

BALLET IN A GLOBAL CITY

Francis Yeoh finds out about
Singapore Dance Theatre



Singapore Dance Theatre in *Don Quixote*.

Professor Koh explained: "If it is our ambition to be a leading city of the world, then we must have the cultural life which a leading city affords its citizens, residents and visitors."

The necessary "hardware" for promoting dance performances was organised with typical Singaporean alacrity. One fine example is the Esplanade, a performing arts centre that was opened in October 2002. It has state-of-the-art facilities, including a theatre with a seating capacity of 2,000 that can accommodate major companies, such as The Royal Ballet, who performed *Swan Lake* there in June 2005. The theatre has also hosted performances by such artists as Sylvie Guillem, Akram Khan and Israel Galván. I have visited the Esplanade on many occasions, and am astounded by the vibrancy of the complex, as its wonderfully expansive concourse and foyer is always filled with throngs of enthusiastic visitors.

Dance has always been popular with Singapore's multicultural population, and the launching of Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT) as the city's first professional dance company in 1988 was enthusiastically welcomed; its continuing growth is testament to its popularity. SDT was launched with only seven dancers, but it has grown into a flagship ➤

When assessing the history of ballet in Singapore, it's impossible to avoid being confronted with the profound realisation that the art form was solely sustained by dedicated performers, teachers and choreographers who have worked tirelessly to ensure it retains its place on the cultural scene. In the past, commentators were only too happy to dub Singapore as a "cultural desert". In the mid-1960s, during the early years of the independent nation, political leaders concentrated on pragmatic projects such as economic development, political stability and nurturing a better-educated workforce. Singapore has spectacularly developed beyond expectations and is now one of the world's busiest ports, as well as a service centre for international companies, a major oil refiner, and a manufacturer of sophisticated high-tech products. Happily, this success has prompted policy makers to widen their "gaze" and focus their attention on the arts.

The idea that the enhancement of Singapore's cultural life would generate greater happiness and encourage creativity was seriously mooted, and the formation of the Singapore National Arts Council in 1991 was a major outcome of this new enlightenment. Professor Tommy Koh, founding chairman of the National Arts Council (1991–1996), stated that government subvention is vital to ensuring that "the standard of their performances will make them the best in the region, so that people will fly in not only to catch an imported performance but to see Singapore performances."

The ambition to develop Singapore as a cultural beacon for the region rapidly gained momentum. The *Renaissance City Report – Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore*, published by the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts in March 2000, heralded the ambition to promote Singapore as a "world-class city" with a "vibrant" cultural scene.

Singapore Dance Theatre in
Kinsun Chan's *Sticks and Stones*.

company that currently employs 32 performers. It's impossible to gauge this amazing progress without looking into the past so as to ensure a keener appreciation of the journey taken.

In the 1950s and 1960s there was no scope for a professional career in dance in Singapore, but the pioneering work of Vernon Martinus, a choreographer, radio presenter and television producer, was significant, as he had the vision in 1958 to form Singapore Ballet, a company made up of dedicated amateurs and advanced students of the Singapore Ballet Academy. Martinus co-directed the Academy with his wife, Frances Poh, who had trained with Marjorie Middleton in Edinburgh and Andrew Hardie in London, and Soo Nee Goh, who had studied at the Legat and Royal Ballet Schools. Florrie Sinclair, who also trained with Marjorie Middleton and was later appointed an examiner for the Royal Academy of Dance, was a member of the teaching faculty.

Although Singapore Ballet received no government subsidy, regular seasons were staged and the company provided opportunities to perform the classics and newly created works by Martinus. Act II of *Swan Lake* was staged in 1961, followed by *Les Sylphides* in 1962 and an abridged version of *The Sleeping Beauty* in 1963. This excellent "nursery" helped produce talents such as the choreographer Choo San Goh, Soo Khim Goh and Anthony Then, founding directors of SDT, and Patricia Hon, who is professor of dance at the Cornish Institute, based in Seattle. However, each



one of them had to travel to Europe and the US in order to extend their careers.

The creation of SDT as Singapore's first professional dance company was therefore an important milestone. The responsibilities of directing were exciting, but they also imposed a huge burden on the founding directors. The initial repertoire was enhanced by the works of Choo San Goh, who had established his reputation as a choreographer throughout Europe and the US after he became resident choreographer and assistant director of Washington Ballet in 1976. His achievements were recognised when he was featured on the cover of *Dance Magazine* in July 1980 and his reputation was further enhanced in 1981 when he created *Configurations* for Mikhail Baryshnikov at American Ballet Theatre. Goh's major works include *Romeo and Juliet* (1984) for Boston Ballet and *Skiftende Billeder* (1986) for the Royal Danish Ballet. *Beginnings*, a work to music by Lennox Berkeley created for Joffrey Ballet II in 1983, was performed during SDT's debut season and 11 of his other pieces have since entered its repertoire.

