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# Out to satisfy the curious

THE biennial Asian Arts Festival, due to start in early October, will mark the first visit to the territory of performers from Kazakhstan, one of the Asian republics of the Soviet Union.

While the Urban Council remains tight-lipped about the opening performance, the festival will feature such highlights as the local debut of the Uzbek Ensemble from Tashkent, Guangxi Minorities Arts Group and Guqin Masters from China, the One Extra Theatre Company from Australia and Hsiao Hsi Yuan Glove Puppet Theatre from Taiwan.

A total of 13 countries will take part in the month-long, \$4-million event, which runs from October 12 to November 2. These include China, Taiwan, Japan, the Soviet Union, India, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Pakistan and Australia.

Artistic co-ordinator of the festival, Mr John Thompson, is more concerned about achieving objectives than merely making it a profitable event.

"There are two things that we try to do: one is to provide high quality entertainment. The audience won't need to be experts; they just need to be curious about what is going on around the arts scene in Asia.

"By stressing a balanced programme of music and dance, traditional and contemporary, we want

**GARY CHAN talks to John Thompson, artistic co-ordinator of the Asian Arts Festival, about his views on local arts and of a guest performer from the Soviet Union.**



□ An Uzbek musician: highlight.

to build up awareness of other things happening in the region."

Mr Thompson said one of the biggest advantages of organising the Asian Arts Festival was the relatively low cost of bringing in groups from Asia compared to those from

Europe. Even if events attracted only small audiences, this could still be justified by the low outgoings.

He said although the Urban Council offered programmes which were all commercially viable, they would not repeat especially popular programmes year after year.

"We still try to reach as many people as possible, though our consistent aim is to raise people's consciousness of new and good art forms. We are definitely not aiming at the lowest common denominator," he said.

But organising the Asian Arts Festival is not without its difficulties. The biggest problem is co-ordinating with people from different parts of Asia who have had little experience with international travel.

Mr Thompson said one group from Indonesia did not even have a telephone, while communication was further hampered by the lack of a common language.

Mr Thompson usually spends months touring the region with his colleague, Mr Albert Lee, searching for programmes.

Space is also a problem, as they can afford only programmes which can be produced on a theatre stage.

Large-scale street performances are out of the question. "Unless we set up a special cultural village, it's hard to find a suitable environment for street performances."

One criterion of programme selection is that it be representative of Asian arts. Mr Thompson explained that it meant they had to consider if the creativity was distinctively Asian - even an artist trained in Asian arts who chose to do Western art would still be regarded as an Asian artist.

The next consideration is if a presentation constituted "good art". Mr Thompson's interpretation of a good art form is that it appeals to a large audience or an expert critic.

If he comes across a new but unknown group, he consults experts in that art form and if negative comments are made he will try to set up a time to view the presentation with Mr Lee.

"I'm also trained in Asian arts and I have to depend on my own instincts as well," said Mr Thompson.

The last two considerations in bringing a group into Hongkong are its potential for local appeal and its cost-effectiveness.

Although the payment for groups varies according to their contracts, Mr Thompson said they still strived to offer fair treatment to all artists from Asia.