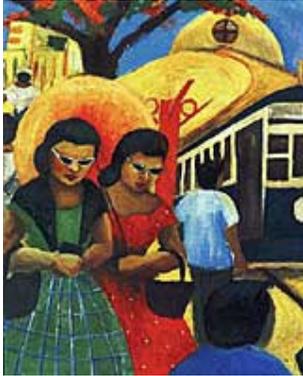


The Philippine STAR

Arts and Culture

Beyond words in the Lion City ZOETROPE By Juaniyo Arcellana

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SINGAPORE – In the lion state of Singapore, there is such a thing as the Crazy Horse, which on first hearing we thought was the old band of rocker Neil Young. Only when we got here did we find out that it was a tasteful showcase of burlesque imported for the tropics.

There are many Filipinos in Singapore, working as domestic helpers, waitresses, cartoonists, musicians, but we weren't here to interview them, rather to experience what latest worldly and cultural delights the city state had to offer, billed as the Beyond Words Media Familiarization Tour, or Uniquely Vibrant.

Crazy Horse, imported from what could be France, was just one of the attractions we were exposed to during our five-day, four-night stay at the Hotel New Majestic, the boutique hotel located on Bukit Pasoh Road in Chinatown, just recently converted from its grand old days as a bordello. It lost none of its raunchy, old world charm, each room designed by a specific artist working on a specific theme, my own being Fly Away with a tree-house setting, the bedroom in a loft with a view of the sign that read: Police Cantonment.

After the three-hour morning flight from Manila via Singapore Airlines, during which we were fed and pampered by the corset-clad stewardesses, our party – a combination of broadsheet and magazine writers – was met by the hat-wearing Muslim guide Yusoff, the faster deep in the month of Ramadan.

If first impressions last, then we were sufficiently briefed on what to expect in the Lion City famous for among other things, its Tiger beer: lots of greenery, indeed not for nothing has it also been known as the garden city, trees and lawns resplendent and deftly manicured, and as one wag commented, "not a leaf out of place."

Also: a very clean, orderly city, right-hand drive cars mostly spanking new, while above the skyscrapers the omnipresent haze brought on by the fires in Kalimantan where Indonesian slash-and-burn farmers resort to *kaingin* system. It was the haze that occupied most of the headlines in the state-controlled *Straits Times* the time we were there, triggering diplomatic loggerheads between Singaporeans and the neighboring *kaingineros*.

Of the welcome lunch at the Majestic, one course stood out: a kind of hot prawn soup served in a coconut shell, whose meat one could scrape off the sides while partaking of the viand which promptly warmed the stomach after a long journey. This same coco concoction was served three days later at My Humble House restaurant, just before taking in a classical concert by the Nagoya Philharmonic at the Esplanade.

The City-State often prides itself as being a kind of arts and culture hub in the region, where artists and writers can congregate and dialogue and present their latest works, all in the spirit of communal brotherhood. At the National Museum on the afternoon of the first day, we got a firsthand look at works at the Singapore Biennial, and finally understood what the fuss was about: here artists of different persuasions and worldview use any medium at their

disposal and within arm's reach to further their craft, and some quite frankly blew our minds, including a painting by Filipino Jose Legaspi that featured a seemingly pious woman exposing her vagina.

Later it was a tour of another boutique hotel, the Scarlet, which had scarlet red interiors that our fasting guide said inspired a mood for love if not wanting to be gone with the wind.

Dinner at St. Julien at the Fullerton Water Boathouse had red wine and veal that perhaps made us shed a tear or two, not out of any gustatory cruelty to animals but to the wonderful view below – the iconic Merlion gushing endless water out of its mouth into the bay of early evening.

Shopping at the 24-hour Mustafa capped the first day, the place a bit too much of an Indian version of the 168 in Divisoria.

A humorous highlight of the second day was a rambling, convoluted feng shui tour that took up most of the afternoon, which allowed our regular fasting guide to catch up on sleep and for us to catch up on our sleepwalking, including an inadvertent foray into a freezing pub where our feng shui expert shiveringly followed to lecture us nonstop on the art of placement, brrrrr.

Not to forget either the DHL balloon ride that Friday, that afforded us a good view of the city through the haze, followed by sumptuous lunch at the Equinox, also several stories above sea level with the cod and assorted clamshells, bread and cheese.

