

SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF ARTS

Two's a treat

Two renowned visual artists, William Kentridge and Daniel Buren, make their debut at this year's festival with two outstanding works. **By HELMI YUSOF**

South African images animate music by Schubert

WINTERREISE (WINTER JOURNEY)
By William Kentridge
(With Matthias Goerne and Markus Hinterhauser, performing music by Franz Schubert)

In the art world, the name William Kentridge is spoken with awe and deference. For more than three decades, the 60-year-old South African has created powerful art addressing topics such as racism, apartheid and colonialism. These subjects stem from his own experiences living in South Africa with its painful history of racial and economic inequities.

For the Singapore International Festival of Arts (SIFA), Kentridge is providing a backdrop of 24 animated films to accompany the 24 songs in Schubert's masterpiece *Winterreise* (Winter Journey) which will be sung by the acclaimed Matthias Goerne.

Playing in New York last November, the show received rave reviews. *The New York Times* said: "(Goerne's) voice is strong, dark and rich. Though he can easily summon chesty power and chilling intensity, he can also bend a phrase with tenderness."

Winterreise, sung in German with English surtitles, tells of a traveller journeying through a cold, bleak landscape. Kentridge has crafted a series of images that allude to the wanderer's journey as well as the larger struggles and sufferings of humankind.

He says: "The project started as a desire to continue my exploration of the relationship between image and sound. We started by listening to the different recordings (of *Winterreise*) and looking at different fragments of animated films that I had made over the years. And we found an extraordinary rapport between the music and the images. This is partly because the animated films are usually three to five minutes long – about the length of each song.

"There's also something about the piano accompaniment that corresponds to the changing frames of animation and the way the musical rhythm of the person walking through his journey acts as a motor to push the animation. So there was a very strong formal connection."



William Kentridge (above) lends his haunting images to Schubert's song cycle *Winterreise*, about a traveller moving through a cold and desolate landscape. (Right) Matthias Goerne singing *Winterreise*. PHOTOS: MARC SHOUL, PATRICK BERGER/ARTCOMART



Winterreise not only details the traveller's journey, it also speaks of the heartbreak he's experiencing after losing the girl he intended to marry.

Kentridge says: "I've allowed various things to come into the film... The imagined landscape of Schubert becomes a different landscape imagined by me. The personal and the broader areas shift."

Kentridge has garnered among the highest honours in visual arts and his

works are collected by New York's Museum of Modern Art and London's Tate Modern, among others.

He says that although *Winterreise* is written in 1828 by an Austrian composer and is set in Austria, Kentridge's South African roots continue to form the basis of his images.

He says: "South Africa is vital in all the work that I do. It's a country which has made clear the centrality of contradiction. It's made clear the world as

a process rather than as a fact. And what music does also is make us intensely aware, more than any other art form, of living through time and of the change that happens through time. These are inherent within a song, within a line of a song within a phrase, and the song cycle. So South Africa is in my work in the most literal sense – the landscapes, the films, the people in the films, but also in understanding the instability of one's under-

standing of the world." helmi@sph.com.sg @HelmiBT
Winterreise runs at the SOTA Concert Hall on Sept 4 and 5 at 8pm. Tickets from S\$40 to S\$120 from Sistic.
As part of a series of free events called SIFA Shares, Kentridge is screening his animated film, 10 Drawings For Projection (1989-2011), on Aug 18 at 72-13 at 7.30pm.

Circus tents as objects of art in the Bugis district

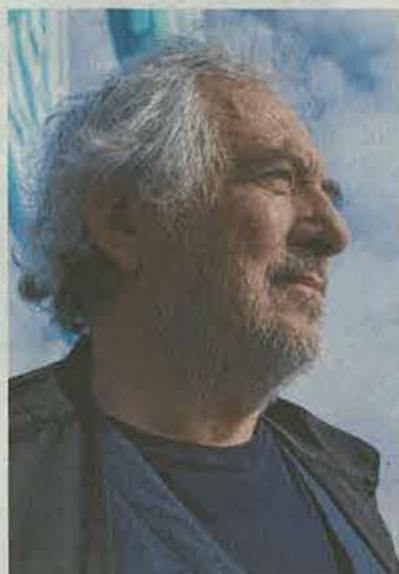
CABANONS
By Daniel Buren
(with Fabien & Dan Demuyne and Buren Cirque)

ROLL up, roll up, the circus is coming to town and it's going to be a different experience from what you may be used to. Especially with someone like renowned French minimalist artist Daniel Buren at the helm, the end product is bound to look, sound and feel distinct.

At 77, Buren continues to be a force in the contemporary art world, showing works at recent major art events such as Monumenta and Art Basel.

He's been experimenting with stripes, geometry and colours since the 1960s to posit a simpler aesthetic value, applying his concepts to institutions such as the Art Institute of Chicago and the Picasso Museum in Paris. His massive red arches tower over Bilbao, Spain, while his striped cylinders grace the Palais-Royal of Paris.

