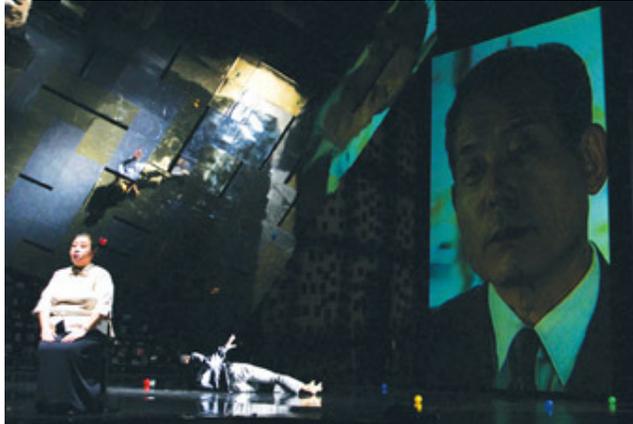


Singapore Arts Festival

Singapore plays its own tune

Keith Gallasch



Sandakan Threnody, photo: Chen Yang

Singapore is exhilarating. The close interweave of Malay, Chinese, Indian and British culture plus the presence of Australians, American and other international residents, many from Asia, makes for a dynamic mix. The language of the locals is rich in code-switching and cuisine and art practices come in many varieties. Like Australia, Singapore is a deeply urban culture, but this island is a city-state of some 4 million people with little in the way of natural space. It seems all city, all shopping and eating out: a promotional campaign declares a month of "retail therapy." And the arts are on the shopping list: there's a steady flow of major international art through the capacious Esplanade theatre complex, little of it travelling on to Australia. What's more Singapore sees art as part of its identity, its serious engagement with contemporary art just over a decade old. Its growing investment in contemporary art is aided by a necessary easing of censorship. There's a lot of nurturing, training, promoting and branding. "Uniquely Singapore" is the island's latest piece of self-branding and it includes art. Australia, with a longer history of contemporary art practice, has barely arrived at this conjunction between art and tourism. Singapore's advertising includes an onscreen recommendation from Philip Glass, declaring that "Singapore plays its own tune."

I was one of a group of arts journalists from around the world generously hosted by the National Arts Council and the Singapore Tourist Bureau to visit the Singapore Arts Festival for 5 days in June, to meet artists, visit galleries and theatres and learn about the structure of arts-making and promotion within Singapore and beyond. Just that conjunction of arts and tourism was pretty exciting in itself, to find the mostly young staff of both agencies speaking with enthusiasm and expertise about the arts. Singapore sees itself as the hub of

South-East Asia and a major part of its pull is its building and promotion of a huge events program (sport, entertainment, art) with the Esplanade arts centre and a growing arts culture playing a key role.

Global City for the Arts

In the old world luxury of Raffles Hotel, our hosts, the Singapore Tourist Board (STB), power-point their way through their vision of Singapore, as "Global City for the Arts", describing their attempts to achieve leverage from "a cultural hotchpot" by branding it a distinctive whole. They see the city as "poised to become the events capital of Asia." STB's vision of the best of traditional and modern comprises a big picture that brings together the arts, entertainment and sport with an annual turnover of \$800m, 11,500 employees and 1,300 establishments. The goal for Singapore, they say, is job creation (with a focus on investing in training and management), developing local work to world class standards, and increasing access for local audiences.

Events make up 5% of the tourist industry, with some 20 events taking place every day: "a lot for a small metropolis." Recent events include a fashion festival, a touring Lord of the Rings exhibition and the hosting of the Indian Academy Awards. Figures indicate that the events audience is growing with a strategy of encouraging tourists to extend their stay to take in more events. The Singapore season of Mama Mia is expected to draw a large regional audience as is a major Botero exhibition. Planning for a visual arts biennale is under way.

Arts infrastructure

The National Arts Council budget ranges from \$30-40m annually. Arts grants are capped at 30% of the total cost of a project and the council runs an impressive scheme for the housing of arts ventures. We visited the Little India Arts Belt, part of the NAC's Arts Housing Scheme. Implemented in 1985, tenants pay 10% of the rental in addition to running costs. In 2001, 10 former shop-houses in Little India were purchased for Arts Housing. We visited 2 of these adjoining spaces adapted from old merchant buildings—narrow, high-ceilinged and with cool, tiled floors. One is Plastique Kinetic Worms, an artist-run visual arts space, also publisher of *Vehicle* magazine. Next door is spell#7, one of the organisers of the 2004 Performance Studies International conference, curator of a 2003 new media arts exhibition (www.livedigitally.net, October 2003), and currently promoting its *Desire Paths* audio tour of Little India (more about this in RT 63). The upstairs space is licensed for performances with audiences of up to 30. Other arts houses in the area include those of Dramaplus Arts and Wild Rice Ltd. The NAC supports a large range of artists and projects, many with international standing.

