

# What's Playing by the Bay?

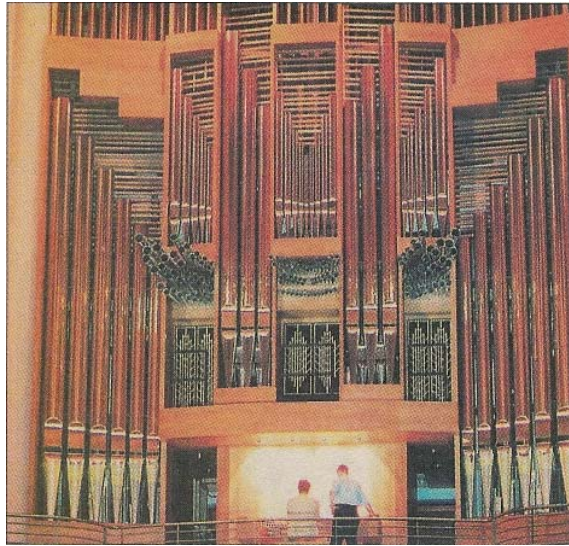
**Kavitha Iyer** explores Singapore's Esplanade Theatre, a performing arts centre built by an Indian, to discover world-class acoustics and more

**A**FTER receiving a standing ovation at Singapore's Esplanade: Theatres on the Bay's Concert Hall in late October, Ustad Amjad Ali Khan and Dr L Subramaniam were effusive: The acoustics were wonderful, we did not want to stop. It was the premiere of Sangeet Sangam, a joint performance by the two maestros as part of the 20-day grand festivities marking the opening of Singapore's latest and most ambitious performing arts centre.

Located on six hectares of prime waterfront at Marina Bay, the Esplanade boasts of a 1,600-seat concert hall, a 2,000-seat theatre, two smaller performance studios, a rehearsal studio, an outdoor theatre, a mall and even a library for the performing arts.

While the horseshoe-shaped theatre is built to resemble a traditional Italian opera house, the concert hall designed by acclaimed acoustician Russell Johnson includes reverberation chambers, an acoustic canopy and acoustic curtains - so amplification is completely unnecessary.

People's feelings about the Esplanade have certainly changed. The legends associated with the building - described as kitschy by some, distinctive



**The acoustics were wonderful, we did not want to stop playing, said Ustad Amjad Ali Khan after his performance**

by most - have found acceptance among Singaporeans. The guide on the hour-long 'Duck Tour' around Singapore says the Esplanade was built to resemble the Sydney Opera House. A local

photographer insists the design is based on two copulating aardvarks.

Vikas Gore, director of DP Architects (chief architects of the project), can keep shaking his head in amusement and say the Esplanade was not meant to resemble any of these, but the iconic structure has captured popular imagination. A headline in the most widely circulated newspaper heralded the opening day with 'Durian season begins.'

"Singapore builds a performing arts centre once in a lifetime," says Gore, "so we took the opportunity to do something beyond the conventional, anything less would have been doing ourselves and the country injustice," he says. He does not like the comparison with the Sydney Opera House. "It has a powerful exterior but the theatres are terrible, acoustically and functionally and it wasn't any source of inspiration."

The philosophy behind the arts centre, points out the chief executive officer, was it should be a people's performing centre - democratic rather than elitist. In

Gore's words, "We didn't want people to wonder what the rich, all dressed up in their gowns and tailcoats, do after they disappear into this mysterious place."

Therefore, the glass domes at the Esplanade Theatre provide this transparency; those on the pavement can look straight into the foyer. The sun is kept away by a unique cladding system, the spiky shades adding to the fast-multiplying legends and likenings. "We want Singaporeans to embrace the arts as an intrinsic part of their daily lives," says Puah, Gore's partner, enthusiastically. But that perhaps depends on ticket prices, which were certainly beyond the reach of the average local during the inaugural festivities.