At the end of the feng shui rambles, in the late afternoon with the view of the river that slices across the city and some statues of boys diving into the deep, it was on to the Asian Civilizations Museum where some hidden faces and masks were waiting, expressions behind glass cases that told a unique history of theater.

In the evening on the way to a riverside resto that served a *pinangat*-like Indochina dish, some ambient bushes outside the museum wafted a familiar scent, the unmistakable *sampaguita*, but this time without the accompanying destitute street urchin selling garlands of it.

When it comes to nightlife Singapore is no slouch either, as evident in a couple of wild weekend night forays, first to Zouk and its bubbly marketing exec Bernadette Loh, where we left a Johnny Walker Black on the rocks waiting in order to meet up with a street cartoonist in Little Cubao in the Adelphi Building off Coleman Street; and next night to the loud Ministry of Sound where house and techno are what matter and one can easily get lost in the maze of smoke and drink and swirl of music.

Saturday was a day of recovering for us, where there was a refreshing excursion to the Botanic Gardens that reminded us so much of UP Los Baños up forestry way. It was a day, too, for reflexology foot spa and Thai massage to get the old sybarite muscles humming and ready for raising the red lantern after the mega eats and treats and trying to decide where in the art of placement the surfeit of sensations would fit.

Down Holland Village we got to purchase some catnip for the crazy cat back home, and afterwards lunch at the Indian restaurant Mustard perhaps coinciding with the great Indian holiday that had some grounds near Racecourse Way full of litter, a rarity in Singapore where hefty fines await the litterbug.

At Sotheby's auction on a Saturday afternoon there were some paintings by Filipino

masters listed on lots, including works by National Artists Fernando Amorsolo and HR Ocampo, Nena Saguil and Lydia Velasco and Pacita Abad, among others.

A great entree of spicy crab at riverside point preceded the night's entertainment at Crazy Horse, but no one was talking about a broken heart when the cancan girls danced to the music of the French quarter, their fine pink nipples alternately staring and winking at us in the air-conditioned dark and the whisky cracked ice in handheld glass.

Sunday morning breakfast was at Maxwell Food Centre, where ambiance was much like the Ongpin estero food court, only the food and aromas were better. This was followed by a post-prandial stroll to the Red Dot Museum, where the shorts-clad curator Grace enlightened us on the possibilities of a designer's free market that puts original creations on the block every weekend.

It was our first time to enter a mosque on Arab Street, where an eatery nearby was offering an oxymoronic Ramadan buffet including a mutton soup that resembled, as one healthy fam-tour participant observed, the Batangas *goto*.

Then it was on to Peter Wee's antique house of the Peranakan, the closest thing to an indigenous culture in Singapore, which anyway has national holidays for at least four different ethnic groups. The Peranakan is the local mestizo, part Chinese and part Malay, and wholly devoted to their ancestors' heritage.

The inevitable wrap-up was the classical concert at the Esplanade, where the acoustics were easily the best we've heard ever. A pin-drop and a cough could be crystal clear in that impressively constructed hall, much more the music coming from the Japanese solo flautist.

In a nightcap at the Fullerton Hotel bar, we passed up on the Singapore Sling and opted for the local Tiger, and got word that Man U beat Liverpool in another battle of attrition, 2-0.

Our last day Monday was a free day, spending more time downtown with our self-designated guide a street cartoonist, hobnobbing with the Pinoys at Lucky Plaza, lunching on Hainanese chicken at the Lucky basement, rummaging through the impressive bookstores, posing by the MRT station where the chopped-up remains of Jane La Puebla were dumped, riding the double-decker tourist bus, buying last-minute *pasalubongs*, then a quick stop at Maxwell's for a Tsing Tao and *Hokkien Mee* before heading back to Majestic to catch the shuttle to the airport.

On the road it was all green again, and if Singapore, a naturally multiracial culture still dominantly Chinese, is still looking for its soul, it's just right there before it. The race riots of the '60s now a thing of the past.

After three hours of being pampered and fed again by the shapely Singapore Airline flight attendants, we could soon see the lights of our dirty undisciplined city down below. In the distance the sky occasionally flashed lightning, followed by echoed streaks of red that were the bloodshot eyes of memory.

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