

The good, the bad, and the ugly

BT's arts writers sum up the highs and lows of the arts festival with this tongue-in-cheek wrap-up

Upstaging the Bishan 'Bodohs' Award

Recently, 40 residents of Bishan Street 13 (including a 70-year-old retiree) petitioned against the building of a nursing home in front of their flats, citing everything from the obstruction of free-flowing breeze and removal of a football field as excuses. But the truth is nobody wants rock stars for neighbours and if these "bodohs" had watched Young@Heart's energetic performance in *End of the Road*, they would know that senior citizens can outrock anyone half their age.

The choral group makes The Rolling Stones look like babies with the members ranging from 73 to 90 years old, yet they could all still move like Jagger while belting out rock anthems by the likes of Bon Jovi, The Pixies and Red Hot Chili Peppers. Then again, with the possibility of all-night parties and hangovers, maybe that's why one Bishan resident was lamenting about old folks groaning right into his home. Because they were up having fun, dude.

The Cuckoo Bird Gets The Wormhole' Achievement Award

Adapting Murakami's surreal novel *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* couldn't have been easy, considering its strange structure and even stranger cast of characters. But director Stephen Earnhart managed to combine all the enigmatic elements together, taking the audience through the conceptual wormhole and back in one piece. Oh, and let's not get started on the good-looking Asian-American actors...

The 'Bite me, I'm falling asleep' Mark of Honour

The vampire play *They Only Come Out At Night: Pandemic* promised so much: "Our vampires are vicious, soulless creatures who try very hard to kill people," said director Alan Lane. But in reality, only one vampire in bad make-up popped out and said "Boo!" - leaving the bored audience this close to crying "Booooo" at the end of the play. To riff on the director's promise, the play was indeed soulless, lifeless, toothless and brainless.

'The Best Things in Life Are Free' Book Award

Given out free at several festival events was a 280-page book called *Platform Campus: Circle Lines*. Created by NUS and SMU students, it is a terrific compilation of short texts, plays and photos of their encounters on the new Circle Line route. Written in a way that allows you to jump pages, skip chapters, and dip into any part you fancy, it makes for an especially fascinating read on, erm, the MRT.

The 'Mommy Porn' Award

There's the *Salon's* Good Sex writing award and *The Guardian's* Bad Sex writing award - and though we don't see the Singapore Arts Festival ever having a sex award at any time, kudos to the 10 women who were willing to bare it all (just their sex lives, not their bodies) to an all-female audience for five ses-



MUSIC MAKERS: FILE PHOTO



Mixed fare: (Clockwise from left) Young@Heart performers show senior citizens can outrock anyone half their age; The Music Makers performing 'Rite of Spring'; Charlotte Engelkes leads a bizarre cast through 'Very Wagnerian Night'; and the 'Vertical Road' dancers display violent limb-thrashing

sions in *The Best Sex I've Ever Had*. Never mind that there's something quite academic about women in their 60s and 70s sharing about their sex lives, we still enjoyed the stories.

Best Movie Script Potential Award

A man who rides crocodiles, head-hunting tribals, the first Chinese republic outside of China, a gold rush and the British-Dutch tussle for land which Darwin called one great wild untidy luxuriant hothouse made by nature for herself. All these sure sound like the elements of a great period movie based on true historical facts which artist Choy Ka Fai brought to life in *The Lan Fang Chronicles*.

Biggest Wasted Opportunity Award

Singaporean composer Mark Chan's *The Flight of the Jade Bird* was a musically brilliant classical operetta with delusions of theatrical grandeur. A dancer flailed around the musicians and up a ramp shoehorned into the side of the crowded stage. And as the Jade bird went cuckoo with the poor pacing, audiences fled before the best stuff in Act 2.

Very Verbal Diarrhoea Award

Swedish actress Charlotte Engelkes behaved like your best friend confiding in you in a fit of verbal diarrhoea as she led a bizarre cast through *Very Wagnerian Night*, a comic tribute to Richard Wagner's operas. It was witty for those in the know. But for anyone not au fait with classical opera, it must have been like watching a nervous breakdown. In fact, one student was overheard complaining that he was never going to attend another Arts-Fest performance.

