

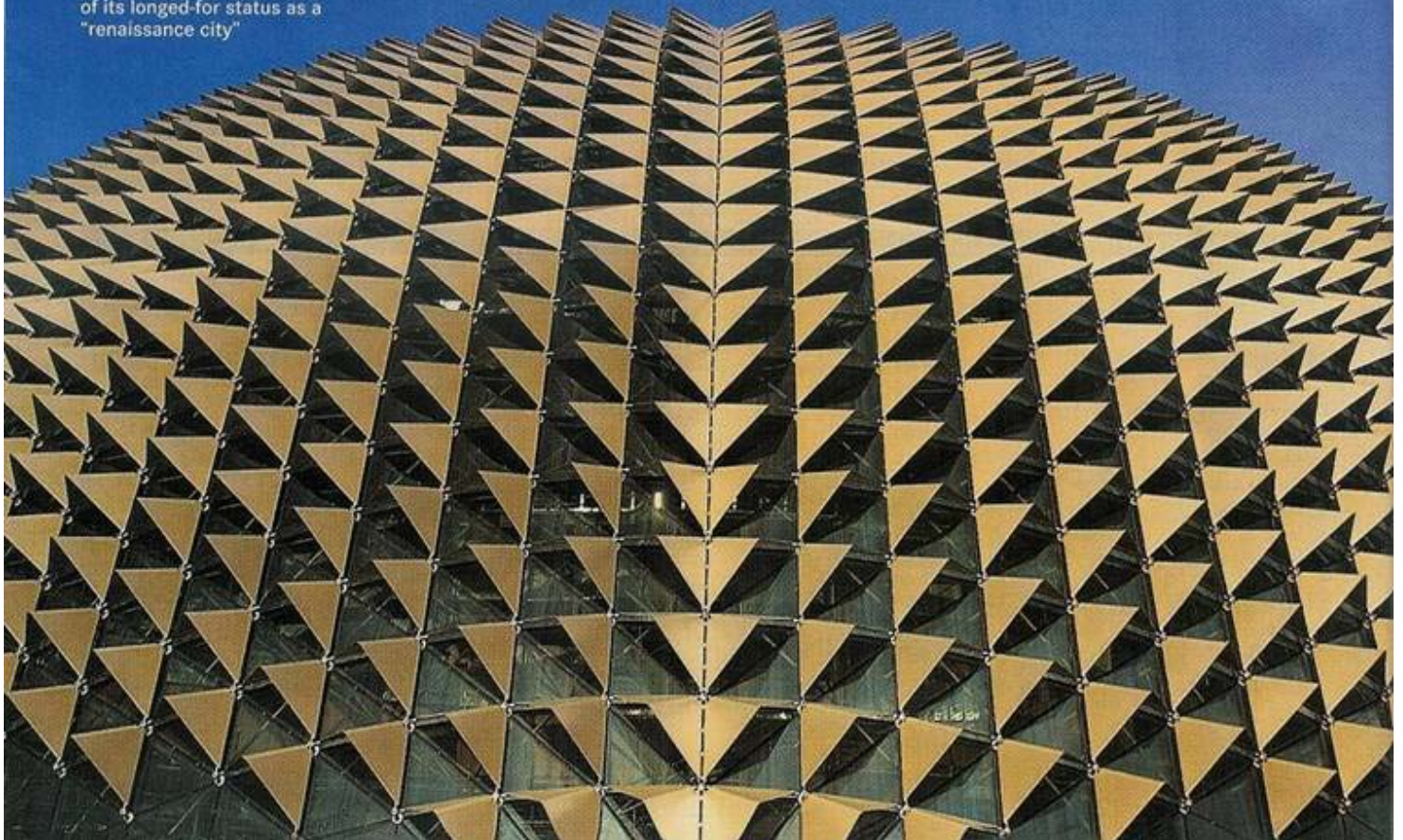
ARTS & CULTURE

# The Renaissance Starts Here?

*Having turned itself into an economic power, Singapore has a new goal: To become Asia's cultural hub. But can the arts really thrive in a city so suspicious of self-expression?*

