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## Lavish new arts centre the pride of Singapore

Roy Thomson Hall's acoustician part of project

William Littler

SINGAPORE — The Esplanade Theatres on the Bay? Some cab drivers can take you right there, straight along Raffles Ave., with a drop-off at the introductory mall. Others still don't know what you're talking about until you say, "the durians."

Known in the tropics as the queen of fruits, these vaguely pineapple-like objects were apparently not in the minds of Koh Seow Chuan, Vikas Gore and their fellow architects of the world's newest performing arts centre, who say they were simply looking for soft shapes to set against the profile of neighbouring hard-edged skyscrapers, but the nickname stuck just the same, long before the complex's Oct. 12 opening.

By whatever name, Koh, Gore and an international cast of consultants from the United Kingdom and the United States (including Russell Johnson of Artec Inc., recent acoustical renovator of Toronto's Roy Thomson Hall) have given Singapore an absolutely world-class home for music, theatre and dance.

A series of homes, actually, ranging from a 1,600-seat concert hall (1,800 seats including the choir gallery), to a 2,000-seat theatre in the style of an Italian opera house, to a 220-seat studio theatre and 250-seat recital studio, along with gallery and retail spaces and a 300-metre-long open area fronting the bay with two outdoor performance spaces.

All these spaces are currently in use as the cleanest city-state in Asia celebrates the latest addition to its constantly changing skyline with a 4 1/2 week opening festival involving some 1,300 artists from 22 countries. I couldn't think of a better place for a quick holiday trip, so I joined the party.

Recalling all the years of wrangling and blood-from-stones fundraising preceding the building of Roy Thomson Hall and the planning of Toronto's still-awaited opera house, it practically brought tears to a visiting Torontonians eyes to learn that the Esplanade, all 600 million Singapore dollars worth of it, represented a breathtakingly direct government investment in culture, sited on the best piece of available real estate left on this tight little island.

An ongoing investment it is, too, since it will take an estimated \$25 million annually just to maintain these state-of-the-art facilities. An additional pair of theatres, part of the original plan, may be added later, depending on demand.

Though similar in size to Toronto, with a four million-plus metropolitan population, Singapore has a much less developed cultural infrastructure. The Singapore Symphony Orchestra, which performed Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* under Lan Shui's capable direction at the inaugural concert, is only 23

years old; Singapore Dance Theatre, which premiered Indonesian Boi Sakti's visually stunning, choreographically underwhelming *Reminiscing The Moon* for the inauguration of the theatre, only 15.

In Toronto, as in most North American cities, new facilities have followed the development of the arts. In Singapore, they are helping lead them. No one who remembers the bleak acoustical environment the Toronto Symphony Orchestra had to endure in Singapore's austere Kalang Theatre on its Pacific Rim tour several years back can doubt the impact Russell Johnson's new concert hall in particular will likely have.

A typical Johnson facility, with such adjustable features as an overhead stage canopy, similar to the one he installed in Roy Thomson Hall, the Esplanade Concert Hall is still experiencing what marriage counsellors would call a period of adjustment, as users discover the settings best suited to them.

In a press conference prior to conducting a pair of concerts with the touring London Philharmonic Orchestra, one of the first users, German conductor Kurt Masur, even went so far as to say that he was trying to help Johnson find the golden mean, after which no future adjustments would be necessary.

By the time he came to conduct Bruckner's *Seventh Symphony* at the conclusion of the second concert, Masur might almost be said to have found it, so gloriously rich and alive did his fine orchestra sound in this latest addition to Asia's growing list of important, Western-style concert venues.

Esplanade's future tests will likely be less acoustical than demographic in any case. Singapore's official language of business may be English, but its population is predominantly Chinese in background, so the challenge faced by chief executive officer Benson Pua and his staff will be to program, within an arts complex primarily Western in design, for the benefit of all Singapore's citizens.

Judging by the opening festival, an energetic beginning has been made, with Singapore's Chinese Orchestra and Repertory Theatre, Cantonese opera and the National Ballet of China appearing alongside the New York Philharmonic, soprano Jessye Norman and Cape Verde pop star Cesaria Evora.

It is said of durians that they taste like heaven and stink like hell. It is Esplanade's happy discovery that they can also serve, and serve handsomely, the purposes of art.

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