



# EUROPEAN UNION

*Under the auspices of 'Encore, The European Season in Singapore', the cultural and artistic calendar over the next twelve months promises to be an exciting one. James Tulley talks to Laurence Harel, Encore's executive director on both the programme and how it promises to bring Europe and Asia closer together.*

The tiled floors, wicker chairs and the French 1930s accordion music playing in the background in PS Café at Palais Renaissance lent an almost Parisian air to the interview setting. However, it was Harel's Gallic charm and beguiling French accent that provided the authenticity. No stranger to Asia, Harel has been in Singapore for over 12 years and with her husband and family has very much made it her home. Her higher studies in Art History and Museology at the Ecole du Louvre and MBA in Banking Finance as well as professional career gives her considerable experience in arts and culture as well as business and made her the perfect choice to be the executive director of 'Encore! The European Season in Singapore'. Indeed, when I asked Jacky Deromedi, Monaco's Honorary Consul in Singapore and president of Encore! as to why she had approached Harel to lead the season she remarked, "She is talented in everything, her background is both in business and in arts." Above all noted Deromedi, Harel was "with so many qualities, that makes her a real gem".

Now in its third year, Encore! seeks to celebrate the diversity of European culture by bringing together all the various cultural and artistic events that take place in Singapore under one unifying

programme. The initial brainchild of HE Pierre Buhler, the former French Ambassador to Singapore, this second season promises to be more expansive and broad based than what has gone before. Harel explains, "What we are trying to do is to create a marketing platform, we are trying to market all the European events in town under one umbrella."

Fortunately for Harel, she is able to tap into an extensive network of cultural activities under the various embassies, as well as such notable institutions as the Goethe Institute, Italian Cultural Institute, British Council and Alliance Francaise. Together they are all valuable partners in an effort to represent European culture. Says Harel, "You take the embassies one by one, there are huge networks and they really make the Encore! season happen."

This is a sentiment shared by Deromedi who in her capacity as president of Encore! is able to support Harel by reaching out to the governmental, diplomatic and cultural entities in Singapore. She explains, "My role is mainly about meeting with all the Ambassadors or Heads of Cultural Services to get them involved." Adding further clout to the effort, Encore! is backed by a Board comprising numerous

highly respected leaders in cultural and artistic affairs. Ultimately overseen by Deromedi, it draws upon such diverse backgrounds as that of Dr Robert Liew who was recently awarded the Knight in the Order of Arts and Letters by the French government and Hossan Leong who has long been part of Anglo Franco theatrical performances in Singapore. The Board's remit is to oversee the direction of the season and the inclusion of the various activities that fall within in.

Harel is clear that ultimately Encore is about ensuring that Singapore is able to get access to and enjoy some of the best cultural and artistic shows and performances that Europe has to offer. "The focus definitely is to promote European culture in Singapore," she enthuses as she presents an extensive selection from the forthcoming season. As seasons go, Encore is a long one. Covering a full twelve months from May 2010 to May of 2011 Harel jokes that for many "a year is not a season, but it's a season in Singapore nonetheless". Time is not perhaps the factor but in ensuring that as many people have access to the activities that are planned. In this respect, Harel is very practical in the approach that she needs to take. Above all it is important she says that Singaporeans are able to identify with what is being presented.

She sees this on two fronts. Firstly, that for many there is the Anglo tradition in Singapore. "Probably they are more familiar with British culture and many are studying in England so may relate more to UK events," she says. However, she is excited that whatever the historical relationship between Singapore and Britain, there is a very strong and growing interest in Europe, "things are changing we are

seeing more and more interest in broader European culture". With that in mind, Harel was quick to draw my attention to the breadth of events, which include everything from The Magic Flute performed by the Singapore Lyric Opera to a Fellini retrospective. Drawing upon the rich cultural heritage from all the European countries and cultures is very much a key component of the Encore! Season.

The second aspect to the season is to ensure that the programme can engage with as many people as possible. One key point to this is the sense of broad based appeal. As Harel notes, "I would say if it is not too avant-garde then people are very interested. We need easy going shows before we go on to the more unusual things." Far from being low brow, the season certainly caters to a broad range of interests, but the presence of such crowd pleasing elements as renowned film music composer Ennio Morricone or French Club icon Bob Sinclair are certainly intended to grab the interest of a more populist audience. However, Harel also sees tremendous power in presenting activities and events that are family driven. The 'Last days of Pompeii' exhibition for example will appeal to "children who want to go and bring their parents, so we reach out to a wider group of people".

The inclusion of street theatre activities offers those with limited



means or perhaps a discomfort of traditional theatre environments the chance to enjoy world class entertainment – for free. "For people who perhaps can't afford to go to the theatre, there is street theatre," explains Harel, but it's not about money it's "so that people can be part of what is happening in town," she adds. Despite limited resources Harel praised the generosity of the foundations and sponsors who are supporting the season this year and she will oversee the production of 20,000 booklets every two months and bus-stop poster adds as a means of bringing the season to the attention of the public. The online version of the booklet at [www.europeanseason.com](http://www.europeanseason.com) offers a rich content and extensive information on the various activities from all the various embassies and cultural institutions that fall under the Encore! season.

In the spirit of bringing the message of a unified Europe, the season kicks off with the genre of film. "Every year we start with the European film festival as it really brings together all the European countries," notes Harel. From then on the season promises to be a rich and varied diary. Whilst many events are planned, there are many more that are in the pipeline, and being an opportunist Harel sees tremendous scope to increasingly be more proactive in bringing events to the programme, "I would like for the second part of the season to initiate some more of the projects," she says. Based on her passionate recounting of various conversations she has been having it is safe to assume that far from static the Encore! season will continually evolve.

While Encore is a celebration of European culture, Harel draws great comfort from the increasing artistic profile of Asia and its own cultural scene. The power of arts and culture to reach out and build social bridges of 'entente cordiale' has long been a tool of politicians and diplomats. A sentiment that Deromedi had also shared with me earlier when she astutely remarked, "I also believe that European culture must travel to Asia to be a link between Asian and European people, to help them to understand better each other by sharing and

## **HIGHLIGHTS OF THE ENCORE SEASON 2010 / 2011**

**Italian Film Festival - June**

**The Magic Flute - July**

**Pompeii at the National Museum - October**

**Giselle Ballets choreographed by Mats Ek,  
from the Lyon Opera - October**

**The Berlin Philharmonic - November**

**Valentino Exhibition - December**

**Carmen from the SLO January 2011**

mixing our cultures." Indeed, if things go according to plan then Harel envisages Encore!'s reach expanding, "maybe the season can be spread around the region, so in a few years we might see a season across the region", she reflects. For now, she knows that there is a great deal of work to do and with so many players and parties "we have to really make it happen".

With such a passionate, educated and engaging individual as Harel helping to drive Encore! there is little to doubt it will succeed in its ambitions. Indeed, when reviewing the line-up for the season I couldn't help but coo with enthusiasm, and reflect that Singapore was a lot more 'happening' than is often assumed. Apart from enriching the social lives, seasons such as Encore! do much to provide networks within the European communities as well as between European and Asian ones. On that basis, 'Encore! The European Season in Singapore' presents in so many ways the very best of a European Union.