



# Far and away

PHOTO: THEATREWORKS

TheatreWorks' panoramic piece about the effects of migration opens in the Edinburgh International Festival to praise

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A Scottish accent joined the Singaporean ones in *Diaspora*, a TheatreWorks production which opened at the Edinburgh International Festival on Saturday.

It represented a coup for Singapore art because it is the first home-grown work to be selected for the prestigious 63-year-old festival, which insiders consider to be the top showcase of the performing arts.

Helmed by artistic director Ong Keng Sen, the production showcased the experiences of different migrants who left their Asian home countries for other places. These included Vietnamese Americans, Indonesian Chinese, Indians in Thailand and Orang Laut (or sea nomads).

The play, which was performed by the Singapore Chinese Orchestra and Singaporean actors, was first commissioned in 2006 for the delegates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank meetings. It starred Lim Kay Tong, Janice Koh, Koh Boon Pin and Nora Samosir.

In the new version presented in Edinburgh, Ong has included the story of Rabiya Choudhry, a Scottish artist who is half-Pakistani. The 27-year-old, who was born in Glasgow, painted live on stage. Her drawing of a many-armed goddess was projected in real time on a large scrim.

In recorded segments, she also spoke about her family - her Pakistani father and Caucasian mother who converted to Islam - her experiences with racism and the significance of her artworks.

*Diaspora* played at the 2,900-seater Edinburgh Playhouse Theatre on Saturday and Sunday to an international crowd.

Mr Lee Suan Hiang, previously the National Arts Council (NAC) chief and now its senior

adviser, was among the Singaporean delegation that travelled to the Scottish capital. The group included High Commissioner for Singapore to the United Kingdom Michael Teo, NAC chairman Edmund Cheng and Singapore Arts Festival director Goh Ching Lee.

Mr Lee told Life!

at a pre-show reception on Saturday: "To have a production in the opening weekend of the Edinburgh International Festival is a great honour. It's a recognition of our artists and their standards. It also increases Singapore's reputation as an arts city."

*Diaspora*'s debut at the festival was 2007's *Optical Identity*. But that collaboration between Singapore's T'ang Quartet and Scotland's Theatre Cryptic was a co-commission between the Singapore Arts Festival and Edinburgh International Festival.

Also at the *Diaspora* reception was the Edinburgh festival director Jonathan Mills, 45, who limped around in a cast after breaking his ankle last week.

He said that Ong's work is interesting because "as seen from the position of Singapore, diaspora means something that is the opposite (to Scotland), Singapore being the result of diaspora, rather than the origin of diaspora. In Scotland, we think about ideas of homecoming as people of Scottish origins returning to Scotland".

Homecoming is the theme of this year's festival.

Mills, also a composer, had worked with Ong for the Sandakan Threnody in 2004. Mills' music was used in the multimedia production about people who died in the death marches in Borneo during World War II.

Calling Ong a "dear friend", he said: "What I

really appreciate about Keng Sen's work is the way in which he has robustly dealt with, in ways that no one else has, cross-cultural collaboration. A typical Keng Sen production will have nine performers and nine translators in the room."

The performances of *Diaspora* drew a diverse audience. Londoner Katie Bradford, 51, bought a ticket to the show "because I like learning about different cultures and music".

The lawyer said she enjoyed the electronic music, though she wished she could see more of the orchestra, which was obscured by a scrim.

"To have a production in the opening weekend of the festival is a great honour. It's a recognition of our artists and their standards"

Mr Lee Suan Hiang, senior adviser to the National Arts Council, on *Diaspora* (left)

Bosnian theatre director Haris Pasovic, 47, whose play *Class Enemy* made waves at the Singapore Arts Festival last year, was also in Edinburgh. He said that *Diaspora* was a "brilliant show".

He said: "It dealt with such an important and difficult subject, but it was done with a certain distance and we could observe and think about it. It had beautiful music, excellent video work and great actors. It was a really fine work."

The play also attracted members of the Singaporean diaspora. One of them was Ms Ng Hui Hiang, 49, who is a Singaporean who teaches in a Chinese school in Edinburgh.

She has been living there for more than 20 years, after marrying a Scotsman. "I could really relate to the play. The older I get, the more I want to seek my roots, like the characters in the play," she said.

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