By Sara Webb/SINGAPORE

**HIGH AMBITION:** Singapore is hoping the distinctive domed roof of the Esplanade will become a symbol of its longed-for status as a "renaissance city"



IN A FEW DAYS' TIME Singapore will finally open its much-vaunted arts centre, the Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay. The list of features is long and impressive: There's a 2,000-seat theatre, an 1,800-seat concert hall, two smaller venues, public spaces and, of course, those head-turning bug-eyed domes that Singapore is hoping will become as iconic as Sydney's Opera House.

But perhaps the Esplanade contains nothing more amazing than this: a graffiti wall. Singapore is not a country known for its graffiti. In 1994, it earned international notoriety when it caned an American teenager, Michael Fay, for spraypainting a car.

Few places have much tolerance for graffiti as a form of self-expression. But in the eyes of many, Singapore's reaction went beyond a reasonable approach to law and order and instead typified a tendency to clamp down on anyone stepping out of line. That applies not only to spoiled teens but to some of the city-state's leading creative figures. This is a country, after all, that detained one of its leading playwrights, the late Kuo Pao Kun, for his communist leanings in the late 1970s; where a novelist, Catherine Lim, was publicly rebuked in 1994 for an essay criticizing the prime minister; where a performance artist was fined for obscenity; where a play about rape within marriage was banned; and where even the popular American television series *Sex in the City* is considered too racy to be aired.

But having turned itself into an Asian economic powerhouse, Singapore has decided it's time to become another regional hub: Asia's arts centre. As a 2000 government report noted: "Having secured the economic necessities of life, Singaporeans are discovering the allure of culture and things aesthetic. The potential for Singapore to develop into a Renaissance city of Asia is high."

The benefits may also be high. Singapore believes that spending on the arts will not only help the economy by encouraging tourism and domestic spending, but could also have wider economic and social benefits.

"It's more than just art for art's sake," says the writer and poet Simon Tay, who is a former member of parliament and is now chairman of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs thinktank. "It is connected with our ambition of being a creative society that is vibrant and alive for all those who reside here."

Or, as the government report puts it, in somewhat Orwellian tones, it's all about creating "the Renaissance Singaporean'-the sort of individual who "dares to be different: he perseveres and is not afraid to fail ... he is not a mere actor in a vast nameless play, but a co-writer of the Singapore Story."

Daring to be different doesn't necessarily pay off, as performance artist Josef Ng found to his cost in 1994. Ng was charged with committing an obscene act and fined for staging a performance inspired by news reports of a police entrapment operation in which 12 homosexual men were arrested and later punished by caning. During his performance, Ng caned slabs of tofu while reading from a newspaper article about the case. He then turned his back on the audience and snipped off some of his pubic hair.

"My mother's reaction when she found out was, 'Why are you doing this in Singapore? Go to New York if you want to do this kind of thing,'" Ng recalls. Instead, he moved to Bangkok: "I've met more artists, curators, academics in Bangkok in one year than I did in Singapore in my whole life," says Ng. Even so, he concedes that with the opening of a big-ticket venue such as the Esplanade, Singapore could attract more artists.

He's not alone in feeling more optimistic about Singapore's prospects. "Finally we have a state-of-the-art venue," says Gaurav Kripalani, artistic director of the Singapore Repertory Theatre. He's "thrilled" by the opening of the new venues, and generally impressed by the facilities. But he reckons their sheer size will limit their usefulness for local groups. Only two or three Singaporean companies will be able to make use of the Esplanade's 2,000-seat theatre, he says; local groups are instead more likely to use the complex's smaller theatres and its casual outdoor spaces.

