

# GOES EAST AND UNDER

- \* A few shutters, barndoors or more sophisticated optics would not have come amiss. Nor would a dimmer. The snapping switch can be a wondrously dramatic device, but it has its limitations.
- \* Lightning never strikes twice in the same place – except on stages.
- \* In Thai music it is curious how bells take on the role of the omni-present euro-american drum, whereas the percussion are engagingly tuneful.
- \* Sitting on floor cushions with feet in an under-table trench does wonders for audience sightlines to the stage.

If I had not taken a jar from time to time with Kevin Bourke, I would probably have assumed that Rank O'Connor's were in Dublin. But they are the means by which light shines forth in abundance upon Singapore's entertainment scene. And it was O'Connor's magic wand that spirited me through many stage doors including that of the hyper-exclusive Pine Tree Club where the Environ dimmers for the white neon in the ceiling coves give an immaculate fade whose smoothness and constant whiteness would upstage the most perfect detergent.

I am glad to have caught Singapore's National Theatre before its demolition for road improvements. Although opened as recently as 1963, its twenty one years are a long time in this extraordinary city state which combines its role of being arguably the current leading economic miracle with being certainly the cleanest and tidiest place on earth bar none.

It is (or perhaps by now, was) a 3,000 seater with a cantilevered roof carrying lighting bridges over an auditorium which is open to the weather at back and sides. The huge stage is mostly revolve, and the

swallows nest amongst a lovely collection of old Strand beauties like the Pattern 93/N. Nearby is the 300 seat Drama Centre which is spick, span and inviting to both its actors and its audience after a complete Rank O'Connor refurbishing job of drapes, carpets, an AMC and an entire concert of Preludes.

In the colonial heart of the city, near the statue of Sir Stamford Raffles, stands the Victoria Theatre in its 1862 splendour. Its interior, however, has been refurbished so that in place of Victorian boxes the walls are wood lined and carry lighting booms. (But why are the access ladders in front of the lamps?) The adjacent Memorial Hall was added to commemorate Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee. Amidst the accretions of several acoustic and lighting renovations (the latest of which was taking place during my visit) the old shell still shows glimpses of its original pillars and cornices.

But Singapore is still a city of many contrasts. After watching a television advert for part-time English newsreaders – send in photo and you may be called for audition – I set out in search of a 'Wayang' or Chinese street opera. It was, after all, the Feast of the Hungry Ghosts. Finding all quiet in Chinatown, I hailed a cab with a hopeful 'Take me to your Wayang!' I was taken to a residential suburb where the temporary stage had been erected in the communal courtyard between high rise housing. Walking around this structure with about half-an-hour to go before performance, preparations could be seen through the many gaps in the flapping canvas walls. Actors applying the thick mask-like make-up, musicians tuning, back-cloth rollers being tested and props marshalled. The lighting was exactly

right and in full flood – anything as technological as a lens would have been quite out of place.

I was only able to see the first few scenes before 1984 intervened in the shape of a 747 to whisk me across the equator. But it was great stuff – from the clanging orchestra to the formality of the acrobatic choreography. The stage manager was very important and often stood on stage, well into view. But we the audience could not see him because he, of course, was in ordinary street clothes, not made-up and therefore invisible.

A character in a Wayang  
(Chinese street theatre) Singapore.



Above: The Drama Centre, Singapore.

Centre: The Victoria Theatre, Singapore.