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Are there too many arts events in S'pore?

Dip in attendance at ticketed events raises questions about the increasingly crowded calendar and competition for attention.



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Supersized puppets in the form of prehistoric creatures battled aliens on the lawn of the National Museum as part of the Singapore Night Festival 2016, as throngs of festival-goers gathered to watch the spectacle unfold overhead.

Free arts and culture events, such as this, attracted a record attendance of 9.2 million last year – a five-year high – according to statistics from the Singapore Cultural Statistics 2017 report, released last week.

In isolation, the data could indicate a growing appetite for arts and cultural events here, but the report also showed a dip in attendance at ticketed performing arts events.

This raises the question of whether there are just too many shows here and if free shows are starting to cannibalise paid performances.

TOO MANY EVENTS, TOO LITTLE TIME

In the arts community and among arts-goers, the general sentiment is that “there are too many events and festivals in Singapore”, said Ms Audrey Wong, head of the school of creative industries at Lasalle College of the Arts.

Non-ticketed performing arts activities reached an all-time high of about 5,900 last year – about 1,000 more than in 2015. However, attendance at such non-ticketed arts and cultural events hovered around 2.8 million for both years.

This shows that more free events do not necessarily translate into higher attendance figures. A spokesman for the Ministry of

Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) said this could be because some of the activities last year were smaller and “held at more intimate spaces”.

Another explanation could simply be that audiences have a finite amount of time and thus not enough bandwidth for so many arts activities.

Ms Wong, a former Nominated Member of Parliament for the arts, said: “With so many events competing for our attention, it’s obvious that it’s getting harder for producers, promoters, venues and arts groups to reach their audiences. Many shows aren’t reaching people who might be interested, because these people don’t receive the information in time. This is one reason why ‘smaller’ shows aren’t achieving good ticket sales.”

According to the report, attendance at ticketed performing arts events dropped from 1.94 million in 2015 to 1.81 million last year, despite an increase in such events.

There was also a corresponding dip in gross takings from ticket sales, from \$121 million in 2015 to \$89 million last year.

And the competition for attention is not just among arts events, say practitioners and administrators.

“There are also many other sources of entertainment which are competing for people’s time and attention,” said Esplanade chief executive officer Benson Pua.

“This includes the ever-growing number of video streaming services, both paid and free, and the fact that people can easily access these in the comfort of their homes or on-the-go on their mobile devices.”

He expressed concern that with so many distractions, people may not “engage with the arts at all”.

Another downside of having too many events is that the branding for each gets diluted.

“People get confused about what event they are attending,” said Ms Wong.



Examples include the Civic District Outdoor Festival and the Singapore Night Festival, which were both held in August this year.

There are hopes that such events will create vibrancy and revitalise spaces and districts in Singapore, through a process called “place-making”, which broadly refers to planning, designing and managing public spaces to promote well-being, including a greater sense of identity.

This buzzword was banded about at the annual conference of the Culture Academy Singapore, where the Singapore Cultural Statistics were released last week.

Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Grace Fu, who spoke at the conference, said that “through

place-making, we have transformed some of our majestic historic buildings and given them a new lease of life”, bringing up examples such as the National Gallery Singapore, which used to be the old Supreme Court and City Hall and The Arts House, which was Singapore’s first Parliament House.

She added that “place-making can create common spaces for people to gather, share and understand their experiences”.

But many are worried that when the funding dries up for some of these place-making efforts, so too will the activities and the vibrancy that was seemingly there.

Ms Wong said: “Place-making isn’t just about having more and

more activities in one geographic location; it has to go beyond that.”

Ms Fu acknowledged that to sustain such efforts, it is important to include stakeholders and the community and rightly questioned if more “co-creation” could be facilitated.

As opposed to organising more festivals which are somewhat alike, which people have no stake in, Ms Wong points out that what might have greater value are festivals that have sprung up for specific purposes to engage a targeted audience.

Silver Arts, for example, is an annual festival, organised by the National Arts Council, that aims to integrate the arts into the lifestyles of seniors.

This year’s festival took place over four weeks in September and 42,000 are estimated to have attended the programmes.

VALUE OF FREE PERFORMANCES

While it could be interpreted that free shows are pulling audiences away from ticketed shows, MCCY said there is no evidence at present to suggest a relationship between the number of non-ticketed activities and ticketed attendances.

“Both ticketed and non-ticketed performances contribute to the vibrancy and sustainability of our arts and culture sector and help engage more people through arts and culture,” the ministry’s spokesman added.

Mr Chng Hak-Peng, chief executive officer of the Singapore Symphony Group which manages the Singapore Symphony Orchestra among other groups, believes that free concerts and regular subscription concerts attract different audiences, or even the same audiences who are looking for different experiences.

“For instance, interactivity and making the repertoire accessible are some of the key considerations for free concerts,” he said.

On the other hand, “a keen concert-goer will still pay to enjoy a fuller concert experience in terms of acoustics, scale and star billing” – for example, artists such as cellist Yo-yo Ma or pianist Lang Lang.

“Because of the different experience and audiences, I don’t think there is cannibalisation of one by the other,” added Mr Chng.

He said the clear advantage of presenting a free performance is to reach a wider audience and to allow people to enjoy the orchestra in a different format.

The high quality of free events could also boost the overall quality of artistic offerings here, which would be a win for both audiences and the arts community as a whole.

At the Esplanade, 70 per cent of the programmes are non-ticketed.

Mr Pua said free programmes provide a platform for artist development.

He added that these are curated programmes of good quality and have, therefore, become “aspirational performance platforms for young artists who wish to perform at the centre and encourage them to better their standards”.

As to whether those who attend free events would ultimately graduate to become part of the ticket-wielding crowd, the jury is still out.

Ms Wong said “a more sophisticated grasp of why and how people make choices about what shows and events to attend” is needed and “only then can we devise better strategies to build audiences”.

Yet others are convinced that people will graduate to becoming paying audience members.

Mr Pua said: “As people become more accustomed to engaging with the arts and their arts appetite grows, we believe that they will also be more open to other arts experiences, which could include ticketed performances.”

“Art is valuable to society, and I believe that society will learn to value that art,” added Mr Chng.

May the numbers bear this out in the years to come.

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