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In other words, to fill its large theatre and concert hall the Esplanade will need to ensure a steady stream of international productions, such as the musical *Singin' in the Rain*, which will open after the launch festival. The centre's funding structure will add to the pressure to ensure that shows have wide public appeal. Revenues will come from several different sources, including rental of the centre's venues and commercial spaces, corporate sponsorship, box-office receipts and possibly some form of government funding, which is currently under discussion. "Initially it will be more mainstream, to pull in the crowds," predicts Kripalani. "But hopefully that will change over time."

Others are less hopeful: "I think once again, this art centre may sacrifice art to commerce," says noted Singapore theatre director Ong Keng Sen. At the Esplanade, he says, "they will make a big deal about the 'art' in capital letters that they are bringing in from world centres. But Singapore companies may be treated according to profit margins or we may be there when it is important to include us politically."

Still, even if the Esplanade doesn't thrust Singapore immediately onto the cutting edge of the artistic world, there is a feeling that the centre and the publicity surrounding it will at least make the arts more visible in the city-state and more acces- ►►



Simon Thong/Reuters

**DESTINATION:** Singapore has been encouraging the staging of regional art fairs

sible to more people. That's welcome in a place that historically hasn't really cherished its artists, or devoted much to encouraging the arts. As a result, it has seen some of its artists, such as Jimmy Ong, known for his charcoal drawings of the human figure, move overseas to more liberal and stimulating environments. "Artists aren't celebrated," in Singapore, says actor and director Ivan Heng, but he thinks "the Esplanade shows that they realize artists are a very important resource."

There are other signs, too, that the government is serious about improving the arts infrastructure. As well as building the Esplanade it's been encouraging such commercial events as the staging of art auctions and art fairs and luring international figures like the international print-maker Ken Tyler, who set up the Singapore Tyler Print Institute. (Tyler later resigned as director of the institute in a apparent row over funding, described by one board member as a clash between an artistic entrepreneur and Singaporean bureaucracy. Neither Tyler nor Singaporean officials have commented publicly on the split.)

The government is also reviewing its censorship rules. Licensing of arts events, for instance, is no longer the responsibility of an obscure police department, but of the Ministry of information and the Arts, which should-at least in theory-mean the decisions are more informed. "It has become more liberal," says local playwright Russell Heng, whose politically inspired plays have run into problems in the past, "but it's two steps forward, one step back." In his view, the sensitive issues are violence,

sex, race and religion, and the political dominance of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), but in some of those areas, the authorities appear to be more relaxed.

"Singapore is more comfortable with sexuality," says Ivan Heng, who is planning to stage *Porcelain*, a play by Singapore-born playwright Chay Yew, who now lives in the U. S., about a Chinese boy who shoots his male lover. "It's a beautiful play about a crime of passion," he says. But race and religion are still thorny issues: A couple of years ago, the authorities banned a theatre group from performing *Talaq*, a play by Singaporean playwright P. Elangovan about rape within an Indian Muslim marriage, after members of the local Indian community protested. "It makes a mockery of Singapore's aim to be a renaissance city," commented Elangovan at the time. If anything, Singapore's approach to the arts appeared more medieval than renaissance.

As for political issues, "nobody wants to look hard at our politics," says Russell Heng. A recent theatre adaptation of *Animal Farm*, George Orwell's satire about the rise of a totalitarian state, took a few potshots at the PAP: "We had a drummer dressed in white (the party's uniform) and the

animals were moving to the heat," says director Ivan Heng, while the farm on which the animals lived was constructed from huge air-conditioning ducts, an allusion to the popular description of Singapore as an air-conditioned state. "I think the climate has changed," Ivan Heng adds, though he says that on preview night, some members of the audience seemed surprised. "They asked me, can you do this?"

Others generally prefer to play it safe. When a local publisher recently brought out the novel *Wuya* (Crows) by mainland Chinese author Zhu Ziping (who writes under the name Jiu Dan), it decided to cut a reference to the heroine's affair with a former Singaporean politician. Zhu had lived and studied in Singapore and there was plenty of speculation among readers that the book might be semi-autobiographical. "It refers to a former member of parliament and when you talk about MPs it's a very sensitive issue," says an executive at the publishing company. Another person involved in the book confirms "it's always prudent to play safe," since any reference to an MP inevitably means the PAP.

