

An arts critic's holiday

A vacation reminded me to enjoy the arts with my heart, not just my head

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The first time I was assigned to cover the Singapore Arts Festival as a young reporter, I was determined to make the most of the press pass that allowed me entry to every performance.

My colleague and I, both enthusiastic rookies, promptly overdosed on the arts. I survived two weeks of non-stop daily events, plus matinees on the weekends.

But the final performance, a butoh dance by Buto-Sha Tenkei, proved to be the tipping point for both of us. My colleague was snoozing in her seat by halftime and I was struggling to stay focused. To this day, I am not fond of butoh.

Looking back, the younger me was trying too hard. Like a kid in a candy store, I binged and, predictably, sickened.

Over the years, as an arts journalist, I have attended countless shows for work. Of course, as an arts lover, the beat is a dream job. But having had to sit through some stinkers on the job has also made me wary of trying new things. That can be quite a handicap for an arts lover.

On leave recently, however, I rediscovered the joys of consuming the arts.

I attended talks at the Singapore Writers Festival and caught five wildly different shows. Without the spectre of work, I could forget all the calculations with which I usually approach an arts event. Instead of thinking about who to assign to an event and how much space to give it, I just turned up and enjoyed the show.

Frankly, I had almost forgotten what it was like to attend a show as a regular Joe. Usually, my mind is churning with things to take note of as a journalist - is that a new face on the scene, is this production unusual in a company's repertoire, could I wring a trend or a feature out of this show - which, while second nature to me, also means a sometimes unwanted running commentary in my head.

As a critic, I also tend to exercise - some friends say overexercise - my analytical muscles. After years on the job, this has become a habit and I do derive a real pleasure from working my brain in this way. To me, dissecting the way a performance works is a crucial part of the way I enjoy art. I think of it as weightlifting exercises for my brain.

In the past three weeks, however, as I have rambled from one arts event to another purely for fun, I have realised that my arts critic's head sometimes gets in the way of my arts lover's heart.

Two events I went to were a good wake-up call for me: One was the IPS Prism project, devised by Drama Box for the Institute Of Policy Studies, and the other was the Affordable Art Fair.

The former was an ambitious, multimedia event spread over two levels of the National Library building. Comprising installations, a short film and forum theatre, it aimed to elicit responses from the public on no less momentous a topic than their vision of a future Singapore.

I did not know quite what to expect. But it turned out to be a wonderfully immersive experience. Film-maker Jasmine Ng's short film, with its cheeky future visions of a political party made up of senior citizens and women doing national service, offered thought-provoking concepts in palatable short snippets.

I wandered through the interactive exhibits, which asked visitors for their feedback on what they thought was an ideal politician and what kind of Singapore they wanted 20 years from now. What struck me the most were these reactions: on the walls were literally hundreds of post-it notes, scribbled with the ideas and opinions of regular people.

It was an eye-opening experience for me. I had never seen art used in this way in Singapore before: as a medium for eliciting responses from normally reticent Singaporeans. It reframed potentially divisive political stances in simpler, everyday terms. Instead of emotive phrases such as "national conversation" and "national policies", Prism presented visitors with potential scenarios, mediated by art, which made clear these questions are not just academic issues but urgent matters with an impact on the way ordinary Singaporeans will live and work in the future.

Judging from the post-it notes, the project succeeded in generating plenty of contrarian views from the average man in the street. There were little mini-conversations across the notes as one Singaporean responded to another's views. Now this, I thought, was a true demonstration of the power of art - engaging people and generating thoughtful discussion.

Most importantly, art provided the space for dialogue, and it accomplished this with people who might never have thought about stepping into a theatre or art gallery in the first place, let alone using art as a means of expressing their desires and hopes for the future.

The installation's setup might have looked basic - booths and life-sized cutouts, pens and post-it notes - but the artmaking was sophisticated, well thought-out and purposeful. Most crucially, it was still accessible, a characteristic it shared with the Affordable Art Fair, where I spent a delightful afternoon with family.

My niece painted up a storm at the kids' arts corner, while my sister and I wandered through the fair and pondered buys for our homes. I chatted with gallery owners about the artists they represent and ended up buying two small works.

Unlike the posher Art Stage Singapore, with its "look but don't touch, forget about buying anything" air, the Affordable Art Fair has an easy, weekend-y vibe that makes one want to just hang out. No wonder it drew 16,000 people and racked up sales of more than \$4 million this year.

Both Prism and the Affordable Art Fair reminded me of the heart of art: that it can help one frame, and understand, the important issues in life, and that it does not have to be a distant, aesthetic concept but a vibrant part of everyday life.

All one has to do is just not overthink it, and welcome it with an open heart.