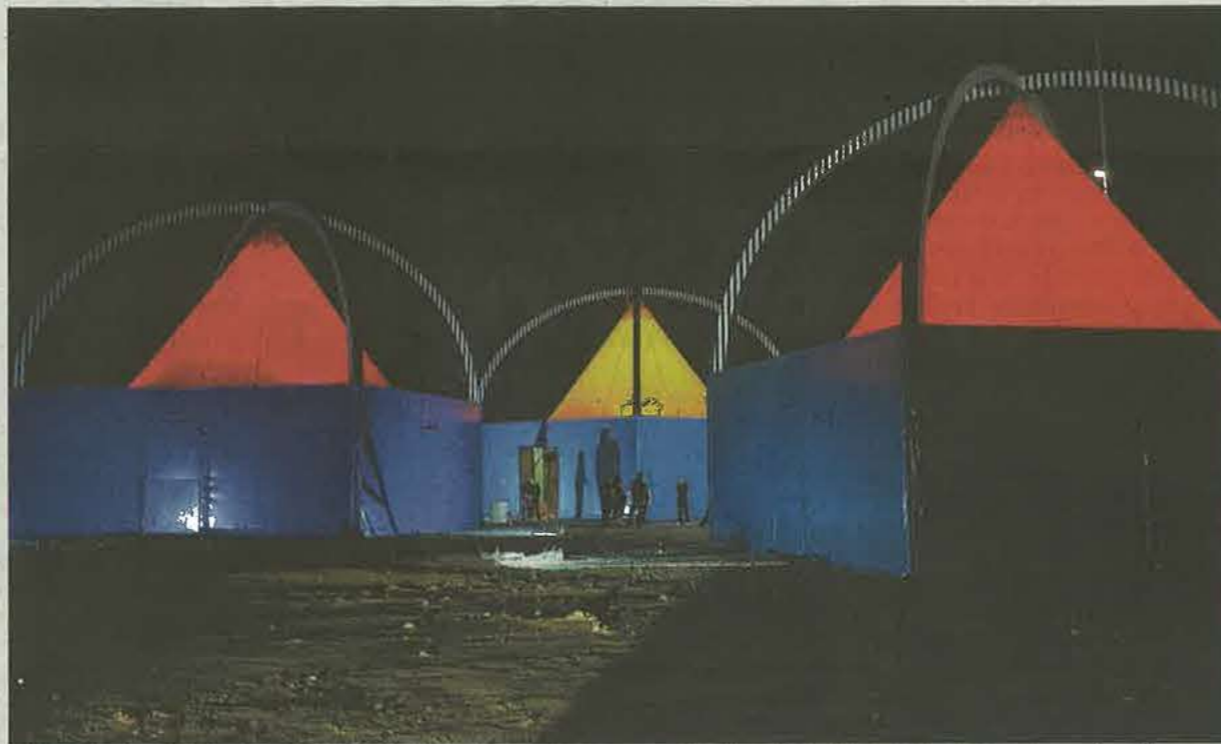
Come September, three coloured cabanon tents designed by him will be pitched on the field next to Tan Quee Lan Street, just opposite Bugis Junction. They're not just circus tents for the acrobats, jugglers and other performers – they are art objects in



French artist Daniel Buren imbues his minimalist artistry on the circus form in *Cabanons*, creating intimate spaces that cater to just 150 audience members

themselves, designed for one to sit in and contemplate.

Buren says: "I used the circular ring of the conventional circus as a reference around which I designed a conic coloured tent supported by a



square built around the ring. We have no pillar in the tent and the space inside is totally free of any obstacle. This cabanon is suspended from outside with a type of striped criss-crossed arch."

The audience, he explains, remains seated in one of the three cabanons while a cast of performers move from one tent to another to deliver their acts simultaneously. Incidental sounds from the neighbouring tents

become part of the external soundscape and add to the magic.

Buren says: "The spectators from one cabanon are listening to the applause and laughter of the people in one of the other tents. They know

they are not seeing the same thing at the very same time. The succession of each performer in each of the three tents naturally tell a different story in different cabanons."

And because the tents are relatively small – each can hold only 150 people – you get to see the performers up close and focus on their nerves and vulnerability. The experience becomes more intimate than the usual circus experience.

Working with directors Fabien and Dan Demuyne, Buren says many old circus conventions have been abandoned. "We're working in the spirit of the contemporary circus, a new platform for a more experimental type of spectacle. It's not about a succession of clowns, acrobats or extravagant monsters – but the construction of a story which mixes dance, music, acrobats, illusionists, cinema and video in a unique spectacle."

