

***Eighth International Busker Festival in Singapore,
13-21 November, 2004***

One of the highlights in the tourist promotion programme *Christmas in the Tropics*, was the *8th International Busker Festival in Singapore* (<http://www.singapore-buskers.com/who.htm>).

Buskers from around the world were invited to offer the much-anticipated visual and verbal boosters for the pedestrians at various popular spots. Buskers, either individual, in duos, or in groups, flew in from Australia, Austria, Canada, England, Germany, Ireland, Portugal, and the USA. Besides at Orchard Rd., Singapore's central shopping district, the buskers also entertained at Clark Quay, a district of wine and fine dining by the Singapore River, Marina Square, Robertson Walk, Singapore Changi Airport, and Singapore Expo (<http://www.singapore-buskers.com/>).

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| <p>The Cloghoppers (England)</p> | <p>Vincent Dube (Canada)</p> |

The misconception in many books that language is the crux of communication is most glaring in the busker festivals. In an event like interactive street performance, little linguistic intelligence was needed as the audience imitate the kinesthetic strategies introduced by the buskers. The whole idea is to project conceptual difference amidst cognitive routine. The audience enjoyed the surprises whether it was a sudden change in a series of movement or an extraordinary gesture out of the norm. Dare devil stunts were a definite stopper for the busy pedestrians.

For a change, linguistic decoding became minimal and non-linguistic semiotic encoding was paramount to the success of the interactive street performance. Basic instructions such as “Stand over here,” or “Hold your arm like this,” or “Put this over there” were pretexts to a prank that caught the unsuspecting audience, who obliged after much coaxing. The interchange of linguistic transactions were mostly non-verbal, e.g., smiles, laughter, applause, whistling, photo-taking, donation, screams and shouts of appreciation with occasional boos solicited in a particular prank. These non-verbal exchanges form the semiotics of performing and watching on a shopping belt like Orchard Road in Singapore.

A good 21 performances or displays were showcased to Singaporeans and visiting foreigners either in static-artistic, interactive-communicative, rhythmic-aesthetic, visual-spatial or visual-logical mode. The various intelligent punch lines, clever mimes as well as skilful manipulation of fire, juggling pins, knives, plastic chickens, metal boxes and bananas has added the much needed interactive human communication to the otherwise staccato routine of dinning and shopping. The performances came in an array of artistic repertoire, ranging from hilarious dramatic acts of mundane activities in daily life sensationalised with unexpected exploitation of articles such as whips, flowers, plastic chickens, and balloons to clever improvisation of mime performed in the process drama fashion. The spectators were invited or cajoled by many buskers to participate as collaborators in their street theatres.

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| <p>Pedro Tochas-The Sculptor Clown (Portugal)</p> | <p>Theatre Leela (Austria)</p> |

Pedro Tochas' performance was a highlight of the interactive street theatre in this festival. He was the winner of "The Street of Fools," Porsgrunn, Norway, 2003 and the first runner-up at The International Busker Competition, Killarney, Ireland, 2003. His interdisciplinary work combined mime, physical theatre, circus, and balloon sculptures to express his feelings. His street theatre on Orchard Rd., 20 Nov. 2004 was a double drama. The male audience member who was supposed to hold the balloon flower went beyond the instruction and stole the balloon dumb bell from the bag while Tochas was busy gesturing to the girlfriend of the participant at the other end of the enclosure. That cocky male audience member had difficulty following instruction from the beginning and had a mind of his own. Consequently, Tochas had to send them away and managed to secure a more conforming couple to collaborate with him.

A quick repair was made by inviting another discerning couple to re-enact the scenes. A third man who seemed to be amused by his adroit improvisation, turning balloons into a flower, a heart, a pigeon, a French hat, a sword, and a securing belt was added to the cast. Tochas was indeed a creative improvisationist who twisted a love epic and caught the audience off guard. First he had the female participant crying in distress. Then he made a flower with a purple balloon for the male participant. The next minute the second male was turned into a villain by wearing a balloon as a hump on his back and shrieked with a devilish gait. Balloon swords were offered and a paradox was conjured when the villain killed the hero. While the female was sobbing, a balloon gun was created and the audience had a good laugh at the villain who unexpectedly walked to the heroine armed with a *gun*. The fourth participant was selected and adorning a pair of balloon wings he mystifyingly revived the dead hero. Like all fairy tales, Tochas' ended with a stereotypical happy ending. The creation felt like a post-modern version of Ramayana with a hilarious bend.