The Rite Stuff

What could have been a lukewarm mess turned into a triumphantly balanced production as the Orchestra of the Music Makers (OMM) daringly replaced live ballet dancers in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* with a slow-motion dance video by Roystan Tan, accompanied by dramatic stage lighting in *Rite(S)* of Spring. Most brave of all was Ho Chee Kong's *Passage-Fantasy for Cello*, a prelude to *Rite of Spring* executed perfectly by OMM and cellist Qin Li-Wei.

Hot Bod Award

Parallel Cities' *Factory* touched hearts with an honest, interactive tour of a paper factory in Kallang, but it also captured them in the form of "actor" Tan Swee Boon. With his boyish grin, the lanky worker seemed the most at-ease as he shared the day-to-day quirks and perks of his job.

The JB native boasted star quality with his natural, breezy charm and commentary. That he's easy on the eye doesn't hurt. And he's strong to boot - lifting up heavy reams of paper effortlessly, before sweeping his wispy fringe away from his face. When Ah Boon - as he prefers to be called - showed off a couple of his favourite sleeping haunts in the factory, no doubt some ladies secretly wanted in.

Failure to Launch Award

In most productions, the director receives the lion's share of credit and criticism. It's hard to do this with *Advanced Studies In*, seeing as its creator Herman Chong seemed to be largely absent from the work, apart from dumping 10 bloated tomes on 30 children - most too young to fully grasp the works. With overbear-

ing lesson titles such as *Possible Meanings of Life* and *Futile Construction of Utopia*, Chong may have bitten off more than he could chew. It didn't help that these classes were taught by eager and over-earnest students, leaving his audiences hardly stimulated, much less educated. If audiences had a watch with them, they'd be counting down the seconds till class was over. A bold experiment but it seems like the only grade *Advanced Studies In* will be getting is a big, fat F.

The Energizer Bunny Award

Who knows what they were drinking, but it sure kept the *Vertical Road* dancers going for a full 75-minute display of violent limb-thrashing. Their frenetically jerking limbs must have somewhat made up for the lack of a comprehensive storyline, and warranted an equally spirited applause by the time they ran out of time, or juice.

The Best Sex Nobody Had Award

A Language of their Own was literally warmly embraced by the audience, who sat shoulder-to-shoulder even though no such physicality existed on stage where the cast members mostly stood a foot apart from each other. The actors each spoke of their characters' sexual encounters, but nothing was shown: no flesh, no sex. Still, there was more than enough adult material to make Lady Gaga blush.

Shakespeare's Nightmare Award

Shakespeare, Shakespeare, wherefore art thou, Shakespeare? Who would have taken your highfalutin' plays and turned them into the lovechild of *The Last Samurai* and *Alien Resurrection*? Ong Keng Sen did - he decided to shoot green laser beams at a Japanese Noh master while blasting techno music.

Little wonder why the namesake character of *Lear Dreaming* was so weepy - Shakespeare would cry too if he saw his beloved Romeo and Juliet turned into a hip hop teen movie - oh wait, they did that already.

Best Makeover Award

Singaporeans can't live on music and arts alone. That's why the organisers of the Festival Village this year - which saw more F&B participants and an accessible watering hole - gets kudos for adapting to both the cultural and personal comfort needs of the audience.

Last year's Main Stage in particular was a walled-off space which made sitting unbearable in the muggy weather. Audiences had to traverse a rickety three-storey high walkway to get their buzz from a bar on the ground.

So this year's unticketed performances at a breezy open area was a welcome change. The grunge-chic zinc containers made the arts look pretty edgy too.

It also meant that patrons could knock back a beer or grab a bite just a few feet away while jiving to great music by foreign duo Soumik Datta and Bernhard Schimpelsberger, or classical acts like local-bred T'ang Quartet.

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