

BROUGHT TO YOU
BY LIFE & TIMES**PLUSH** *living***NIGHT
INVASION**

A nocturnal extravaganza set against the backdrop of Singapore's National Museum has everyone mesmerised, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

IT'S close to nine o'clock on the last Saturday in August. The weather has been humid and despite night having fallen, the temperature hasn't cooled one bit. As the crowd swells and my friend and I attempt to find a place to sit on the lawn outside the National Museum of Singapore, we overhear a curious statement from someone in the audience: "The performance will take place all around us."

All that's known is that the performance in question is called Invasion. It is one of the main performances during the recently-concluded Singapore Night Festival (SNF), an annual nighttime extravaganza held in the heart of Singapore's art and heritage district, the Bras Basah, Bugis (BBB) Precinct.

ALTERNATE INTERPRETATION

There is a hush and the music begins. The soothing tones are followed by a singer who emerges from one side of the Museum. Dressed in white, she's seated on top of a moving contraption in the shape of a globe. The language she's singing in sounds like Spanish, yet there are elements of other languages. Though confusing, in that moment, the visual aspects of the performance override this need to understand what the words mean.

As the first singer exits, the energy of the performance changes. The music becomes harsh and new performers emerge on the stage. Looking formidable on stilts, they are led by a striking-looking woman in a bright red costume that bears an uncanny resemblance to Disney's Maleficent. In the next few minutes, we see her summon what seems like an array of animals, ranging from dinosaurs to butterflies. The climax of the story sees a giant bird come sweeping down magnificently over the crowd. As the music reaches its crescendo, the first singer dressed in white appears again. Her soothing tone seems to calm the agitated animals. They ignore the angry woman clad in red and soon, peace reigns.

"That's not Maleficent," insists Vivian Hendriks, the creative director of

Invasion. She shows me the actual description for this production which reads as follows: "Large animals move between the public. A mythical world comes alive; animal sounds are heard everywhere. A dark figure appears as a prehistoric bird flies overhead. The area is completely filled as all these creatures are spreading out and causing confusion among the people should they run or follow. The chaos ends by a magical song that attracts the animals and calms them down."

The description is deliberately vague, explains Hendriks. In fact, all the performers are singing gibberish. The characters don't actually have names. "Our aim is for the audience to immerse themselves in the production," she continues before conceding that for the purposes of our discussion, the dark figure is called Wicca and the dinosaurs, Saures. It is more important for Hendriks that the audience come up with their own stories of the production.