Cabanons will run from Sept 2 - 6 at 8pm at the field opposite Bugis Junction, next to Tan Quee Lan Street. Tickets at S\$80 from Sistic. Daniel Buren is giving a free talk as part of a series titled SIFA Shares on Sept 3, 6.30pm, at Drama Centre Black Box at the National Library. For more information, go to sifa.sg

Swimming upstream

RETURNING, the most expensive commission of the Singapore International Festival of Arts, is an ambitious work that involves eight choreographers, two dozen dancers and a score of musicians. Among the choreographer mentors are three doyennes of Singapore dance – Goh Lay Kuan, Santha Bhaskar and Som Said – while the music team comprises some of Singapore's best players. Expectations are, thus, naturally high.

There are many moments in *Returning* when these expectations are met splendidly as young dancers let their strength and technique roar, while the music, directed by Julian Wong and composed by him and five others, supports the dancers with its stirring and consistent beauty.

But there are also moments when one can't help feeling that the four choreographers (Meenakshy Bhaskar, Jenny Neo, Osman Abdul Hamid and Low Ee Chiang) each come with such a unique and individual sensibility that *Returning* cannot possibly integrate all four visions into a seamless whole.

Returning, conceived and directed by Goh, centres on the life of the salmon as it hatches, grows, migrates, spawns and dies. Meenakshy Bhaskar choreographs the first delightful seg-



Meenakshy Bhaskar's first segment in *Returning* had dancers in a playful mood as they enact young salmon leaving their eggs. PHOTO: NG YUAN JIE

ment in which eight alevins (tiny young fish) hatch and euphorically discover their surroundings and each other. Employing *bharatanatyam* movements, the segment has all the requisite joy of birth, curiosity and determination.

This is followed by Neo's segment in which the alevins grow to become fries, leaving the protection of the rocks to live in the currents. Neo applies the elegant elongated lines of Chinese dance to emphasis growth, development and surprising will and determination.

Osman takes over with the third and fourth segments. The third employs Malay elements with their stretched arms, wrist flicks and swaying bodies to depict the fries' gradual transition into smolts (young salmon with silvery scales). Then, somewhat jarringly, it segues into the fourth segment, a propulsive and giddily enjoyable contemporary number, as the smolts become adult salmon and swim to the ocean.

The final segment depicts the salmon's journey back to its birthplace to spawn. It is also a contemporary number, this time by Low, and it stands out for its boldness and brio.

Taken individually, each piece brims with its own strengths and sensibilities. But placed together, they fail to become a cogent whole. Ironically, the incongruity is emphasised by the fact that the music led by Wong is able to incorporate a vast array of Indian, Malay and Chinese instruments into an exquisite, seamless whole.

There is no doubt that the intentions are good as the dance seeks to highlight Chinese, Malay, Indian and Western vernaculars on the occasion of Singapore's 50th anniversary. But perhaps, a firmer hand is needed in merging the disparate segments.

By Helmi Yusof

Returning is on at the Drama Centre Theatre until Aug 15 at 8pm. Tickets from S\$25 from Sistic.

Kumar hearts heartlanders

WHEN Singapore's most famous comedian Kumar was asked by festival director Ong Keng Sen what he'd like to do for the arts festival, he said he wanted to perform for the ordinary HDB dwellers who never go to his shows at glitzy theatres and nightclubs.

Kumar got his wish and has been, since last weekend, cracking up uncles and aunts with his free gigs at HDB estates all over the island. He performs his last free show on Saturday night at Jurong East's Community Plaza – expect another huge turnout.

The caveat is that the jokes he makes for this series, titled *Kumar's Living Together*, aren't nearly as risqué as the ones in his usual routines. There are no sex jokes, few political quips and very mild variations of his usual racist barbs. The marvel of it is that the PG jokes actually work well with the heartland crowds. In fact, his more complex puns elude many, while his basic self-deprecating pokes about being *ah gua* (effeminate) get instant roars of delight.

Kumar is aided by four other comedians – Koh Chieng Mun as a former co-ho-dweller forced to downgrade to a HDB flat, Zaliha Hamid as a tu-



Kumar bringing his irreverent humour to HDB estates around the island. PHOTO: MALVINA TAN

dong-wearing woman trying to cope with her Westernised daughter, Sharul Channa as a haughty yuppie sniffing at HDB lives, and Shane Mardjuki as a Western expat so in love with Singapore he's adopted its rules and lingo wholeheartedly.

Together, the five of them paint a portrait of Singapore that is diverse and loveable: Koh makes no bones about the fact that her CPF payouts are measly ("S\$300 a month? I need to ration my toilet paper"); Zaliha praises her Potong Pasir estate, an ex-opposition ward ("There's only one bus going through the whole estate – so everyone recognises everyone else");

Channa plays up the yuppie's obsession with all things Western, while Mardjuki marvels at things one takes for granted, such as the HDB void deck that can be used for "both weddings and funerals – wow!"

Though none of these one-liners and Kumar's toned-down humour match his usual subversive barbs, their candour and compassion blow more than a whiff of fresh air to this side of the island.

By Helmi Yusof

Kumar and his friends play their last free show on Aug 15, 8pm, at Community Plaza, Jurong East Street 32, between Blocks 312 and 316.