Theatre Leela was funny in its simplicity. A child was invited to take part, whereby a circle was drawn. He was asked to hop to another circle in front him. The third circle was

literally another easy hop but the fourth circle was 3 meters away. That was where interaction began with Leela carrying the child forward to the fourth circle after much persuasion failed to get the child to move from the circle, and the mother was invited to participate. She soon realised her mistake when she was asked to tuck in her tummy through breathing while raising her hands horizontally, and she gave up since aping Leela in front of many multi-national strangers was not pleasant. Leela went on to tease a photographer with three poses each sleazier than the other. The photographer obliged with smiles. He happily posed in return for Leela who switched roles with him. However, he refused to join Leela in the performance, no matter how hard Leela tried to persuade him. Leela wrapped up the shows by juggling in a range of pace and bodily variations. He was funny and persistent in his quest for response from the audience.

The Tutti Fruti duo (Charmaine and Maryke) from Australia who enticed the audience with their creative water skiing feat provided much laughter to the crowd. Imagine two female buskers, one large the other petite, clad in skimpy pink bikinis, standing in a big blue inflatable wading pool and pretending to be skiing on water by grabbing on to the ski-handle slung around a lamp post four meters away, with the upbeat Hawaii-Five-O theme as their background music. hilariously, a plump Chinese male from the audience turned a steering wheel frantically from left to right and left again between the blue wading pool and the lamp post. With the music blaring, one of them climbed on top of the other, as if balancing in the act of water skiing, while sending occasional tongue-in-cheek waves and cheers to the speedboat driver. The whole street drama transformed individual faces into an instant sea of laughter. The *wicked* 30-minute performance ended with a brief introduction of themselves and the announcement that the collection will be offered to two local charities, a verbal routine uttered by most performers in the festival.

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| <p>Tutti Fruti: water skiing at their best</p> | <p>J-P juggling, no sweat!</p> |

J-P, from Australia, thrilled the audience by juggling three sharp knives in three sequences. First he juggled the knives while standing; next, he did it standing with a female Indonesian teenager lying under the flying knives, and lastly he juggled the knives while lying down on the floor staring into the black sky. He stopped and looked at the audience while lying next to the teenager and then reassured her parents that he was gay. The audience laughed harder when he corrected himself, saying that he was not gay but his husband was. Prior to these acts, he halved a flower and cigarette with a whip twice, once holding them in the air on his head. The breath-taking part was his amazing feat of walking up a ladder of blades and juggling the knives while standing on the last sword blade on top of the ten-foot high ladder.



Dare Devil Chicken Club in their pink tutus.

Despite the depressing wet weather in the early evening on the last day of the festival, the buskers continued to radiate the much needed glow of carefree performances. Once again, the cold reddish pavements were filled with smiling faces, laughter and cheer. Dare Devil Chicken Club, the husband and wife duo from the USA, tirelessly teased the audience with their tricks. They warmed the atmosphere first by imitating the action of busy pedestrians to secure their attention. They spotted a brand new digital camera and posed for the owner before taking it away. At a change of scene the husband threw a camera from the red suitcase to his wife, who had failed to secure it and had the camera broken in two parts on the ground, much to the audience's dismay. The owner smiled and his camera was returned, well tucked away in the suitcase. The duo's most interesting feat was to catch a banana spit from one's mouth to the other while the fallen piece was picked from the floor and stuffed back into the mouth. Gross as it might have seemed, the audience remained entertained and the show went on hilariously.

In contrast, the static displays of musical and artistic creatiity had less audience appeal simply because they were less interactive and had less engaging power but were nonetheless stimulating. The displays were non-sequential and did not require a formal enclosure, as would a performance. The duration was open ended and participation by the comprehension of the audience was never prohibited or distorted by the temporal flow of the scene structures. The audience had a constant semiotic invitation from the creator to participate and re-create meaning and comprehension throughout each night in the festival.

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| Chalkmaster Dave (Canada) | KROMATIK QUEBEC CITY (CANADA) |

The need and ability to communicate between humans in various forms of interaction were exemplified by the buskers. Creativity was never an elitist trait but creativity in street theatre required cultivation and reformation. In comparison, the selections in the busker performance in 2004 were not as comprehensive as the 7th International Busker Festival in 2003. There were more than 30 groups in 2003. One of the buskers was Miss Behave, from London, one of the two females in the world who swallows swords. None of 2004 performances was as daring as Miss Taululiah, from Canada, in 2003, who was paraded on the shoulders of semi-nude males invited from the audience. Perhaps the selection of buskers in 2004 was aligned with a family orientation in mind.

The 8th International Busker Festival 2004 ended successfully on 21 Nov. with the last performances that commenced around 10:30 pm. All in all, it was good fun in an enjoyable festival that managed to convince many spectators to let their hair down. At the same time, the spectators were urged to remember their humour and to donate for the less fortunate in Singapore.

Unfortunately, the busker festival has not continued after 2004 because of the rising costs and a lack of sponsorship, as all buskers flown in were provided free accommodation and lodging at a reputable hotel by the Singapore River. The streets in November are still bustling with business transactions and Christmas carols. Many would not ask for the buskers because they had not experienced the recurrent vibrancy of street performance in a night resounding tirelessly.

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