

15/11/2000

A resounding success

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WHAT sputtered to an uncertain start turned out to be an unqualified success - one whose effects will last long after the last stroke, musical strain and dance step are done.

Yes Lifa - the Langkawi International Festival of Arts - has been etched naturally into the cultural rubric, proving every bit a celebration of the arts and life!

It nicely dovetailed the official opening of the Ibrahim Hussein Museum and Cultural Foundation (IHMCF) museum building in the northwestern fringe of Langkawi by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Lifa also gave credence and meaning to the museum's creation in the first place - a veritable global village for interacting, and a showcase for the major works of Datuk Ibrahim Hussein and his fellow internationally-renowned friends of various creative disciplines from all over the world.

With a well-rounded arts shishkebab the likes of which the fabled island has never seen before, not in such concentrated brew anyway, Lifa could only get better and better.

That Lifa got off the drawing block at all was a feat in itself. Time was pressingly short, only barely a month over, for Ib and his wife Datin Sim to "rustle up" his luminary friends, to seek last-minute sponsors, to go into the nitty-gritty like flight arrangements, transport, accommodation, food, etc.

But having been a maestro of two previous arts festivals - the Club Mediterranee Asian Arts Festival in 1987 (Nusa Dua, Bali) and 1988 (Cherating, Pahang), Ib was well fortified.

That was when they decided to go it alone - to do it the way they wanted it, the way they thought it should be done: of a high international calibre and professionally.

It helped that the Kedah State Government and the Langkawi Development Authority (LADA) put their weight solidly behind him, that sponsors like Yeoh Tiong Lay brought in some acts and funds, and the national carrier Malaysia Airlines and the hotels there supplied a modicum of solace; that the New Straits Times and its publicity juggernaut did justice to all the efforts put in chronicling and exposing the event.

Then, when it was all systems go, the Rome-based Caschi Bianchi Europa Foundation (White Helmets Europe Foundation), billed a co-organiser, came in with only 60 artists out of an expected 200-strong party, and even then without some top-notched personalities as expected.

Obviously, there were some crossed lines somewhere, and the two foundations operated virtually as two entities.

On Ib's part, his coterie of artists and artistes friends all excelled with the exception of the "no-show" of the world-renowned Mexican sculptor Sebastian and that even because of flight-scheduling problems.

ALL the Malaysian artists selected by Ib for the festival are a great credit to the country and the art fraternity, coming up with works that easily stand up to scrutiny.

Hasnul Jamal Saidon with his dark sinister shrine in mock homage of herbal aphrodisiacs; Chuah Chong Yong with his tactile pigments of black sand/burnt rice; Juhari Muhammad Said with his meticulous woodcut on a katak's skewered ambition to become a lembu.

Kungyu Liew's garish Wadah Untuk Pemimpin pseudo-monument; Wong Chee

Meng's homage to Langkawi, the Emerald Isle, with a island-under-a-mountain mystique; Susylawati Sulaiman's facade whitewash to "save" an old building in downtown Kuah condemned for re-development.

Hoe Say Yong's multi-planed, multihued abstract reflections; Faizal Ramli's "reconstruction" of man in earthy wood block (well-hewn and carved) and stones; and Rome-based hotshot Conceptual artist H.H. Lim, with his epox "treasure" chest secured with chains.

Kudos to them all!

There was also the hastily-cobbled together photography exhibition of Eric Peris and the Silver Gelatin group, and the Gapena Congress with poetry recitations in a hotel and a shopping complex.

Of the foreigners, there's Made Wianta and the resonance of the performance of his "orang minyak" assistants around his installations on the museum's Pasir Pantai Tengkorak cliff promontory; Thawan Duchanee's extraordinary power of morphological creatures.

Thavorn Ko-Udomvit's re-suscitating core universal values with his play of positive-negative images (the untimely death of Montien Boonma has inadvertently shifted the focus to Thavorn as one of the standard-bearers of such deeply spiritual artform);

Masao Yoshimura's light stringed mini carriages which could also act like Calder's mobiles if strung to poles; Thierry Vide's harmony of curvilinear planes (though without his usual coloured light treatment); and Shri Shail Choyal's moo-ving tribute to Langkawi with the mounds of sentinels in the centre with the sides filled with a pattern of cow configurations.

The open studios of the artists must be a novel experience to the less initiated art enthusiasts for here, they could watch works in progress and how they developed or even changed in course.

The woodwind quintet of the Cebu Youth Symphony and Ingrid Sala on the ivory keys were the most sporting of the lot, providing soothing interludes for frayed nerves and busy minds, all over.

The Vietnamese Thang Long Water Puppet Theatre proved to be the biggest hit, with its spectrum of music, colours, uncanny skills (of puppetry), well-crafted puppets - a real orchestra in attendance would have been the coup de grace, instead of the minus-one music.

Scintillating one-night stands by flautist Andrea Griminelli and the jazz act of Thijs van Leer and Mike del Ferro would do better with at least one or two more nights - one must understand that Langkawi is vast and distance can be a nightmare.

The other one-nighter, or rather 10-minute flashes, exuded from the once-divine sultry sizzles of La Chunga, Spain's best-known barefoot flamenco dancer.

La Chunga must have been caught with her flowing flamenco ruffled skirts (no, she didn't wear that, neither was there the abanico fan or ole castanets) down - what with all the hype and billing in posters all over Langkawi.

But surely nobody expects this 62-year-old diva of dance to do a scorcher the way more youthful Aida Redza and her dancers rolled, tumbled, pranced and scurried with their medley renditions celebrating the human spirit.

There was also the two-men act mask dance from Bali although there's nothing like the real McCoy.

Of course, Lewis Pragasam and John Kaizan with his shakahuchi are a class act by themselves.

Then, there's the Kuala Lumpur Symphony Orchestra (string quartet).

And the farewell beach party at Tanjung Rhu was a nice wrap-up with the merchants of fun from Club Med providing the entertainment.

As the museum lies smack in a tropical rainforest, there's much to do with Ib's nature trail and a coastal cruise.

But Lifa 2002 should have much better international coverage, better defined artistic criteria and spending limits, better co-ordination and information dissemination.

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