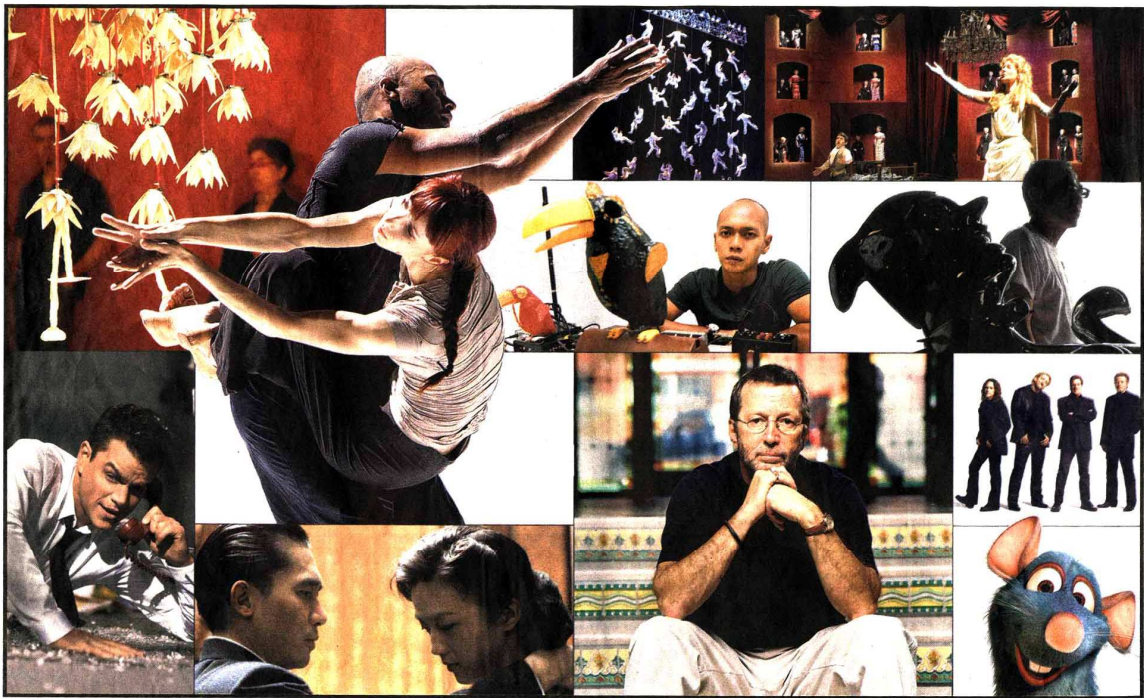




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A year of anniversaries

PARVATHI NAYAR applauds the sheer volume of high quality and well-received arts events on offer throughout the past year

IT HAS been a good year for the arts in Singapore, if only judging by the sheer volume of artistic events and the variety of activities on offer on any given day of the year.

For ticketed events, visit the Sistic website, and about 80 shows are on offer at any time, the bulk of which are arts events. "About 15 per cent more tickets were sold for arts shows this year compared to 2006 - keeping in mind that more arts shows were available in 2007 than 2006," says Sistic's deputy CEO, Kenneth Tan.

This year, *Phantom of the Opera* probably sold more tickets than any other single event in Singapore, but Sistic's top-sellers of the year include local shows like the Dim Sum Jollies' *History of Singapore*, Singapore Repertory Theatre's (SRT) *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Toy Factory Theatre Ensemble's *Titouan*.

That is encouraging news for the local scene.

As Hareesh Sharma of *The Necessary Stage* (TNS) observes: "It has been a very healthy year for the arts, especially in terms of the output of performances, exhibitions and festivals from local artists and companies. I feel there's been more collaboration and support coming from venues like the Substation, the Esplanade and the Arts House."

Regulars on the arts calendar celebrated anniversaries, most notably the 30th year of the Singapore Arts Festival (SAF). The occasion was marked with a first-ever Festival Opening performance at the Padang, and a programming line up that attracted over 700,000 people.

Meanwhile TNS celebrated its own 20th anniversary with a return to its core strength: staging socially relevant theatre, with a new work, *Good People*, and a revival of *Off Centre*, which this year became the first Singapore play to be included in the Literature syllabus for GCE O Levels.

Still on anniversaries, the National Museum - the "old" but refurbished new kid on the museum block - celebrated 120 years in the business with specially commissioned programmes such as *T20* by TheatreWorks, a massive site-specific work that explored the making of the museum over the years.

"We have successfully grown the museums into lifestyle destinations," says Michael Koh, CEO of the National Heritage Board (NHB). "Audience numbers have been increasing and our exhibitions have been featured regularly in international media such as the *New*

York Times and *Newsweek*. We have engaged the community through innovative programming - working with personalities like Mark Lee to guide at the museums or introducing events with popular appeal yet rooted in history like the Vintage Car rally at Heritage Fest."

