

Art and Soul

The Singapore Arts Festival 2003 dances on the cutting edge with a program of genre-bending performances **By Joe Ng**

American singer Meredith Monk performs to dreamy video images of a pencil scrawling across a page. Local artist Tan Swie Hian displays his skill with a paint brush to the lush sounds of the Singapore Chinese Orchestra. TheatreWorks' *The Global Soul—The Buddha Project* investigates Gautama Buddha's journeys by way of contemporary novelist Pico Iyer. *Alladeen*, an Indian-British-American collaboration, takes a tongue-in-cheek look at Indian telephone operators' fake American accents.

With a program full of such cross cultural, interdisciplinary and hybridized works, the Singapore Arts Festival 2003, May 30 to Jun 22, hopes to leave deep impressions on audiences. According to Goh Ching Lee, the director of program development at the National Arts Council, this year's festival "upholds its adventurous spirit in both inviting and commissioning works that push artistic boundaries, exploring the intersections of several genres that embrace music, theater, dance, opera, film, puppetry, literature, and the visual arts."

WHERE Singapore sifts through the 40 core performances from 18 countries to give you the highlights.

ART PROVOCATEUR

Don't play it safe—an arts festival like this presents the perfect opportunity to go out on a limb and watch genre-bending works.

Making its world premiere here, *Le Festin d'Immortalite* is a dance that comments on technology's invasion of our lives, and explores the conundrum of immortality through the ever-shifting boundaries of life and death in modern society. This collaboration between Singapore Dance Theatre and Japan's H. Art Chaos features Sakiko Oshima's spectacular aerial choreography and stars H. Art Chaos' leading dancer, Naoko Shirakawa.

The Handspring Puppet Company from South Africa adapts Italo Svevo's cult 1923 novel *Confessions of Zeno* into a bold multidisciplinary theatrical work that uses puppetry, live singing and acting, and video images to tell the story of the protagonist, Zeno, who's struggling in his relationships with his father, wife and mistress. Meanwhile, the specter of World War I hangs over him. The brainchild of Johannesburg-based filmmaker William Kentridge, *Confessions of Zeno* is a sharp con-

temporary work that reveals how modernism gate crashed Victorian lifestyles.

Combining Meredith Monk's music and Ann Hamilton's site-specific art installations, the all-American production *Mercy* is a dreamlike piece of musical theater that defies easy categorization. A miniature camera captures the movement of pencil strokes for the audience to see, while Monk's transcendental singing and chanting express the inexplicable feelings of the hypnotic dream that unfolds on stage. This is an Asian premiere.

