

Festival reaping Asia's artistic harvest

by
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IN the early days of the Asian Arts Festival, the Urban Council invited overseas performing groups through their own governments with the result that the troupes rendered national programmes, with the regional art of the countries being neglected.

To feature Asian arts thoroughly in this year's festival, a "cultural ambassador" was sent to visit different countries.

John Thompson, a former editor of the Urban Council's festival office, was selected as the artistic co-ordinator to carry out the mission.

Mr Thompson has established good contacts with overseas performing groups and knows the Asian arts scene well. A musician himself, he came to Hongkong to study *guzin* some years ago.

"I study music books and keep in contact with the artists to keep myself informed," says Mr Thompson. "I've also heard lots of musical tapes from different Asian groups."

"Usually I contact an ensemble after I've heard about it from friends or publications. For popular groups, sometimes you need to contact them a year ahead because of their tight schedules."

One major drawback Mr Thompson has encountered during his visits is language. "Artists communicate with people through art. So they seldom learn a second language. Hardly any performers speak English."

Nevertheless, a harvest has been reaped after his hectic trips to Malaysia, Indonesia, Nepal, India, Burma and many other Asian countries over the past year.

The festival, to open on October 18, will feature an array of colourful programmes, many of which are new to Hongkong.

The *Solo Kraton Gamelan and Dancers* from Indonesia, which includes princesses as members, is one of the most exciting performing groups on the programme.

And its engagement was largely due to luck, Mr Thompson said.

"I told Sardono Kusumo, Indonesia's best known contemporary dance/theatre director, that we had never had a full Gamelan orchestra perform at the Festival, either from Java or Bali, even though this is the art that Indonesia is most famous for."

"He suggested inviting the Solo Palace Gamelan. The palace was hit by a serious fire in January and the dancers' spirits were low because of the tragedy. They needed something to cheer themselves up. Breaking their traditions — to perform overseas — did the trick."

The Gamelan and performers were considered so important by the palace that it had never even considered sending them on a trip outside Solo before.

However Mr Thompson was able to get the necessary approval and a committee which was set up to coordinate restoration of the palace was brought in to help restoration on costumes for the overseas debut.

Mr Thompson added the exit fee for every Indonesian is about US\$150, an expensive trip for the group.



China's Hubei song and dance ensemble.



Afghan court musician Essa Kassimi



Japanese dance in kabuki tradition

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The *NCFI Folk Music Ensemble* from Korea is among Mr Thompson's favourites. It will be the first time that the Festival is featuring Korean percussion.

"I was struck by the music which has a very earthy jazz feeling."

"This group has received rave reviews on its overseas tours with programmes featuring Korean "farmers" music". Two new countries added to the Festival are Afghanistan and Syria.

"Afghan musician Essa Kassimi, has made a recording for a French label and I also heard a recording he made for German radio."

"I find the music he plays very appealing and am told he is a good live performer. I have heard quite a bit of very lively Afghan folk music, and it is interesting to see Afghan classical music capture this liveliness within a framework similar to that of Indian classical music."

While Mr Thompson was in India, Dr Suresh Awasthi, a local art promoter, played performances of over 30 groups to him.

Yakshagana Bayalata, a dance/drama theatre, was sing-

led out. "I saw their shows. They are exciting, vivid and are enthusiastically received by audiences."

"The group performs outdoors on the ground instead of on stage. The whole performance is sung out by the narrator."

Mr Thompson says he had visited all the overseas dance groups for the Festival while the music ensembles were heard on tape.

As for rumours whether the Festival will be continued next year, Mr Thompson said he is already planning for the 1986 Asian Arts Festival.

"I will try to please everyone," he said. "Young people are adventurous and potential audiences whose interests need to be catered for."

"However, with the establishment of the Academy for Performing Arts, cultural activities will further be developed."

"Contemporary serious music and popular music will both be emphasised in next year's Festival. *Dangdut* pop music from north east Thailand, for instance, is easy to accept."

"Whilst pop music in the Middle East and jazz music in Korea are also appealing, I am still hunting for more contemporary groups." Mr Thompson said.

