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## Will arts groups get spiked?

**By [Tan Shzr Ee](#)**

MONEY, money, money. That is the thorny issue which has gotten everybody prickly over the Esplanade - Theatres On The Bay, now that the hue and cry over its durian-like facade has died down.

Earlier this month, the management of the new performing arts centre said it was in discussion with the Government over its long-term funding.

No figure has been settled on yet but it is expected to be substantial. As it is, \$600-million has been sunk into its infrastructure, the pride of which is a 1,800-seat hall designed by the American acoustician Russell Johnson.

The centre opens officially on Oct 12 with its own \$12.9-million festival, boasting 670 acts involving some 1,300 artistes from 22 countries.

While all this largesse may have come out of tax coffers, senior directors at the Esplanade are anxious to point out that it is the taxpayer himself who will reap the greatest benefits, namely, more than reasonable prices for high-quality art.

Said Mr Benson Puah, its chief executive officer: 'We want to bring arts to all people, which means making performances affordable.'

For example, the cheapest ticket to the touring London Philharmonic, which plays at the centre on Oct 14 and 15, is \$41, not a whole more than the £12 (S\$34) which a Londoner might pay for bottom-tier tickets to hear the ensemble on home ground at the Barbican.

But while the audience is happy, other arts companies have been less thrilled, since more funding for the Esplanade may mean less for them.

How much of the well-thumbed arts funding pie will the giant centre gobble? How will smaller arts groups cope with the introduction of a muscle-man in the race for sponsorship?

Last year, the Government spent \$140 million on the arts, but it is not known precisely how much would be allocated to the newcomer, which is managed by a company whose board of directors include bankers Michael Wong Pakshong and Theresa Foo.

The matter is still under discussion, said Mr Puah.

However, the centre will not receive funds from the National Arts Council (NAC), which had just \$5 million to give in funds and scholarships last year, but from bodies such as the Singapore Totalisator Board and Singapore Pools.

This is good news for groups like the Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT) and Sculpture Square, two

out of 19 organisations which receive yearly grants of anything between \$58,000 and \$765,000 from the NAC.

Ms Ng Siew Eng, SDT's general manager, ponders: 'All things aside, I am sure our Government would have made separate plans to fund the Esplanade, alongside ongoing arts groups - remember the commitment they made with the Renaissance City report.'

That commitment, made to Parliament in March 2000, was for an additional \$50 million to go to the arts over the next five years.

It doesn't sound like much and according to the NAC's rules, government funding is capped at 30 per cent of a company's budget. For many companies, it is more like 20 per cent.

This leaves arts groups the challenge of raising funds in alternative ways. Many rely on the usual: ticket sales, hall rentals and endowment-fund earnings, which can account for up to 35 per cent of typical budgets.

At the end of the day, all arts groups will still have to compete in the open market for corporate sponsorships.

This is where the picture looks less rosy for the smaller ones.

Mr Liew Chin Choy, general manager of the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, points out: 'Obviously the Esplanade has an edge over other arts groups in securing sponsorships now.'

'Major corporations would want to be associated with its state-of-the-art facilities for corporate image.'

Ms Ng adds: 'The competition is rife even without the Esplanade in the picture. It has a lot of novelty value now, so I won't be surprised that it gets a bigger slice of the pie.'

Realistically, all sponsors have a finite budget, the spending of which will be related closely to branding policy.

Says Mr Frank Messer, president of Daimler Chrysler South East Asia, which sank US\$100,000 (S\$175,000) recently into opera icon Jose Carreras' Dec 2 date with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra at the Esplanade: 'Of course we will have the problem of not having an unlimited budget; we can only cut the cake one way.'

'But supporting all aspects of the arts is our social responsibility - and we have been sponsoring groups like the SSO regularly.'

Mita, however, is confident that the pie can grow and that new players will eventually come in as the arts and economic scene expands.

According to a spokesman, corporate arts sponsorship has grown about five times since 1991. Two years ago, the NAC managed to raise about \$37.4 million in corporate monies.

Responsibility for keeping the arts alive, he added, falls on all parties - the private and public sectors, and the audience.

Mr Puah is eager to reassure all that the Esplanade does not intend to cannibalise from other local arts groups by approaching their regular stock of established sponsors.

So far, he has brought on board Volkswagen and The Oriental, Singapore as sponsor and partner respectively, to help raise a target of \$3 million in cash sponsorships, which will cover 10 per cent of his operating costs.

Meanwhile, some arts groups are also asking for more government support, citing Singapore's apparently-weak track record in comparison with the arts expenditure patterns of other cities.

Per capita government arts spending here in 1998-9, excluding capital expenditure, hovered at \$7.27. This pales in comparison with recent figures of, say, Hongkong (\$24.83), Australia (\$14.71) and London (\$108.72).

SSO's Mr Liew, for one, hopes that the Government can up its grants ceiling of 30 per cent to Australian and Hongkong rates of about 60 per cent of an arts company's budget.

Other groups such as drama company TheatreWorks have looked into tapping foreign funding sources from the Ford Foundation and the Japan Foundation.

Mr Puah observes: 'Arts groups could also explore more marketing and business-driven initiatives to earn additional income, such as creating touring or special event products for conferences, industry fairs and gala dinners.'

Still, even very large pies have limits.

And more importantly, how will art-making be influenced by the branding imperatives of financial backers?