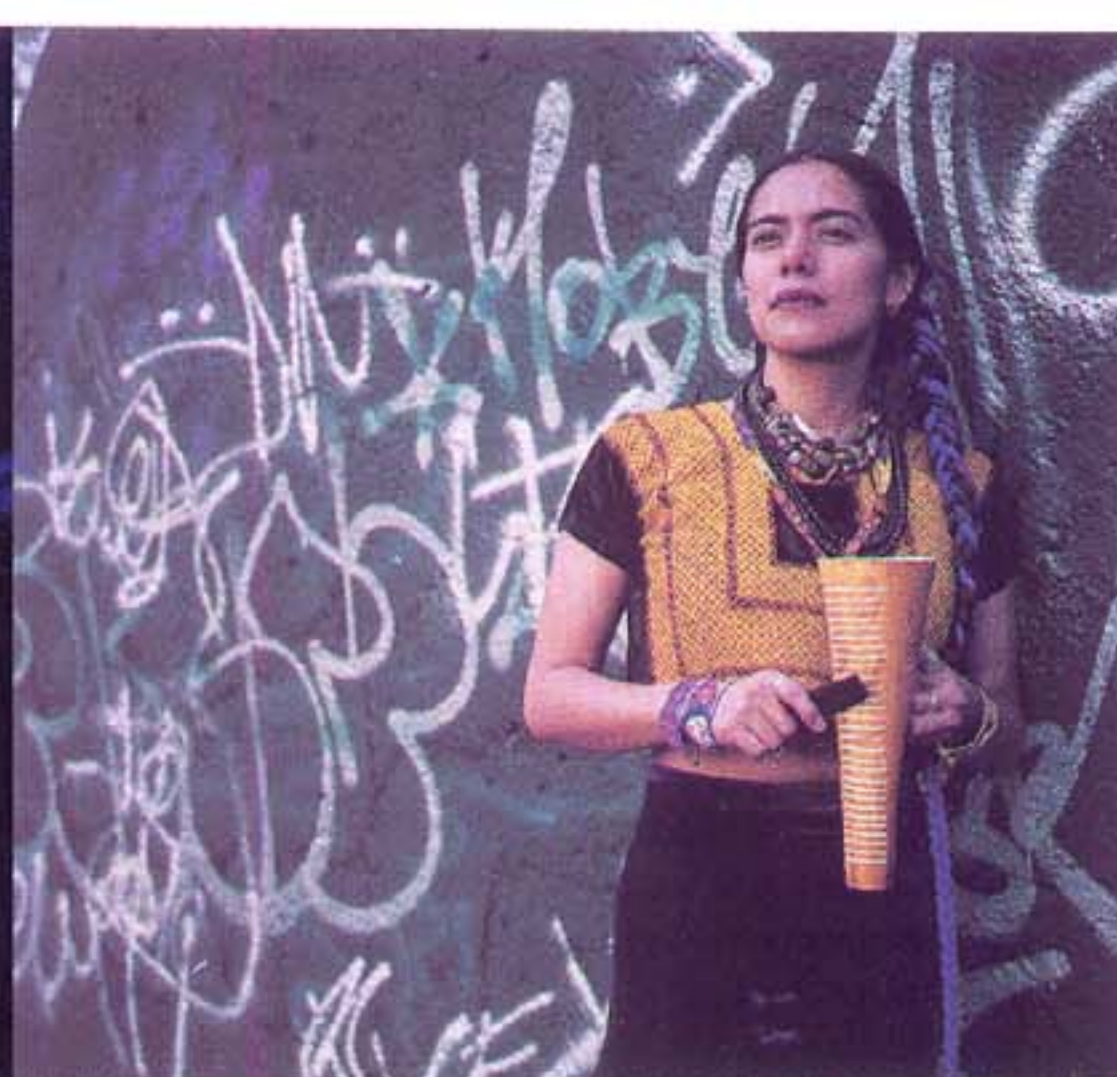
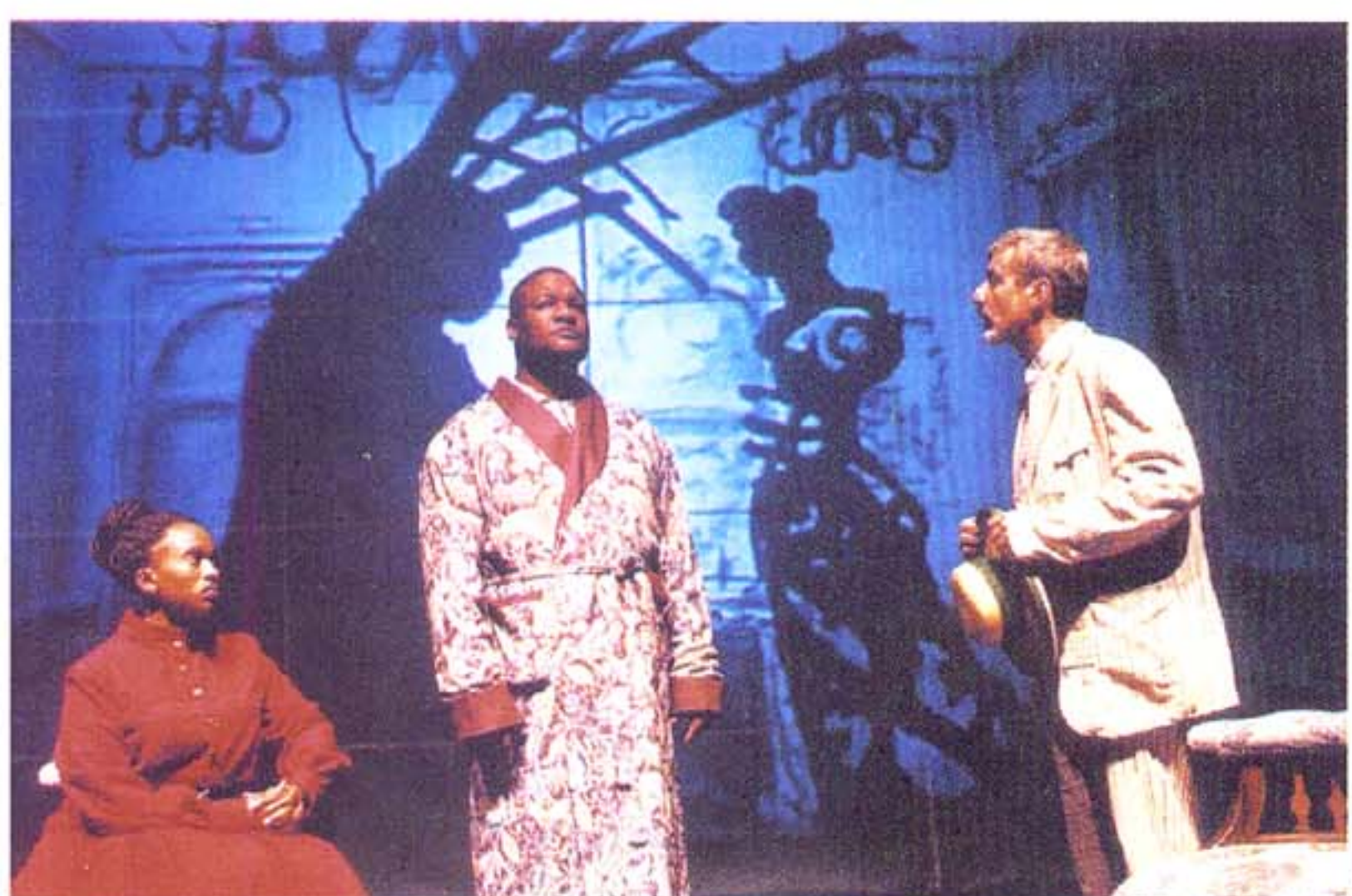
She has sung opera, peddled jewelry on the streets woven indigenous Mexican Indian cloth, and been nominated for this year's Best Original Song Oscar for "Burn It Blue" from the film *Frida*. Now let Lila Downs the daughter of an American father and Mexican Indian mother, enchant you with her interpretation of Mexican music in the Indian languages of Mixtec, Zapotec, Mayan and Nahuatl. Surely, she's one of world music's hottest stars today.