SDT's body of work grew and its ranks were further strengthened by

the recruitment of dancers not only from Singapore and Malaysia, but also from China, Japan, Australia and Philippines. However, the odds were stacked against the company as disaster struck with the deaths of Choo San Goh in 1987 and co-artistic director, Anthony Then in 1995. Soo Khim Goh was nevertheless determined to shoulder the responsibility of retaining the company's place in the cultural life of Singapore. Experienced ballet masters and mistresses were imported, and more ambitious programmes were introduced. The repertoire was further enriched by such works as *Coppélia*, George Balanchine's *Rubies*, Michael Corder's *Rhyme nor Reason*, Graham Lustig's *Cinderella* and André Prokofsky's *La Traviata* and *Anna Karenina*. In 1999, Chan Hon Goh, a principal with National Ballet of Canada, performed Jean-Paul Comelin's *Giselle*, and in 2003 the company added Stanton Welch's *Madame Butterfly* to the repertoire. Perhaps the most important event in the annals of SDT was the Singapore Season presented by the National Arts Council in London in 2005 to showcase the "new creative face of Singapore". The company performed ➤

Singapore Dance Theatre in *The Sleeping Beauty*.

a programme of works at the Peacock Theatre that included *Maninyas* by Stanton Welch, Choo San Goh's *Birds of Paradise* and *The Lost Space* by Boi Sakti. The following year, Johnny Eliassen staged August Bournonville's *La Sylphide* for the company.

Soo Khim Goh decided to retire in 2007 after being at the helm for nearly two decades. The Board – after a global search – appointed Janek Schergen as her successor, and it has been Schergen who has been responsible for the preservation of Choo San Goh's legacy of works. His special relationship with the choreographer began when he was persuaded by Goh to undertake the role of ballet master and teacher with Washington Ballet in 1981. More important, his extensive professional experiences in Europe and the US as dancer, ballet master and artistic director are necessary prerequisites for the role. Schergen added *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *Swan Lake* to the repertoire, and invited Cynthia Harvey to stage *Don Quixote* in 2014. He also strengthened the company's contemporary works by acquiring ballets by Nils Christie and Edwaard Liang.

The need to sustain a company that can truly represent the new

Singapore is a gargantuan task. The recruitment of dancers is an arduous endeavour, and although there are ballet schools that provide part-time training, Singapore does not have an equivalent dance conservatoire like The Royal Ballet School in London, the School of American Ballet in New York, or the Vaganova Academy in St Petersburg. Vocational training is sustained by established teachers such as Sylvia McCully, a graduate from The Royal Ballet School's three-year teacher training programme, who has been teaching part-time students up to advanced level for more than four decades. In addition, there is Jeffrey Tan, a protégé of Anthony Then, who later became principal of Singapore Ballet Academy after a successful career with SDT as principal dancer and resident choreographer; and Mei Sing Cheah, a former dancer with SDT who became head of Dance at Singapore School of Arts, which provides a pre-tertiary six-year programme of integrated vocational and academic training.

Realising the value of education, Schergen began to extend the scope of projects undertaken by SDT. He supplemented the enormously popular annual *Ballet Under the Stars* at Fort

Canning Park with new programmes to ensure greater access and awareness of the company's repertoire; introduced *One@the Ballet*, a monthly lunch-time open in-studio programme; and a Ballet Associates Course and a pre-professional Scholar's Programme that provided master classes for advanced ballet students, thus creating a "bridge" between vocational dance training and professional work. Also significant was SDT Choreographic Workshop, an annual programme that aims to grow aspiring choreographers that was launched in 2010.

The vital role SDT plays as a national institution is now secure, and the achievements of Soo Khim Goh, Anthony Then and Janek Schergen are commendable. During a visit in late 2015, I was able to attend a performance by the Choreographic Workshop, as well as a rehearsal of *Swan Lake*, and was confronted by the tangible evidence of the huge progress the company has made. A lengthy interview with Janek Schergen also convinced me that the path ahead for SDT will be pursued with the object of achieving excellence that is de rigueur in the Singapore psyche. ■

For more information about Singapore Dance Theatre, visit singaporeballet.com.