Esplanade

Pivotal to the promotion of Singapore as "a global arts city" is Esplanade—Theatres on the Bay, cased in huge shells textured like the skin of the durian fruit and with a superbly equipped concert hall (1600 seats) and theatre (2000

seats), both acoustically sublime, large in scale but intimately realised. There also studio spaces for experimental work, restaurants, shops, outdoor performing space and water views. The aim to create a multicultural, multi-racial arts centre for all Singaporeans is realised in a number of ways, through judicious programming (ranging from Robert Wilson to orchestral and rock concerts), a 5-tier ticketing policy, and, we are told, no free tickets for staff—they must set the example of buying their own. Some 16% of tickets are purchased by tourists. The Esplanade cost \$600m: the goal we were told is not to recover costs but to bring world class art to Singapore. It is proudly pointed out that the centre is operated "by 150-170 full-time staff, half of that of the Sydney Opera House", along with 300 casual employees.

Singapore-Victoria

You might have noticed that the Australian artists and companies programmed in Singapore Festivals are mostly from Melbourne. This is not surprising given that there's a Memorandum of Understanding between the 2 states. We gathered in the Blue Room of the former Parliament House to witness the signing of the third of these successive 3-year agreements. The respective heads of the arts departments, Penny Hutchinson, Director Arts Victoria and Lee Suan Hiang, Chief Executive Officer of Singapore's National arts Council sign the document witnessed by Victoria's Arts Minister Mary Delahunty and Singapore's Dr Lee Boon Yang, Minister of Information, Communication and the Arts. Speakers claim a 'natural connection' between the cities given their size and British background, their proximity (only 7 hours away), the parallel developments of Federation Square and Esplanade—"new venues in search of new audiences"—and the strong connection between their respective festivals. It was pointed out that some 18 artists, companies and arts organisations had been involved in the Singapore-Melbourne relationship. Hutchinson said that there were 12 projects currently selected for development. The Singaporeans emphasised a desire to go beyond exchange to "more joint efforts and artistic collaborations in all the art forms including the literary and visual arts, and new media."

The Singapore Arts Festival

Since 1999 the Singapore Festival has become an annual event, with 50% of programming international and 50% Singaporean. The festival is seen as a springboard for Singaporean art to dive into the international scene, either on its own terms or as part of collaborations, as in the Singaporean-Australian-Japanese production *Sandakan Threnody* (see below) or the Singapore-Hong Kong multimedia chamber opera *Opium* with Singapore's acclaimed T'ang Quartet (2002 Melbourne Festival) and also featuring Australian singers.

The festival is an inclusive one with an outreach ("arts on the move") and weekend programs (eg an all night Indian cultural event), "kids' focus" and visiting artists residencies (eg British choreographer Akram Kahn). The festival budget is \$6.5-7m (the Singapore dollar was almost equivalent to the Australian at the time of my visit) with government input at 40-45%, sponsorship at 20% and ticket sales making up the rest. 50,000 tickets are

sold, 10% of these to tourists. Overall attendance for the 2004 festival, including free events, has been estimated at 900,000. The festival is operated by the National Arts Council, something which appears as unusual to Australians used to the relative freedom of festivals and their artistic directors from government agencies. This is a reminder of the evolution of government-led Singaporean culture. In a discussion with the council the significant role of Goh Ching Lee as Festival Director is acknowledged (she is NAC's Director, Programmes & International Development), however the emphasis is equally placed on collective and committee decision-making within the council along with input from local artists and arts experts.

The 2004 festival includes some very strong programming, some of it provocative, most of it showing before my arrival. A 3-hour *Othello* (Meno fortas, Lithuania), *Conjunto di Nero* (Netherlands/Italy), Compagnhia de Dança Deborah Colker (Brazil), *El Autmóvil Gris* (Certain Inhabitants' Theatre, Mexico), *Butterflies* (Golden Bough Theatre, Taiwan) and *Sandakan Threnody* sat side by side with Yo Yo Ma's Silk Road Ensemble concerts, the wonderful Budapest Festival Orchestra, Cantonese opera and flamenco dance. The festival organisers see new works and challenging imports as calculated risks and an important part of their programming. Regional input is also vital with works programmed from China, Taiwan and South Korea. Above all the festival is eager to find partners, to create more collaborations and co-productions. The Australian connection has been significant this year with the programming of Helen Herbertson's *Morphia*, *Urban Dream Capsule* (a huge success), Stiff Gins and the *Sandakan Threnody* co-production with the Brisbane and Melbourne Festivals, As one official put it, there is a desire "for the Singapore Festival to become iconic for the region, like Edinburgh, and increase its budget by 100%!"

