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It's showtime at the Esplanade

New arts centre draws crowds as visitors sing its praises

By [Tan Shzr Ee](#)

SINGAPORE's dream of being a premier regional centre for culture and the arts became reality when the curtain rose on Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay last night with a spectacular blend of fireworks, music and dance that had critics and ordinary people alike singing its praises.

As befitting the arts centre's aim

to have something for everybody, the high and low arts were on show.

[Esplanade official website](#)

Thousands of people thronged the 6-ha site on Marina Bay from 5 pm to take in outdoor performances that included mime artists, acrobats, a capella singers and stiltwalkers.

Later in the evening, President S R Nathan and other VIPs watched the Singapore Dance Theatre perform Indonesian choreographer Boi Sakti's new work, Reminiscing The Moon, in the theatre.



A spectacular display of blazing pyrotechnics climaxed the launch of Singapore's arts centre, Esplanade. -- Theatres on the Bay. - DESMOND WEE

The evening climaxed in a half-hour show of blazing pyrotechnics, illuminated bumboats and flying acrobats that might have upstaged the inaugural performance inside the complex.

President Nathan had opened the Esplanade at the centre's Forecourt at 7.30 pm, igniting the first display of fireworks at Marina South.

The 2,000 guests there included Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew and most of the Cabinet.

A Malay percussion group, Gendang Boys, and Indian temple percussionists pounded out a dramatic beat to greet them before they entered the centre, which was lit up like a giant jewel box.

Ms Penny Hutchinson, the director of Australian government agency Arts

Victoria, who was a guest, saw the opening as a milestone, and not just for Singapore.

'A landmark like the Esplanade will definitely draw audiences from a wider cross-section of people, including those outside Singapore. It's a boost to the Asia-Pacific arts circuit and a great venue.'

Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir, Malaysia's Tourism Minister, agreed. He had come from Kuala Lumpur for the opening.

'I'm very proud for Asean because we all belong to Asean, and now we have theatres like these,' he said.



The Esplanade, hailed as Singapore's most significant architectural project after independence, is the culmination of 30 years of effort by individuals and government bodies, and six years of construction.

Showing their appreciation of a performance by the Singapore Youth Choir, (from left) PM Goh, Mrs Goh, President Nathan, Mrs Nathan, SM Lee and Mrs Lee. -- DESMOND FOO

Last year, the venue received its distinctive outer shell, earning it the controversial nickname of 'Bug's Eye' and 'Durian'.

But a thornier issue was whether the \$600-million centre would be more than a white elephant to the average tax-paying Singaporean.

Last night, at least, proved that it met its aim of being 'an arts centre for everyone'.

Environment officer Wu Jiming, 39, was there with his wife and three children.

'Maybe it's a high-class arts centre. But for me, it's also a beautiful park that gives us breathing space in the city,' he said.

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Snapshots

SWEET SUCCESS AT THE OPENING

CHOCOLATE-COVERED strawberries, anyone?

Chocolate Box manager Benny Chua, 39, said the strawberries, priced at \$1 a piece, were the fastest-selling items at his shop in Esplanade Mall yesterday.

'They are popular with both

kids and adults. They would buy three to four pieces at one go,' he said.

[Esplanade official website](#)

The shop started selling them at 3 pm. At 6 pm, when asked how many pieces he had sold, he said with a smile: 'Well into the thousands, although I can't tell you how many exactly.'

The strawberries will be on sale today, too.

'We will sell them only when there is a big event at the Esplanade,' he said. 'The process is just too tedious.'

NO NEED FOR TICKETS, IT'S ALL FREE SEATING

RETIRED school principal Lim Chin Chee, 68, and wife Shirley, who is in her 60s, certainly came prepared.

On top of packing in food, drinks and paper fans, they took along their own chairs.

'It's a big day for Singapore and we were expecting a big crowd to come and celebrate the opening. Best to bring along our own seats, so that we can be comfortable anywhere,' said Mr Lim.

Mrs Rahimah Said, 36, had other seating plans in mind. Her 20-member family watched the fireworks from the less-crowded grass patch outside Marina Square.

'It's great timing because the kids have just completed their PSLE exams,' she said.

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SHUTTERBUGS had a field day at the Esplanade - among them, undergraduate Yeo Pei Shyuan, 22, self-employed Anthony Cheong, in his 30s, and systems analyst Lum Eng Kit, 28.

The three, who met at a photography course in June, arrived at 5 pm, just as the crowds started swelling.

Ms Yeo said: 'I like taking pictures of people. If you capture them at the right moment, the expressions each tell a different story.'

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Durians flambe

It was what drew thousands to the grand Esplanade opening: a stunning fireworks display, which lit up the night skies

By [Tommy Wee](#) and [Suhaila Sulaiman](#)

FIREWORKS never fail to please.

That's why thousands of Singaporeans braved the humidity and haze to catch the spectacular opening of Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay yesterday evening.

'I've never seen so many people

in this part of Singapore before,' said primary school teacher Wu Hui Ling, 26.

[Esplanade official website](#)

By 8 pm, the area around One Fullerton, Esplanade Bridge and the Esplanade itself was packed - in some places, 20 people deep - with Singaporeans and tourists alike.

Esplanade chief executive officer Benson Phua, 45, said: 'I can't tell you how many people are here, but it seems like the whole of Singapore has come to join in the celebrations.'



Oohs and ahhs filled the air as the pyrotechnic display took off, bathing the spikey domes of the new art centre and the waterfront in fire. -- DESMOND WEE

Most of the people interviewed said they were there to catch the fireworks extravaganza at 10.15 pm.

Mr Mohammed Faizel, 35, a technician, who was with his wife and two young sons, said: 'It's a big occasion for Singapore.'

'I brought my children here especially for the fireworks.'

Others wanted to show their support for the arts centre and their solidarity as Singaporeans, especially as they had read that the opening would be covered by the international media.

Mr Patrick See, 66, a businessman, said: 'I don't think I will live long enough to see another grand opening of this kind for the arts in Singapore.'

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Birthday fun for Ms Elle Shariff, 21, who is greatly amused by a mime artist. -- DESMOND WEE

affect the centre's success.

'It's too soon to tell if it'll be an international success.'

But for the crowds last night, what mattered more was having a good time.

Pointing to the sea of people, graphic designer Philip Chow, 30 said: 'Singaporeans love a good squeeze.'

'It's a new icon and I'm very proud that reporters from around the world are here to join in the celebrations.'

While most felt that the Esplanade signified a new chapter in the cultural landscape, others had a wait-and-see outlook.

Said aerospace machinist Eric Lee, 42: 'The coverage by the international media could strongly



The Fiesta guide helps Mrs Cherly Chan, husband Boon Siong and daughter Ann. -- DESMOND WEE

EXCITING TIME

'I'm here with my family to soak up the atmosphere. It's exciting because the Esplanade is an icon for Singapore.'
- **Mr Ong Seng Kee, 52, an engineer**

IMPRESSIVE SIGHT

'The Esplanade looks especially impressive because it is right next to the sea. It's another symbol to identify ourselves with.'
- **Ms Lee Hui Ying, 20, an accounting undergraduate at the Nanyang Technological University**

PERFECT SPOT

'Everyone should watch an opera at least once in his lifetime. This is the perfect venue.'
- **Mr Sheldon D'Souza, 28, a software programme**

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