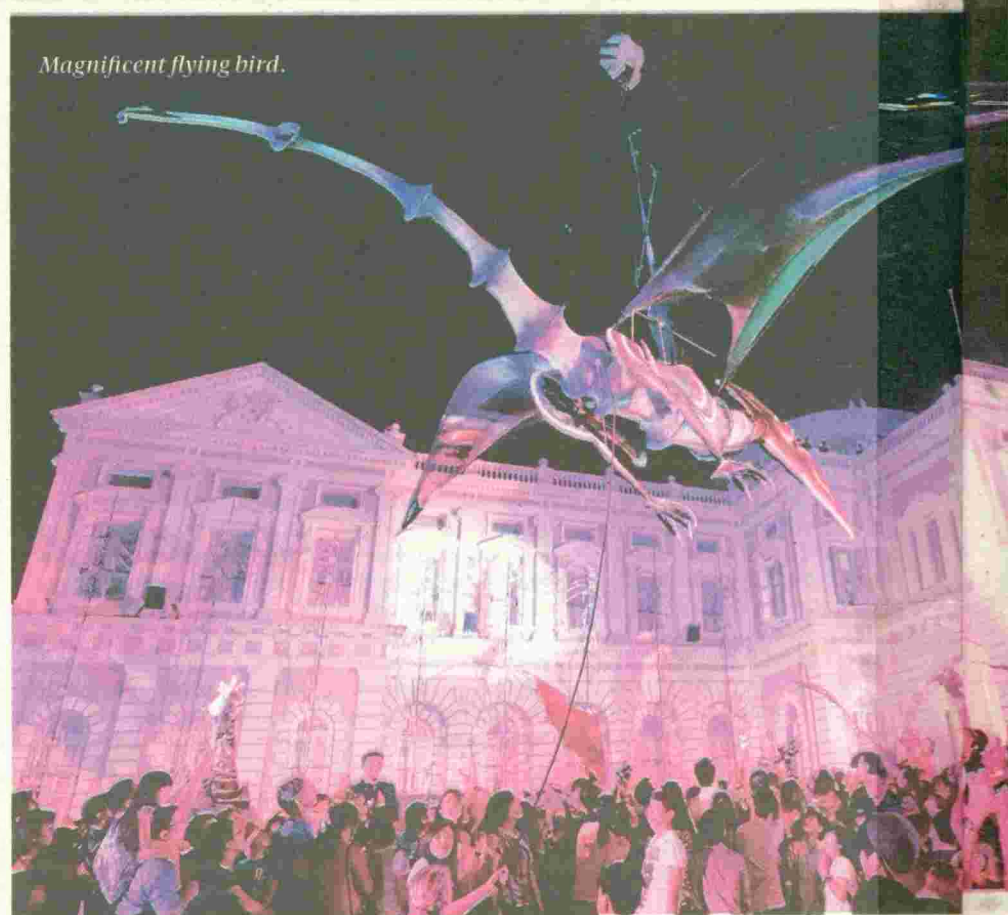
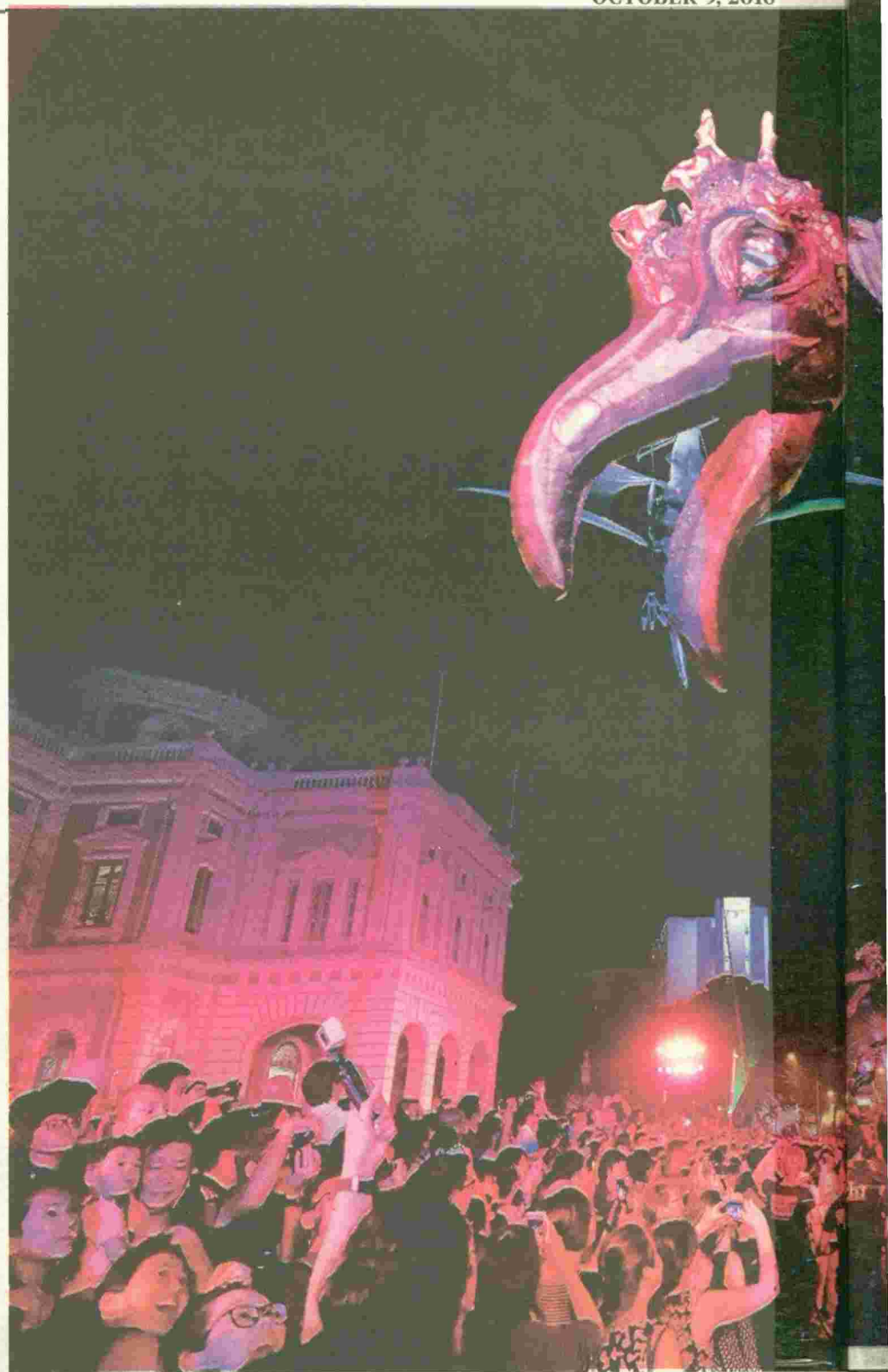
TALENTED AND ENERGISED

