

## Review 7

## Talent scout seeks tunes in Asia major

**IN the run-up to the Festival of Asian Arts, MARGARET SHERIDAN meets musicologist John Thompson who, for the past eight years, has scoured the region for acts that are hard to follow.**

**T**RAVELLING around Asia scouting talent for arts festivals is hard work. Someone has to do it. Just twist John Thompson's arm.

He doesn't come right out and admit it, but the American-born musicologist would probably do the job for free, even if he weren't the artistic co-ordinator for the Festival of Asian Arts.

This year's festival, which begins on Friday and continues for four weeks, is his eighth. During that period 180 artists will come to Hongkong to share their considerable talents. The programme includes jazz from Korea, folk singers from Japan and a wedding ceremony re-enacted by a troupe from Turkey. If anyone doubts there is oriental jazz, Fawzi al-Aiedy, an artist from the Iraqi port city of Barrah, will convince.

"This year's festival is smaller than the last one," explains Thompson in his orderly office in the Cultural Centre complex. "But the budget is the same. Just tells you something about inflation."

He answers to and advises the Urban Council and regards himself as a technical man, not a director.

When he's not under contract, about six months a year, he combs Central Asia on his own for work and pleasure. A music scholar and musician by training, he is currently transcribing 15th century Chinese music for the *ch'in*, an instrument he plays and de-

scribes in layman's terms as a seven-string zither.

"My work and interests overlap. When I am looking for entertainment for myself, it applies to work here." After living in Asia for 15 years, Thompson has amassed considerable knowledge and contacts in the arts world. But, he points out, there is always more to discover.

He makes decisions based on the nature of the artist's work and on his budget.

"They must have an Asian basis, even though they may have trained in the West. For practical reasons, communication for one, they have to be urban performers as opposed to village performers."

Financial constraints are a reality and very frustrating at times. For instance, Thompson was entranced by a performance of *The Tempest* in Tokyo. It was a puppet show in the art form of *bunraku*, one of the most celebrated in the world. "Bringing in the troupe of 30 would cost my entire budget - HK\$2 million. It was out of the question, unfortunately."

Most of the groups he knows from first-hand experience. But the Nava Tajik Ensemble from Tajikistan came highly recommended. He agreed after listening to their tapes. "Exotic is how I would describe that sound," he says.

The eight musicians of the Bustan Abraham group from Israel are classically trained, yet each is a composer, a soloist and the head of his own musical ensemble. "They play



**Asian talent: Warabi-Za folk song and dance company from Japan, appearing on October 17 and 18.**

been rewarded. "It's magic when you see it in the villages. But it's hard to transfer the magic here. Javanese music on the other hand translates better."

So does the work of the Gumarang Sakti Dance Company from Sumatra. He has known the group for years and has seen them perform in Jakarta.

Serendipity also plays a role in his travels. When he went to Bombay to firm up the details with the 13-member Astad Deboo dance company, he asked Deboo if he ever performed with live accompaniment. "That's how I learned of the Gundecha Brothers. Deboo described their singing as bliss. And there is no other way to describe it. Their music blew me away."

Though jazz is not a passion with Thompson, he does appreciate the details of its composition and execution. The calibre of the percussionists in the Korean group, SamulNori, is one example.



jazz with diverse instruments. It's the kind of music Arab workers listen to, a type of pop music. When you hear it abroad, it is usually poorly recorded."

Another consideration in selecting an artist or act is how well it will translate in Hongkong. A case in point is Indonesian music. Every trek Thompson made to the outermost villages of Bali to hear and see Balinese dancing has

