Circus comes to Night Fest

Inspired by Singapore’s old amusement parks, the event this year has music hall dancing too

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This year’s Night Festival will transform the Bras Basah arts precinct into a gigantic amusement park.

The free annual outdoor arts festival has been wildly successful in its past two editions. This year, it is inspired by the New World Amusement Park, a nightlife destination in Singapore in the 1960s. The event will take place over two nights on July 16 and 17.

Visitors can expect to see more than 40 performances ranging from street theatre, circus acts, burlesque shows and music hall dancing. There will also be video projections and edgy art installations.

The festival is curated by TheatreWorks artistic director Ong Keng Sen, 46, who envisioned the New World theme. He says he is inspired by the vibrant nightlife of 1960s Singapore’s amusement parks such as New World, Great World and Happy World.

He adds: “I’m trying to create a retro theme park to revisit and reimagine what Singaporean entertainment means today.”

This year’s festival is bigger than in previous years, sprawling over eight locations: the National Museum of Singapore, Singapore Management University (SMU) Campus Green, Singapore Art Museum (SAM), SAM at 8Q, the Peranakan Museum, The Substation, Dance Ensemble Singapore and Fort Canning Park—with the last two venues joining in for the first time.

Working with a $700,000 budget, Ong has selected performers from the region to reflect Singapore’s identity as “a capital city in Asia”, as well as to allude to the international acts that used to perform in Singapore’s various theme parks.

The first edition of the Night Festival had an international focus and the second one featured mostly Singaporean performers.

Ms Lee Chor Lin, 46, director of the National Museum of Singapore, says: “We share many customs and traditions with the rest of the countries in the region. With a focus on Southeast Asian artists this year, we hope to introduce to our audience different performance genres in this part of the world.

“We also fit well with our theme New World 2010, as many entertainers of the past were also migrants from the region.”

She targets 800,000 visitors to attend the event this year.

Performances at SMU Campus Green include Pathos!, a novel circus show by Cambodian artists, a hip-hop performance by a Saigon rapper called Wowy, and Taxi-Girls And Taxi-Boys, a performance by Litterbugs Singapore that harks back to the music hall days of Singapore.

At the Singapore Art Museum, things get quicker. In an interactive installation dubbed the World’s Slowest SMS Billboard by Thai artist Witt Pimkphana-Ong, visitors can send a text message from their cellphone to a number, and the artist decides if he wants to display the message and when to do so.

If he chooses to feature your message, it will be assembled manually on the amazing billboard by a group of people.

There will also be an Amusement Park by Singaporean art collective Vertical Submarine, which will reinterpret the torture dungeons of fairgrounds in the courtyard and basement of the museum.

As an homage to Bugis Street, there will be drag queens from New Zealand in pirate act for each occasion.”

Compared to his more experimental and serious work, this is a more populist tack that Ong is taking in the festival’s curating. But he says: “Art can be entertaining. People also say that, for Singapore audiences, you need to dumb down. I disagree. You just have to find an appropriate act for each occasion.”

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