Invasion is part of the repertoire of a street-theatre company called Close-Act. Started in 1991, the company has its base in Holland. The performances it stages combines various disciplines like dance, music and circus, with stunning visual representations.

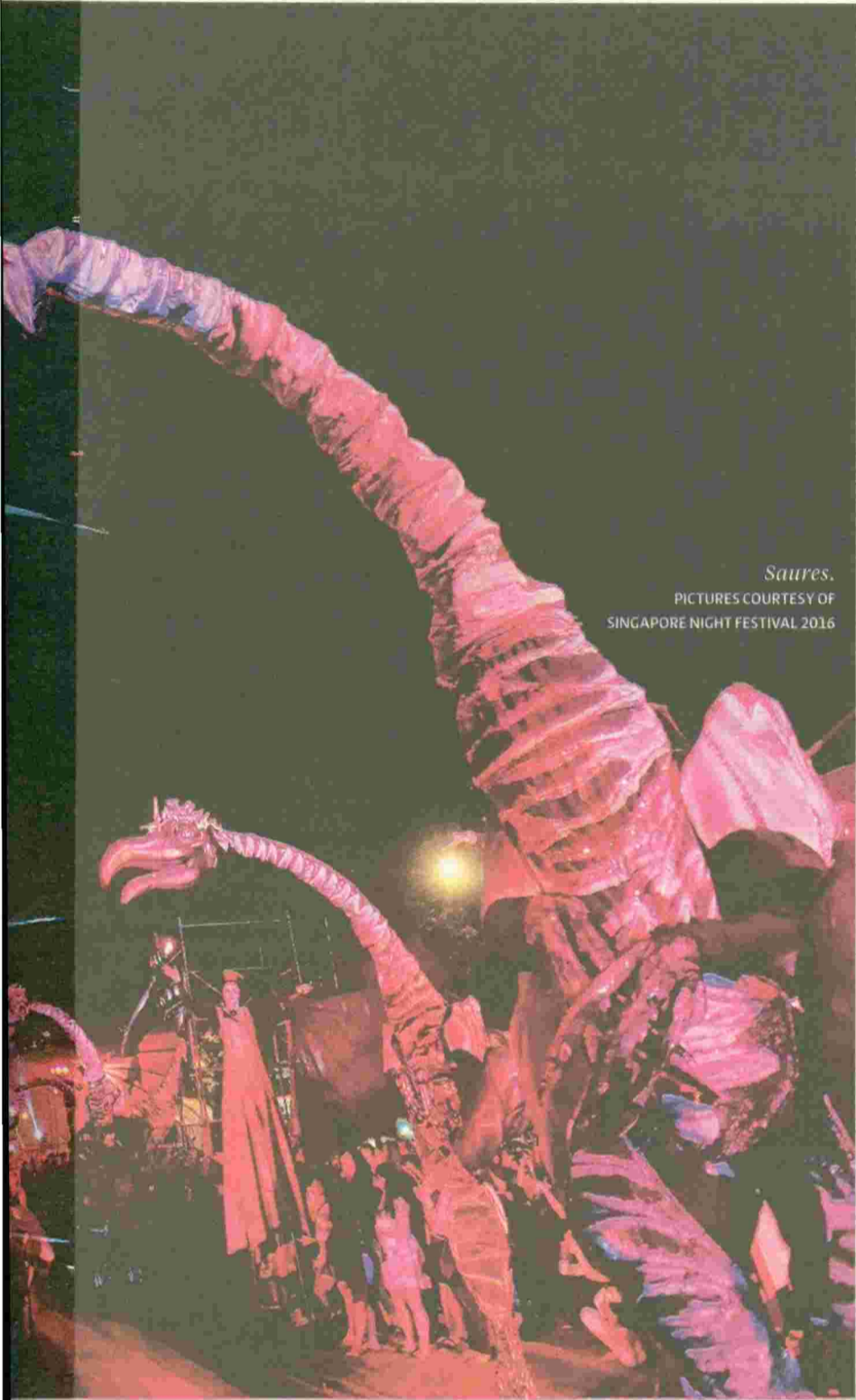
With trained performers, impressive mobile objects and extraordinary air machinery, these performances have an air of magic and the fanciful about them.