NHB also held the first Patron of Heritage awards to recognise cultural philanthropy, and thank generous benefactors. Such philanthropists have greatly helped museums, in particular, in creating a year of visually and conceptually rich programming.

The Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) held two milestone exhibitions - *Mystery Men: Finds from China's Lost Age*, and *On the Natanda Trail: Buddhism in India, China and South-east Asia* - both with "top of the line artefacts", says ACM director Kenyon Kwok.

Kwok Kian Chow, director of the Singapore Art Museum (SAM), says one of the year's highlights was "the leading role SAM played in forming the first art museum association in Asia - the Asian Art Museum Directors' Forum - with participation from India, China, Korea, Japan and ASEAN countries."

The biggest theatrical buzz was generated by the double bill of *King Lear* and *The Seagull* starring the inimitable Sir Ian McKellen, a touring performance that was brought in by SRT.

Most local theatre companies offered strong theatre seasons that mixed old and new. Revivals included Wild Rice's second staging of Eleanor Wong's *The Campaign to confer the Public Service Star on JBI*. Ivan Ilang says: "Theatre is an art form that hinges upon the collective imagination and shared experience of the public. 'Restagings' enlarge the audience for a particular play - 11,000 people in total saw *JBI*."

TheatreWorks presented the sixth edition of its interdisciplinary Flying Circus Project (FCP) after a three year interruption. FCP is a long-running programme exploring creative expression in contemporary Asia arts. Under the theme "Travelogue", this edition brought together artists from Asia, Europe and North America.

TheatreWorks' Ong Keng Sen, talking of the overwhelming response from Singapore audiences who participated in an FCP art marathon from 11am till 3pm the next day, says: "It demonstrates the shift in Singapore audiences: we do have a commercial arts scene, but there's also a crowd of sensitive, hungry audiences who desire more in the arts equation, not just the instant laughs but also food for thought."



Action Theatre provided a fun component to theatre by staging a 2007 version of *Theatre Idol*, where playwrights Ovidia Yu, Desmond Sim, Ng Yi-Sheng and Chong Tze Chien faced off against each other with readings of new plays; the competition was won by Yu for her compelling piece *Hitting (on) Women*.

New arts festivals made their mark in town like the Singapore Sun Festival, which wowed audiences with their core classical music offerings by such celebrated names as Lang Lang and Pinchas Zukerman. An exciting development was the birth of arts/design hubs initiated by the community such as Emily Hill and The Old School.

Complementing the new, older players looked to reinforce their presence on the arts scene with carefully structured programming. Coming into its fifth year, the Esplanade has completed the main structure of its annual programme calendar to allow for diverse audience tastes. The Esplanade's director of programming, JP Nathan, says: "This year in particular, we embarked on a new phase by

Inimitable: The biggest theatrical buzz was generated by the double bill of *King Lear* and *The Seagull* with Sir Ian McKellen, in a performance brought in by the SRT

that Nafa exhibitions like the *Jerwood Drawing Prize Retrospective* were able to attract sponsors "from a broad philanthropic and corporate range; importantly, corporate citizenry and artists were matched up in a way to benefit both parties".

Other forms of corporate support included long-term residencies offered to visual artists by Marina Mandarin, and the exhibition programmes in Hornes's art gallery. High level corporate moves included Jennie Chua taking over as the new chairman of the Arts House.

In terms of the visual arts, the big new interest for collectors remains contemporary Asian art with special reference to China and India. ARTSingapore, Singapore's annual international visual arts fair, generated heat with about \$30 million worth of artworks; actual sales were twice those of 2006.

Internationally, Singapore's pavilion at the Venice Biennale featured four artists - Tang Da Wu, Vincent Loew, Jason Lim, and Zulfikar Mahmud - under the theme "Figments, Fictions and Fantasies".

Auctions in Singapore gathered momentum with auction houses like Masterpiece Auction House, Borobudur Auction - which held one of Singapore's largest auctions this year - and Larasati Auctioneers reporting healthy sales. However, auction house Sotheby's is moving its twice-yearly sale of South-east Asian paintings from Singapore to Hong Kong next year. Tang Wen Li was appointed as the Singapore representative of Christie's, and it was business as usual, with regular pre-sale previews.

The arts continued to play a role in cultural diplomacy with Singapore's veteran arts companies such as the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra and the Singapore Dance Theatre all part of the Singapore Season in China.

Quantity, enthusiasm, arts education, an arts industry - these are the key terms that come up in reviewing the arts scene of 2007. As Nafa's Ms Tan says: "It would seem that the energy in the arts is definitely on the rise. I can't say for sure that it is developing consistently or with any real sense of direction, but the importance is its current dynamism."

The hope is that the projects established in 2007 find momentum and move forward in 2008, accompanied by ever greater critical thinking, sophistication and richness of artistic meaning.