the traditional and the contemporary.

Similarly, in front of the Peranakan Museum on Armenian Street is a statue of a humble man whom, at first glance, is holding the hand of a young girl; maybe his granddaughter. From a different perspective however, it is clear it is the girl that is holding the octogenarian's hand. She is pulling him – dragging him – away from the past and towards the future. This short history lesson leads audiences to the marble doors of The Arts House, which sits on the historic site of the Raffles landing. It is the city's oldest building and most austere performance venue.

Designed and built in 1826 for Scottish merchant John Argyle Maxwell, the private Neo-Palladian residence was leased to the government for use as a courthouse. Since then it has been used as a Court of Law, a municipal office, the Legislative Assembly and the Parliament house until 1999.

"We have unearthed artefacts here that date back to the 11th Century," says general manager Colin Goh as he shows an antique stone made of Madras Chunan

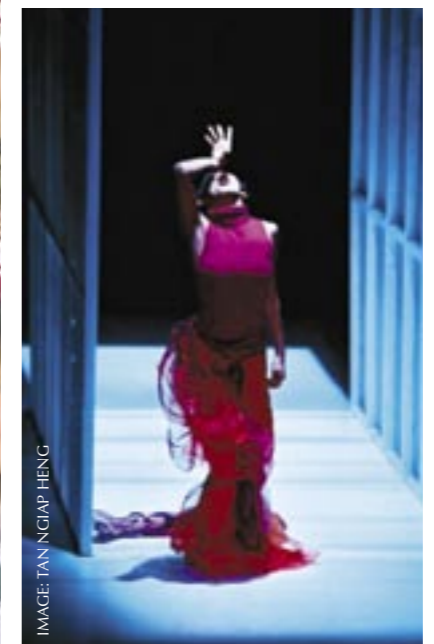


IMAGE: TAN NGIAP HENG



PREVIOUS PAGES, LEFT TO RIGHT: Ifran Khasban's *We Live in a Box*, staged at the Singapore Fringe Festival; The Necessary Stage's *Frozen Angels*

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: The Dance Company's *Within Without*; Angela Liong directed *Shadowhouses* for The Arts Fission; Action from *Within Without*; the interior and exterior of the Art House

and bricks originally brought from colonial Malacca. "There is always a need to go back to come forward and a need to ask where we come from in Singapore," he says. "A city gains great enlightenment and ethos through embracing the arts. Though this is a small city, there is no lack in what is going on here."

Past white-washed panelled doors, I am led to a row of oak varnished seats that sit below a commanding set of bronze chandeliers. It is as distinctive a performance venue as one might find anywhere; a former governmental debating chamber that now plays out the politics of music and dance. A solo violinist tunes his instrument beneath soaring marble pillars and the performance readies itself. It is an alternative space but one that is not inhibitive. "The arts have become so inclusive here," whispers Colin, "and no other Asian city – let alone in the world – has managed to do this yet. We have a stigma that we are living in an insular society – but this venue is a demonstration that the city is opening up and changing."

He is right. The city is like a kaleidoscopic collage. Fast, lush, ever-changing and



IMAGE: MELISSA QUEK

By juxtaposing the ridiculous and the sublime, the past and the present, Singaporeans are demystifying their own culture



IMAGE: BERNHARD MUSIL



reflexive. By juxtaposing the ridiculous and the sublime, the past and the present, the real and the prosaic, Singaporeans are demystifying their own culture and forming new expressions.

In today's Singapore, arts workshops dance with bank headquarters, dance halls waltz with government buildings, and theatres bow to rapturous applause in the suburbs. The government has made its intentions clear to a courting international audience. It has spent over 1 billion Singapore dollars in the past decade on venues and infrastructure, and audience figures have subsequently rocketed from one in 10 to more than a third of citizens attending shows in the past few years.

Take the Esplanade, for instance, the country's iconic concert hall; it is designed in the shape of the tropical Durian fruit and shaped with 1 million spikes and a spine of barbs. Or visit the Substation, which was set up by the visionary dramatist Kuo Pao Kun. Housed in a rundown and disused power sub-

station, it is an indelible part of Singapore's converted cultural and artistic heritage and nowadays harnesses a different energy.

Across the bay, in an underground basement in Marine Parade, hides another black box theatre. It is a subtle refuge for one of Singapore's most respected artisans and the curator of the annual M1 Singapore Fringe Festival. Down winding stairs, past pop art posters of former festival runs and along a hushed corridor full of books, flyers and scripts sit Alvin Tan and Melissa Lim. "We are cultural orphans," chuckles artistic director Alvin Tan, the shy godfather of the Singapore theatre scene. "This city is very fortunate to draw all the best aspects in from India, Malaysia and China and this has helped the arts scene develop its own unique vocabulary and sensibility that we apply to our own work. It's created inter-culturalism."

Inspired by works as diverse as *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, *Huckleberry Finn* and

A Midsummer's Night Dream, Alvin founded The Necessary Stage in 1987, and it is one of the most socially engaged theatre groups in the city today. Perhaps subversive, or even underground, it has tackled issues as diverse as mental health and political detention to religious identity and sexuality. "This is a theatre with a purpose," says Alvin, a Peranakan native. "Art doesn't need to be prescriptive and I suppose this is a reaction to the way that Singaporean society has been over the past few decades. People here have shackled their imaginations and we're here to tackle that."

Perhaps Alvin's most famous work is *Off Centre*, a landmark play that was selected by the Ministry of Education as the first Singaporean work to be studied at high school alongside Shakespeare, Brecht and Pirandello. "Singapore has always been a community of immigrants and we have a strong role to play because of our history," adds Melissa, festival manager of the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival,

whom together with Alvin is responsible for next year's Fringe Festival, a celebration of local and international art and theatre. "We are the go-between and translator between East and West for the Asian region. Theatre is categorised along ethnic lines and there are very few inter-cultural works in Europe. Here we reflect that relationship in the arts."

Climbing up the stairs, I find myself crossing empires and compass points. To the east, I see Chinatown, and to the west lies Arab Street and Little India. Outside, the streets are on fire with neon bulbs and multi-coloured sparkles as Hindus and Tamils usher in Deepavali, the festival of lights. On Eu Tong Sen Street, the lucky Chinese colours of red, pink, orange, yellow and gold melt from shop windows underneath the looming skyscrapers. It is clear that Singapore is a city of contrasts; always ready to surprise and provide a sense of spectacle. From Little India, I watch the firelights rain down. Symbolically, Singapore is performing to the world before a black curtain comes down for the night. ■



IMAGE: JOSE MENCHERO

EXPERIENCE SINGAPORE:

FOR HISTORY: The National Museum of Singapore

The iconic National Museum of Singapore is one of the world's best museums and, having recently undergone a meticulous million dollar renovation, it is keen to show off its cutting-edge status as well as its intriguing past. Designed to be a "people's museum", and strangely reminiscent of London's Royal Albert Hall, the building was the previous home of award-winning restaurants and innovative exhibitions. In addition, the museum hosts cultural festival and community events.

www.nationalmuseum.sg

FOR FESTIVALS: M1 Singapore Fringe Festival

Buddha once said "A family is a place where minds come in contact with one another". That is the goal of the fifth annual M1 Singapore Fringe Festival, which will run under the theme of art and family from 7 – 18 January 2009. Highlights of the festival include The Necessary Stage's production of *Frozen Angels* and *Within.Without*, a specially commissioned contemporary dance by 2007's Young Artist Award recipient Kuik Swee Boom of T.H.E Dance Company.

www.singaporefringe.com

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