Other than the performers, Close-Act also has a talented team of artists, technicians, industrial designers and costume designers. "For example, we have chosen special fabrics from linen to tissue-like material to create the costumes," explains Marja Theeuwes, a production manager at the company.

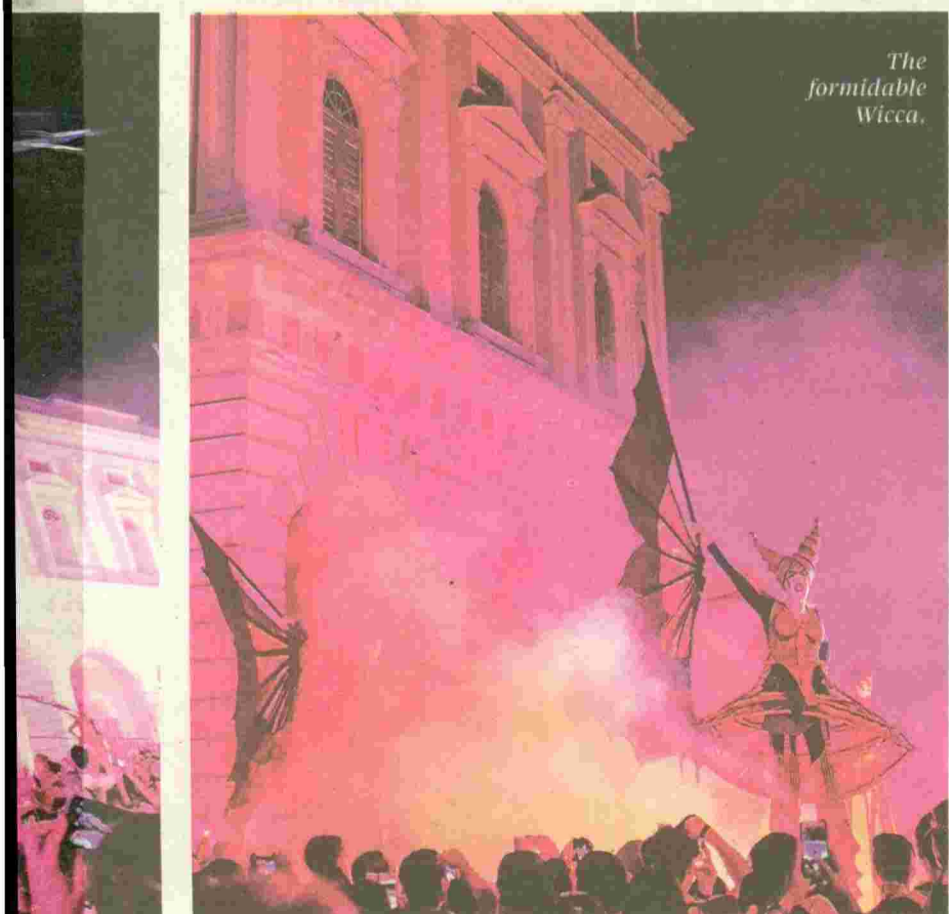
In the beginning, the company held its performances in Europe and was confined to theatre festivals, cultural events, walking acts and parades. Today, the company has expanded and they perform all over the world. Of all their performances, the one that Hendriks holds dear is the memory of



Magnificent flying bird.



