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In paradise with the maestro

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MISSING out on a concert by world-renowned Italian tenor Luciano Pavarotti would be like committing cultural harakiri. The legendary opera star, during his four-decade career, has, after all, interpreted 26 different operas and has performed well over 1,200 performances, in more than 60 countries in prestigious opera houses around the world.

So, whether one's transport was by flight of fancy or by chugging ferry, not to be at the maestro's special performance last Saturday, called An Evening With Pavarotti at Pangkor Laut, was out of the question.

Moreover, a concert by the beach in a place dubbed "paradise" by the man himself during his first visit there eight years ago, held the promise of a heavenly treat.

Nature cast its magic first. Guests, elegantly garbed for an evening of exquisite music, were greeted by an achingly-lovely sunset reflected in the gentle waters of Emerald Bay.

It was cocktails under the trees before one was ushered towards the stage, canopied by the exotic fauna of the rainforest. Spotlights, mounted high, beamed crimson, azure and vermilion rays. And every now and then, giant butterflies fluttered among the greens.

Only music by a maestro would complete the setting. And, as United Nations ambassador of peace, Pavarotti was perfect for the occasion as well.

The show was the entertainment highlight of the two-day Asian Global Leadership Forum 2002, jointly organised by YTL Corporation Berhad, Forbes Inc, CNBC and Asian Strategy And Leadership Institute (ASLI).

The forum, held on Sept 7 and 8, was aimed at seeking a peace initiative in the light of the Sept 11 tragedy and the concert was in celebration of joy and peace.

Just as his name is synonymous with opera, Pavarotti's humanitarian efforts have also been far-reaching. Since 1992, he has spearheaded the annual Pavarotti And Friends concerts which benefit young victims of war like the children of Bosnia and Liberia.

At a Press conference earlier, he commented that music plays a vital role as a healing factor as it is akin to love and humanity.

Back to the show, if one had had niggling thoughts that he would give in to moods and refuse to croon a single note or worse, be unable to hit the high Cs for which he's acclaimed for, going by some reports, these very quickly evaporated.

From the time the 67-year-old stepped onstage in a tuxedo (XXL or more in size, no doubt), one was compelled to suspend time and reality and surrender to the majesty of his voice.

Pavarotti traced the intense phrasings of Puccini's Addio fiorito asil from Madame Butterfly and Che gilda manina from La Boheme with the distinct eloquent and expressive style that has propelled him to be the creme of the bel canto crop. Only, "live" was better!

Incidentally, La Boheme the touching tale of young love among the struggling artists in Paris garrets, was not only his first opera but is described as his "guiding star to artistic achievement".

In 1961 and 1962, a young Pavarotti performed the opera in several cities in Italy, achieving international stardom with it the following year at London's Covent Garden and at a 1965 debut at the prestigious La Scala in Milan.

Fast forward to Pangkor Laut - it has to be said here that the other artistes American soprano Cynthia Lawrence and flautist, Andrea Grimelli matched Pavarotti's excellence.

Lawrence, with her rich, dulcet tones rose to the occasion in Un Bel di from Puccini's Madame Butterfly, Si Mi Chiamano Mimi (La Boheme) and in the next half, La Luce Langue from Macbeth by Verdi, and the soul-stirring duet with the maestro in La Boheme's O suave fanciulla.

Grimelli showed his skills in Czarda and Vittorio Monti but it was his masterful reading of Carmen Fantasi and Bizet in the second half of the show, that earned gasps and loud applause.

The 15-minute intermission was almost unwelcome. As the night resumed, one drank in poignant and evocative renditions of varied classics like Mascagni's Addio alla madre from Cavalleria Rusticana and Leoncavallo's Vesti la giubba from Pagliacci by Pavarotti.

In testimony to his vocal power which was just divine, the audience which comprised not only the Who's Who in the local and international corporate sector but those from the diplomatic and political realm as well, gave standing ovations - thrice.

This man, who had confirmed his intention to retire in 2005 at the Press conference, can't be serious about that decision! He would deprive the world of a rare gift of beauty.

Pavarotti seemed pleased to oblige with more well-loved arias. One titled Tourna a sorriento was dedicated to the night's guests of honour, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and wife, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali.

The performers bowed to resounding shouts of "Bravo!" which reverberated in sync with loud poundings of the feet on the wooden flooring. Certainly not the done thing if one had been in the rigid confines of a concert hall! But this was paradise, remember?

The night wrapped up with 'goodbye' in several languages by who else but multilingual Mahadzir Lokman.

"The concert's superb," said Raja Datuk Seri Ashman Shah Sultan Azlan Shah while wife, Datuk Seri Noraini Jane Ariffin expressed amazement at the power of the man's voice.

"I truly enjoyed it," commented the Yang di-Pertuan Besar of Negri Sembilan, Tunku Naquiddin Tuanku Ja'afar. Meantime, singer Camelia, who had the opportunity of being introduced to the maestro, was ecstatic: "It was a dream to have met with him."

A brilliant fireworks display was held on the seafront before fine cuisine was served on tables set up along the beach.

Later, the tenor, who didn't look like he was about to throw a tantrum, polished off several rounds of sorbet, flanked by the Prime Minister and YTL's Managing Director, Tan Sri Francis Yeoh, the man responsible for the maestro's presence in Pangkor.

This was one picture that should decidedly read: Pavarotti and Friends...

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