Ah Hock and Peng Yu

Over 5 days and between numerous briefings, venue inspections and lunchtime meetings, I caught a handful of festival shows. In the studio of the Esplanade, Singapore's new Ah Hock and Peng Yu dance company presented 3 works with precision and commitment, if not with the greatest of choreographic flair (Esplanade Theatre Studio, June 18-20). In *Homelands* (choreographer Ix Wong Thien Pau, Singapore), men in uniform suits walk with a kind of purposeful purposelessness back and forth across the space, some dropping out of the rigid line only to be quickly drawn back in. Suddenly alone, individuals perform displaced solos, or stand still, aimless. Fluid duos and trios break from the insistent lines of walkers, entwining and tangling in moments of vigour and determination before falling back into line and, finally, a collective stasis. Ingram Marshall's *Fog Tropes II* and Steve Reich's *Triple Quartet* are not compositions I'd usually associate with a theme of alienation (*Homelands* is about men working away from home) but they add to the curious beauty of a fluid but essentially damned-up masculinity.

Kilt Bill (Yuri Ng, Hong Kong) opens informally in very low light as a female figure inches around the boundary of the space, her back to us, contorting

She turns out to be a he and is soon joined by 2 other cross-dressers in an adroit piece of kitsch about dancing in high heels—and they do it splendidly to Ravel's *Bolero*. Tautly choreographed and executed the piece requires expert timing, calculated tapping and tottering, dancing in one shoe, stepping seamlessly into vacated ones and illustrating the art of shoe taking-off and putting-on while furiously and unanimously on the move. Some kind of plotting in the end transforms shoes into guns, but the pleasure is not in fetish symbolism but the dexterity of the dancers. While kitsch can rarely transcend itself, *Kilt Bill* at least celebrated choreographic ingenuity and dancer virtuosity.

Fu Cao by Adelaide-based choreographer Zhang Xiao Xiong was demandingly and sometimes tediously intense, portraying a culture of erotic tyranny and passion with broad, lyrical movements (arms extended like birds of prey) and robust athleticism. Like *Homelands*, *Fu Cao* appeared to delve into the fraught limits of masculine freedom. Oddly it was only in *Kilt Bill* that any release was achieved, and that by adopting female personae.

In this brave venture into an all male program (11 including 1 Japanese and 5 Taiwanese dancers), the company proved itself equal to the sometimes considerable demands of choreography that belonged more to the 90s than the present. The company looks strong and impressed its young audience.

The Substation

Substation, an intimate contemporary artspace with strong connections with Australia, was hosting a documentary film festival of works from the region which I couldn't attend, but the word around was very good, as was the opinion that Singaporeans were making some excellent short films, while feature films remained problematic, with the very occasional hit. The pop shots exhibition in the Substation gallery focused on "rituals, objects, body" from everyday and popular culture angles. The strongest of the works included Lim Kok Boon's *Apache Toy*, a large image of the helicopter ominously straddling pancakes in a Macdonald's; Keng-Li Wee's *Vegas*—evocative C-prints of, among other things, stark Las Vegas buildings, a "Jesus Action Figure", a woman suntanning by a big hotel industrial laundry bucket—and Gilles Massot's installation of impressionistic snaps of everyday objects rendered odd to the point of transcendence and strung delicately before us on wire (pop shots, The Substation and Alliance Francaise, June 4-20).

Singapore Tyler Print Institute

Matin Tran, the eloquent marketing manager of the Singapore Tyler Print Institute, guided us through the building, from the ample exhibition space and print room down to the residency studio (where Bernard Quesniaux from France introduced us to his work), deeper down into the printing and paper-making rooms where children were having a thoroughly enjoyable time making their own paper while we wandered amidst the presses, the screen printers, huge blotting blankets and the racks of drying and finished prints.