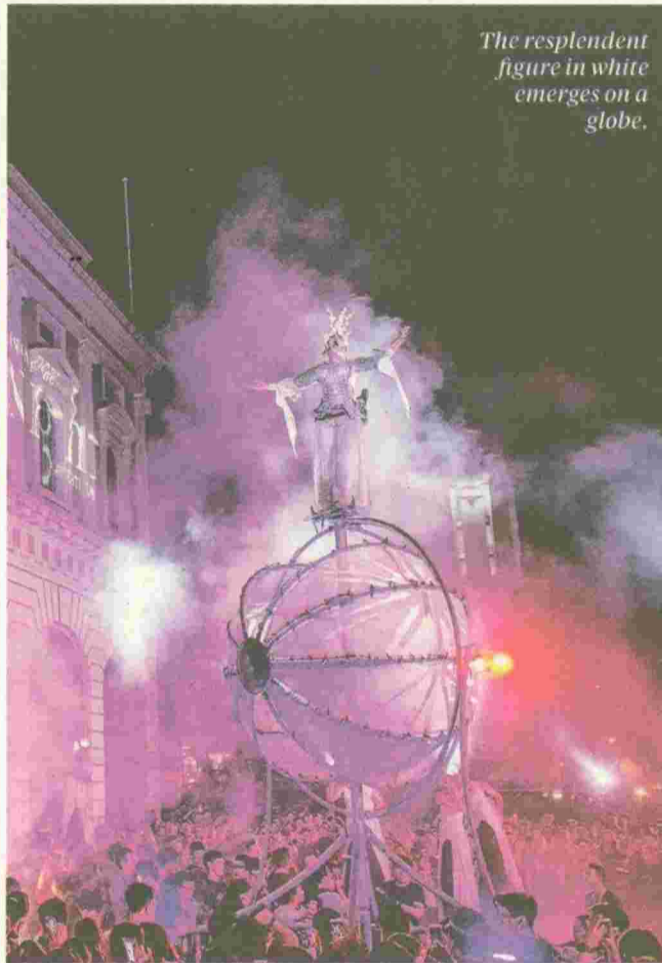
Saures.
PICTURES COURTESY OF
SINGAPORE NIGHT FESTIVAL 2016



The
formidable
Wicca.

livingPLUSH

BROUGHT TO YOU
BY LIFE & TIMES



The resplendent
figure in white
emerges on a
globe.



Vivian Hendriks (left) and Marja Theeuwes of Close-Act.

"Our aim is for the audience to immerse themselves in the production."

Vivian Hendriks

their performance in Brasilia, Brazil. "This," elaborates the former gymnast, "was in 2008. The audience was very receptive. There was a carnival-like atmosphere and this added to the energy."

Why, though, are all the performers on stilts, I muse aloud to the lively duo. "So that we can be higher than the audience and make it easier for them to see us," replies the affable Theeuwes, somewhat simply.

KILLING THEATRE

On the biggest challenge they face today as far as putting on a performance is concerned, the duo confides that it has to be the mobile phone. Exasperatedly, they share that instead of watching and enjoying the show, the audience is more interested in capturing it on their screens. Shaking her head, Theeuwes says: "You know that song *Video Killed*

the Radio Star? Well, here the mobile phone killed theatre." Adding to this, Hendriks chips in: "When we were setting up here in Singapore, we did ask the organiser if we could make an announcement before the performance. Basically we wanted to ask the audience to put away the phone." Chuckling, she adds: "They looked at us and then said, 'That's not possible.'"

The music slowly dies down. The performers on stilts begin to make their way off the stage. As the crowd disperses, a member of the audience can be heard asking his friend if the large bird flying away is supposed to be Garuda, the large, mythical bird that appears both in Hindu and Buddhist mythology. Who knows. But whatever the interpretation given to these characters and the tale, the universal message of *Invasion* is obvious: **Good** always triumphs over evil.