DBS, which supports the Singapore Repertory Theatre, the Singapore Dance Theatre and the DBS Life! Theatre Awards, is very clear about what it wants - 'a strategic fit in terms of target audience and the customer segments that DBS serves', said a spokesman.

Behind the corporate-speak, it is clear that the politics of 'branded' art with a corporate face is a real concern for arts groups, and will involve more than slapping a name on arts events such as the M1 Youth Connection theatre series or the Heineken Jazz Festival.

With a major player like the Esplanade now in competition, art-making might be skewed in two different directions: it might move up the mainstream track, so as to attract potential sponsors, or down the low-budget, low-production-value ladder, in the event of a group failing to secure regular funds.

The potential casualty would be experimental new works or nascent groups, which may have critical merit but not popular appeal.

Mr Alvin Tan, director of The Necessary Stage, asks: 'It's not that we do not welcome the Esplanade, but would it have the capacity to platform local original works without being harassed by bottom-line pressures?'

With such an expensive venue to pay for, programmers may find they have to fall back on well-known and commercially viable productions, and ignore new, original, innovative or experimental works from local companies.

SSO's Mr Liew agrees, and says that local arts groups, including amateur and school groups, will be unlikely to have a chance to use the Esplanade.

'They can only salivate, and use the Victoria Concert Hall, Singapore Conference Hall, University

Cultural Centre etc,' he says.

'There is this fear that these places will turn into venues for the man-in-the-street, while the Esplanade develops into an elitist bedrock of high-class acts.'

To ordinary people, such pronouncements may be rather over-stating matters, but they go to show that the line between genuine concern and a protectionist stance on local art can be blurred.

After all, competition can only mean a refinement of overall quality, so one might argue.

As DBS' spokesman says: 'The economic environment remains challenging and it is up to all arts companies to look aggressively at how to work with sponsors.'

Ms Tay Swee Lin, general manager of mid-sized visual arts space, Sculpture Square, believes that 'upping competition is not a bad thing, although of course I cannot stress that it's always a constant struggle looking for money'.

'We can't be protectionist about the arts. But at the same time, I have confidence in our artists - I doubt that those of real calibre will really paint, or create art just for their client anyway.'

In the real world, where artists have to make a living, the arts, like any other commodity, is subject to the opposing forces of the marketplace. But marketplace theories envisage not only killer competition but also situations in which all parties benefit.

The salubrious effects of investing in a high-prestige project like the Esplanade means that not just consumers, but also participating local arts groups benefit from the funds disbursed and the boost to arts appreciation levels because of the 'buzz' it generates.

Volkswagen's director, Mr Norbert Preiner, points out there is a 'virtuous circle' to be had: 'If the Esplanade succeeds in its goal to create a groundswell of interest for the arts, this may encourage more corporate sponsors to support the arts in the long run.'

Mindful of the criticism it has generated about being elitist, the Esplanade has already put its money into developing local cultural capital by sharing its global ties: it organised an Asian arts fair for artists, impresarios and festival 'buyers', has shared international contacts, conducted technical courses for arts groups, and is collaborating with and commissioning local works.

Its reach is so wide that discussions have been going on about whether the NAC should relinquish certain functions to the Esplanade, in the areas of programming, arts education and outreach, says Mr Liew.

For example, he says, should the Esplanade, with its infrastructure and resources, take over the organisation of the annual arts festival entirely?

He is not drawing theories out of thin air. Following the launch of Mita's Cultural Capital programme this year, which assesses the arts as economic assets, the ministry is now in discussion with bodies such as the Economic Development Board and NAC about new strategies.

When the papers are written and action plans proposed next year, it will be clearer how arts and funding policies will develop.

One thing is clear: the Esplanade has provided both arts practitioners and lovers with the best opportunity to hold policy makers to their promise of supporting a Renaissance city.

A Mita spokesman affirms: 'The Esplanade is a big investment. But it is a clear signal that we understand the importance of arts and culture in making Singapore a cosmopolitan city.

'We will also continue to invest in new arts and cultural facilities. We will also support the development of artists by building up our arts education institutions, and through programmes that give our artists greater international exposure.'

- **Tan Shzr Ee is a reporter with the Straits Times Life! section.**
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### **In short**

The Esplanade, which opens in October, will need millions to keep it going. Smaller arts groups predict that it will suck up corporate money, which is not all that bountiful already.

But government agencies say that corporate sponsorships are going up, if slowly. And a high prestige project like the Esplanade can only raise the profile of the Singapore arts scene, something which is good for both artist and art lover, as well as companies looking to look good by giving money to the arts.

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### **ART OF MONEY**

Bankroll issues behind the Esplanade

- **The Esplanade runs on a budget of about \$30 million each year.**

While it is targeting to raise \$3 million in cash sponsorships as well as rolling in ticket sales and hall rental fees, how much exactly should the government pump into its programming budget?

- **Local arts groups fear that the Esplanade will eat into the public, private and corporate arts sponsorship pie.**

A more important concern, however, is how the launch of a brand-name arts centre sourcing for brand-name sponsors might intensify the divide between mainstream and alternative art-making in Singapore.

- **How can a win-win situation be achieved?**

Arts groups here hope that money spent on the Esplanade might be channelled further into commissions of local or experimental work.

There is also the 'spin-off' effect: that money put into the arts centre will eventually spiral outwards into a larger pattern of increased appreciation levels and arts 'buzz'.

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