STPI is a good example of investment with considerable foresight. The famous

New York printmaker Kenneth E Tyler offered his 4th workshop, which he wanted to be state of the art, to Singapore as non-profit establishment if the Singapore government would buy it outright. It required the renovation a 19th century warehouse, with equipment brought in from New York. The complex is perfectly ventilated, uses recycled water and has its own drainage system. And there's a restaurant in the building (featuring Australian wines). The goal, says Tran, is to create "100% sellable prints" and at prices to encourage Singaporeans to invest in art. The house has its own publishing program, creating limited editions. What seems in retrospect a small investment has turned out to be an invaluable one, making it the most complete print and paper-making house of its kind, central not only to printmaking in Asia but a model for similar institutions elsewhere in the world. Artists from China (Ju Wei), the Philippines (**Pacita Abad**), the USA (Donald Sultan) and France (Quesniaux) are among those who have enjoyed residencies here. STPI encourages artists to go beyond the normal bounds of printmaking with **Pacita Abad** sculpting paper pulp and Donald Sultan merging flocking, orthography, dyeing and woodblock techniques in single works. STPI asks visiting artists "to arrive with a concept, but no fixed image." In collaboration with the British Council STPI exhibited an impressive collection of often sardonic and well-crafted British printmaking during the Singapore Festival.

Wu Tong at The Arts House

Sometime member of Yo Yo Ma's 'world music' Silk Road ensemble, Wu Tong performed in The Arts House in the old parliamentary chamber with Singaporean/Indian collaborators Nizam A Halar on sitar, Jatinder Singh on tabla and vocals by Ghanavenothan Retnam. Wu Tong has been a major pop star in China as member of Lunhui, bringing together rock and traditional music. But he's also had classical training in playing the flute-cluster sheng, yielding a rich and varied soundscape suggestive of everything from solo flute to organ. Despite an uneven sound mix, this was an interesting cross-cultural experiment, often feeling more improvised than through-composed, a fascinating first stage in a collaboration with pieces alternating between a primary focus in either Indian and Chinese modes, one of the most effective based on an evening raga.

Originally a courthouse with cells (1827), subsequently Parliament House until 1999 and officially opening as an arts venue this year, The Arts House preserves the past while presenting contemporary art in a well-equipped, intimate black box theatre (Play Den), a small cinema, the parliamentary chamber (where Wong Tu performed), meeting rooms, a shop, restaurant and cafe. Our host described The Arts House as "a platform for aspiring artists...and with a number of spaces available to adapt rather than treat as fixed venues."

Singapore Art Museum

The Singapore Art Museum provides a focal point for the viewing of Singaporean and Southeast Asian contemporary art as well as some traditional art (see exquisite Chinese finger drawing by Wu Tsai Yee) and

educational programs. The latter on this occasion included C.A.S.T. (Convergences of Art, Science and Technology), a showing of works influenced or driven by new technologies, including a striking museum-style installation of 'genetically-engineered' butterflies with, among other things, advertising on their wings. The feature exhibition for the festival was a Pierre & Gilles showing (*Beautiful Dragon*, June 17-July 18) mixing familiar output with a set of unusually dark works of Asian subjects including depictions of male sacrifice but without the usual glitter and easy eroticism.

Sandakan Threnody

Late in World War II, prisoners of war, including many Australians, were marched to their deaths by the Japanese as they shifted from one camp, Sandakan to another, hundreds of kilometres away, deep in the jungles of northern Borneo. Six Australians out of 2,400 prisoners survived starvation, exhaustion, disease and execution. Australian composer Jonathan Mills' father, a medical officer at Sandakan, had not been included in the march when he was transferred to another camp and survived the war. Australians know a little of this grim story. Singaporeans, said Ong Keng Sen director of Sandakan Threnody in a post-show talk, know even less. He put this in context by explaining that many in the region had seen themselves and their countries as trapped in a war between empires. Only now were they beginning to appreciate the role of Australians and the complexities of responsibility.

Mills and Keng Sen (artistic director of Singapore's acclaimed TheatreWorks) agreed to collaborate on a multimedia performance using the composer's 30-minute *Sandakan Threnody*. The director saw an opportunity to put the Sandakan marches into multiple perspectives: Singaporean, Australian and Japanese. At its very best this is what happens, a quaking ethical incertitude amplified by contrasting points of view and multiple means of conveying emotional responses, through design, projections, dance and acting. The music is powerful, densely orchestral and choral, existing very much on its own terms but reflected in the huge layered, refractive set-cum-installation that wraps around the performance. For all its force, without a live element the music risks some diminution: hybrid performance can easily upstage itself with focus on some elements at the expense of others. Even so this soundscaped version of the music grips: an open, public grieving (from the Greek, *threnos*), alternating between long passionate lines, a sad lullaby and harsh metallic marching and entailing strains of traditional Japanese music.