Adapted from Edgar Allan Poe's horror classic of the same name, Ballett Nürnberg and Oper Nürnberg's *The Fall of the House of Usher* is a evocative dance opera production about Roderick Usher, the narrator, and his dying sister, Madeleine, replete with incest, homosexuality, insanity and murder. Daniela Kurz, one of Germany's most respected choreographers, produces a work of haunting power, set to Philip Glass's 1988 score.

In the National Theatre of Northern Greece's *Swan Lake City*, a deconstruction *Swan Lake*, there are no ugly ducklings—only ugly human beings. Choreographer Konstantinos Rigos's explosive story of a trailer park by a lake is all about disgusting human behavior. A young woman trapped in the form of a swan tries to escape the tragic human circus.

There's no magic lamp to rub in this *Alladeen*, a collaboration between America's The Builders Association and *moti roti* from the UK. Instead, this multimedia theatrical production borrows the ideas of desire and wish fulfillment from the original *Arabian Nights* tale

(FROM LEFT) HANDSPRING PUPPET COMPANY; SINGAPORE DANCE THEATRE; LILA DOWNS



and adapts it into a story about Indian telephone operators at international call centers who learn to speak in an American accent so they can pass off as Americans. Think of this as Hollywood meets Bollywood.

HOMEGROWN FARE

Some of Singapore's best known artists in various fields showcase their latest works at the festival.

The works of painter Tan Swie Hian, the recent recipient of the World Economic Forum's prestigious Crystal Award for outstanding artistic achievement, interact with the Singapore Chinese Orchestra at the world premiere of *Instant is a Millennium—A Musical Conversation With Tan Swie Hian*. The highlight of this wonderful night of music, poetry, sculpture and calligraphy sees Tan painting to the sounds of *A Thousand Sweeps*, a specially commissioned pipa concerto composed by the Hong Kong-born Law Wing Fai.

If you had thought Buddha and *TIME* magazine correspondent Pico Iyer had nothing in common, you couldn't be more wrong. TheatreWorks' director Ong Keng Sen was inspired by the wisdom of Gautama Buddha and Iyer's writings to conceive *The Global Soul—The Buddha Project*, a contemporary spiritual tale about Buddha, jet lag and airports, which experiments with Japanese Butoh theater, Liyuan opera from ancient China, and Korean court songs.

Described as "firmly rooted, collectively committed, and deeply loyal to its audience," *The Necessary Stage* bares all in *REVELATIONS*, a collection of stories about hope and despair in urban Singapore, conceived by two veterans, dramaturg Alvin Tan and playwright Hareesh Sharma; and local theater's rising stars, Jeff Chen and Chong Tze Chien.

Groundbreaking singer-songwriter Mark Chan and a seven-member ensemble bring his brand of East-West fusion music to *Little Toys: Chinese Film Classic with Live Music*. *Little Toys* is a classic Chinese silent film starring 1930s Chinese screen goddess Ruan Lingyu.

The Jeremy Monteiro NYC Trio offers music that cannot be more different from Chan's. Together with Belgium's 81-year-old harmonica legend Toots Thielemans, the trio of Singapore-born pianist Jeremy Monteiro and New York-based drummer Adam Nussbaum and bassist Jay Anderson jazzes up the festival with stylish music and impeccable taste. Witness for yourself why the harmonica is more than just a "miscellaneous instrument" in Thielemans's masterful hands.

HIGH NOTES

With three outstanding orchestras in participation, classicists can rejoice thrice over.

Aging better than a bottle of excellent vintage, the 250-year-old Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra performs Mendelssohn's *Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Schumann's *Cello Concerto in A minor*, Beethoven's *Symphony No. 6 in F major*, Mozart's *Symphony No. 41 in C major* and Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*. In its long history, the orchestra has performed the world premieres of many famous compositions by the likes of Beethoven, Brahms and Mendelssohn. Maestro Herbert Blomstedt conducts and cellist Pieter Wispelwey is the star soloist at this festival.

Don't miss pianist Mikhail Pletnev's performance of a complete cycle of *Beethoven Piano Concertos* over two evenings together with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra. Praised by the *San Francisco Chronicle* as an artist "who gets more sound out of a piano than any three instrumentalists" and acknowledged as one of the greatest pianists of our time, Pletnev displays his talent at interpreting Beethoven's works with an awe-inspiring intensity.

The Orpheus Chamber Orchestra doesn't believe in being led by a conductor. Instead, members of the American orchestra take turns to critique their performances for balance, blend, articulation, dynamic range and clarity of expression. Such democracy and openness

have helped Orpheus become one of the best regarded orchestras in the world. At the festival, Orpheus performs the Singapore premiere of Osvaldo Golijov's *Last Round* and Aaron Copland's jazzy *Clarinet Concerto*, among other classic and contemporary works. [E]



(FROM LEFT) A MUSICAL CONVERSATION WITH TAN SWIE HIAN; REVELATIONS BY THE NECESSARY STAGE; LITTLE TOYS: CHINESE FILM CLASSIC WITH LIVE MUSIC

TOOTS THIELEMANS, JEREMY MONTEIRO NYC TRIO