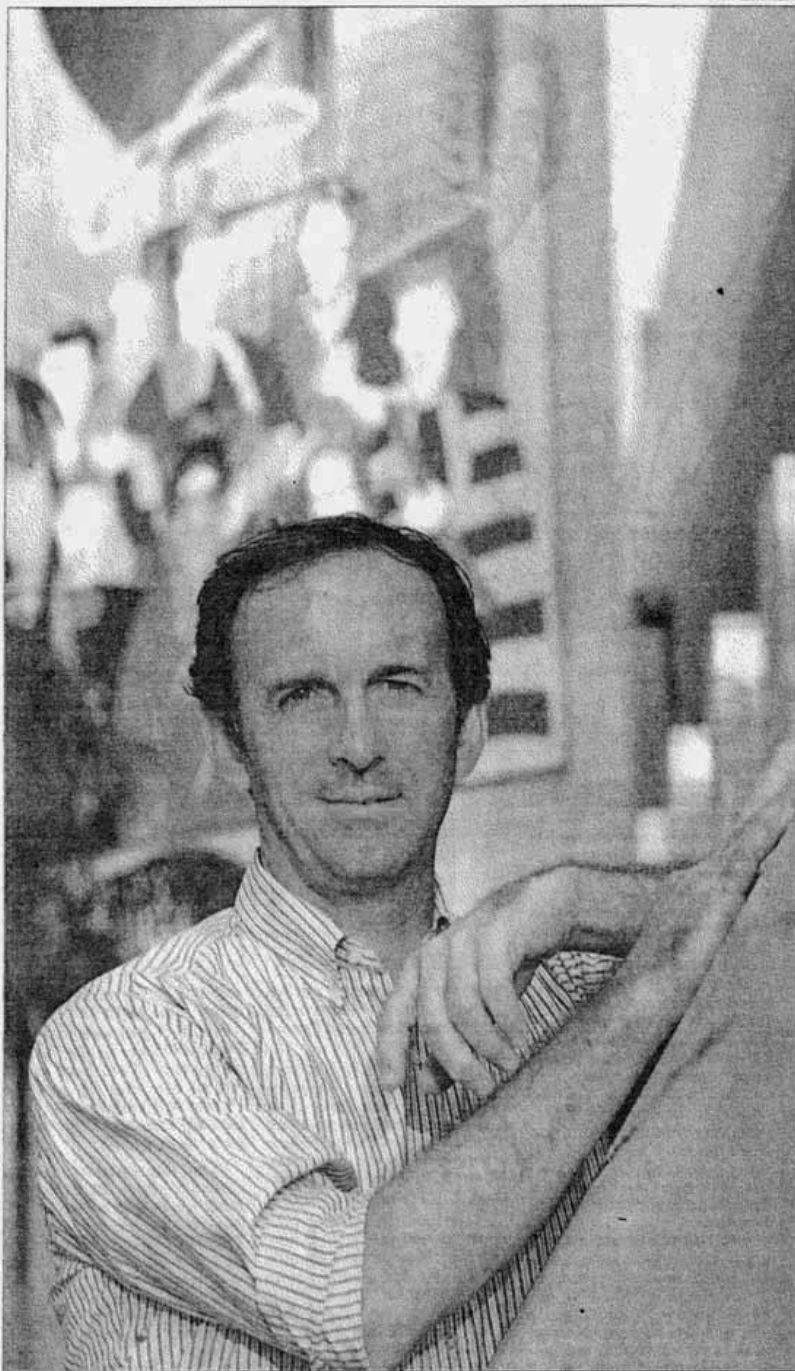
"Each of the four percussionists is an excellent soloist. Hongkong will be a reunion for them and their partner, the Vienna-based Red Sun. They'll have fun playing together. And they're accepting reduced fees."

Music and travel are central in Thompson's life. After earning several graduate degrees in the United States and surviving a stint in Vietnam, he realised that his Western education didn't prepare him for the diversity of the Far East.

So, like the good academic he is, he moved to Asia and studied Chinese language and music in Taiwan instead of learning Japanese.

The next Asian arts festival is slated for 1994 and he already has ideas. "I don't know if I will be offered a contract. But you've got to plan ahead."

**Programme and schedule.** 734-2900; telephone bookings, 734-9009; postal booking information, 723-7713; tickets also through URB.TIX.



**John Thompson: As co-ordinator, he is already making plans for the 1994 festival.**

John Lehman