In RealTime 59, I reported the pleasure of encountering Elision's *Tulp: the body public*, describing it as a new hybrid: documentary, multimedia music theatre. *Sandakan Threnody* is a similar creature and much of the first half and more of the performance is a sublime interweaving of documentary film, dance and acting, of passages literal and symbolic. After that, however, the symbolic and the abstract take over, and while it's interesting to see 2 soldiers of warring cultures in the end as Beckettian figures, it remains a conceit, barely a concept and is never convincingly embodied however passionately performed.

Matthew Crosby as the Australian soldier brings his experience in Japanese

theatre to bear with an intense physicality and an uncluttered version of how a tormented soul fantasizes his way to survival. Koto Yamazaki, a Japanese dancer with modern American dance and butoh background, excels as a kind of physical alter- and counter-ego to the Australian, moving about him in intense parallel patterns. Another Japanese presence is onnagata performer Gojo Masonoskue, who while impressive is the least integrated into the work, taking up significant stage time as the work appears to unravel. Keng Sen describes this female figure as a symbol of hope, "like a gold thread through the tapestry of war and pain" (program note). *Sandakan Threnody* is at its best when the weave is tight and the alternation of elements and shifts in patterning are rhythmically insistent. This is mostly in the first half where the totality of the hybrid is most felt as organic.

A large vertical off-centre screen is central to video artist Margie Medlin's projections. Above hangs a fractured, shining sheet of metal, reproducing and distorting the screen image below. A huge, high net of small, sometimes glittering squares bounds the performing space and, behind, a cyclorama becomes another space for enormous projections or fiery washes of colour. Medlin's deployment of videos and her lighting are integral to Justin Hill's set design, creating a remarkable depth of field and surprising perceptual shifts without dwarfing the live performers. (Hill is a Singapore-based Australian and a founding member of TheatreWorks.)

While the stage performances suggest psychological complexity and hint at ethical agony, it is the videos that carry much more weight, whether in the nightmarish opening documentary footage of the execution of a Japanese war criminal, or in 2 interviews central to the work. The first is of the daughter of one of the survivors of the marches. She describes her father, Bill Moxham's despair at his survival, his refusal to be applauded as some kind of hero, and his subsequent suicide in 1961. She thinks that, like Kurtz in *The Heart of Darkness* (her point of reference is Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*) her father had entered "the dark side" and its torments were too much for him. Crosby's Australian prisoner does not suggest this, the production going for something more difficult, and less convincing, in having the actor double as Yamamoto, the camp commander. The other interview, even more distressing than the first (although problematically coordinated with stage action), is with the son of the executed Yamamoto. No matter how saddened by or apologetic for his father's misdeeds, the son is quietly and resolutely proud of his father. These interviews are public grievings, complex and deeply affecting, resonating with Mills' score and the more impressionistic anguish in the lyrical onstage scenario.

Sandakan Threnody does not attempt to reproduce the death marches, rather it reflects on their consequences and poses disturbing questions about our ongoing relationship with war, with the maltreatment of prisoners and the clash of loyalty and morality. Although partly flawed in its first outing, reshaping and editing could focus its considerable power for the Brisbane and Melbourne Festival showings. Australian Tim Harvey, local performer/musician Rizman Putra and TheatreWorks regular Lok Meng Chue complete the strong cast.

Uniquely Singapore?

Singapore's exciting cultural mix, its intimacy and intensity, its conscious development as an urban culture with strong arts aspirations and extensive arts facilities (and excellent public transport) make it unique. There's a sense of synthesis, a bringing together of cultures, of the countries in the region and beyond, and a vision of art as integral to Singaporean life. I look forward to returning to Singapore as part of the *RealTime* writing team collaborating with local writers on covering another Australian-Singaporean collaboration, the new media arts event MAAP (Multimedia Arts Asia Australia Pacific) in October.

TheatreWorks, Sandakan Threnody, director *Ong Keng Sen*, composer *Jonathan Mills*, set *Justin Hill*, lighting and video *Margie Medlin with Choy Ka Fai*, soundscape *Steve Adam, Jonathan Mills*; recording, *Sydney Symphony Orchestra*; *Victoria Theatre*, June 18-20

Singapore Arts Festival, May 28-June 20, www.singaporeartsfest.com

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