Keeping everyone happy isn't going to be easy. While the authorities realize that plenty of Singa-

poreans, dubbed "cosmopolitans," are well-travelled, well-educated and open-minded when it comes to new artistic experiences, a large portion of the population—the "heartlanders"—remain conservative and resistant to *avant-garde* art-house films or sensational art. That's true of many other societies too—witness the regular rows in New York or London over art that's cutting-edge or deliberately intended to shock.

But in Singapore, it's telling that local newspapers played the role of local educators recently, explaining why an exhibition of nude paintings and drawings currently on show were not pornography but art. Even so, *The Straits Times* noted that not everyone agreed. It quoted Edward Chain, a 41-year-old assistant project engineer as saying, "I am fine with it as long as the exhibition is held in a private place. But I don't think this is art. Art is something else other than a human body. This kind of behaviour is not acceptable in Asia. We are not Americans. We should maintain our own culture and identity. No point trying to adopt the West's patterns."

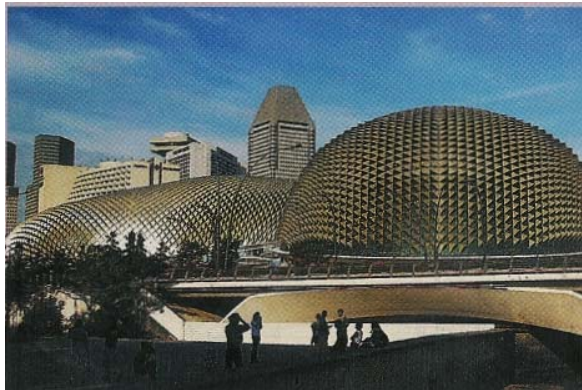
Meanwhile, back at the Esplanade, work is continuing ahead of its public opening on October 12. Once the launch festival is out of the way, Singaporeans will have a long list of events to look forward to, and art to marvel at, including the graffiti wall. But anyone hoping to show up with their own spray can will be disappointed: The "graffiti" will be produced by an officially sanctioned company. As an Esplanade spokeswoman explained to reporters, "Of course we have to be careful with sensitive things." ■

## INTO THE PLEASURE DOME

Built at a cost of S\$600 million (\$338 million), the Esplanade Theatres on the Bay complex is already a talking point in Singapore.

Perched on the waterfront, the domes were derided as "concrete blobs" or "marshmallows" when the plans were first shown to the public a few years ago, but they have since been dubbed "the durians" because of their spiky exteriors. The spines are designed to keep off most of the direct sun, while allowing clear views out through the glass and across the water.

Vikas M. Gore of design firm DP Architects says the inspiration came from "elements from nature such as sunflowers, fish scales, the patterns of a bird's feathers," as well as from traditional Asian buildings, "ranging from Jali screens in medieval



**FRUITFUL:** The domes have been dubbed "the durians"

South Asian architecture to the woven mat walls in Southeast Asian buildings." Whatever its inspirations, arts lovers are hoping the centre's 1,800-seat concert hall, 2,000-seat theatre and smaller spaces will help turn it into an unrivalled home for the arts and a venue for local,

regional and international work.

The Singapore Symphony Orchestra will perform the inaugural concert on October 11 ahead of the official opening the following day. As part of the opening festival, the Singapore Repertory Theatre will perform *Forbidden City: Portrait of an Empress*, about the life of the Empress Dowager Cixi, while the Singapore Dance Theatre will perform *Reminiscing the Moon*, choreographed by Indonesian artist Boi Sakti. Among the international names lined up for the

festival are American opera star Jessye Norman, the London Philharmonic Orchestra with Korean-American violinist Sarah Chang, and Cape Verde Islands folk-singer Cesaria Evora.

**Sara Webb**

Web site: [www.esplanade.com](http://www.esplanade.com)