

Ulasan / *Reviews*

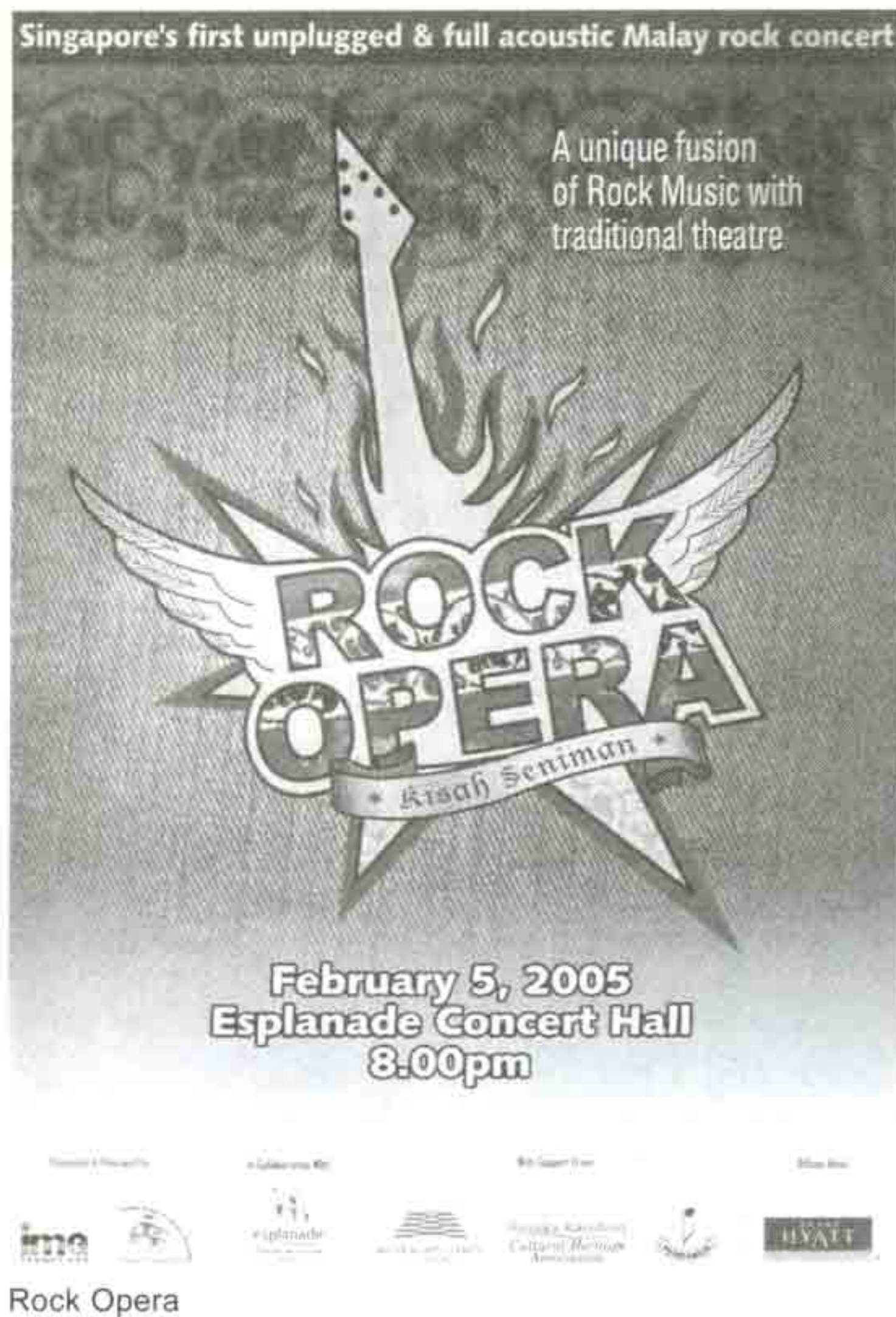
Rock Opera Kisah Seorang Seniman

*Esplanade Concert Hall, The Esplanade
Theatres on the Bay, Singapore
5 Feb 2005*

The Malay rock music scene in Singapore was in its peak around the 1970s and 1980s. It was a golden era where many of the legendary bands were formed, talents came into the spotlight, concerts played to large crowds. And while bands from the west such as Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin inspired many Malay rockers, what was unique about the Malay rock scene then, was that the rockers did not just do covers. They also wrote original songs with memorable melodies and heartfelt lyrics that expressed their aspirations and ideas about life.

In the recent years, with the rise of MTV culture, the Malay rock scene in Singapore has gone quiet and underground, with the Mat Rock becoming a parody of a certain class of young Malays in Singapore, somewhat equivalent to what the Ah Beng represents to the young Chinese in Singapore.

In this context, the *Rock Opera*, produced by IMG Productions can be seen as a milestone for the Malay arts and entertainment scene in Singapore. This production has put one of the most popular music genres among the Malay community into a national arts venue and opened to a larger audience base. Rock music, however, has had somewhat of a love-hate existence within the Malay community. While the older generation is concerned about preservation of the



Malay cultural identity, the younger generation Malays seem drawn to rock and alternative genres of music.

And it is this concern that forms the basic storyline of *Rock Opera* which was staged at the Esplanade Concert Hall in February this year. It focused on the universal issue of the communication gap between the generations and the perpetual tension between the traditional arts and popular art forms. Set in Singapore in the not-too-distant past, it told the story of a young rock musician named Ramli, his struggles for this art and how he found his identity by fusing the rock music he loves with the traditional musical elements of his community.

As the story goes, Ramli's father, Yusof, was the leader of a *Bangsawan* troupe who had very strong views on the upholding of his cultural heritage. Young Ramli, on the other hand, born into the era of Rock and Roll, felt that he could better express himself through loud rock music and strong lyrics. In the

face of his father's disapproval, he resorted to developing his skills secretly by using a mask to hide his identity in his performances. Ramli, in this mysterious persona, soon developed a large following.

However, Ramli felt something was missing in his music and decided to go back to his roots in order to find his own identity. He started composing songs using traditional tunes and instruments. Ramli's new fusion works attracted many people, including his father. The story ends happily with Ramli acknowledging that his father had been a source of inspiration for him all along and his father acknowledging that he loves his son's music.

Billed as "Singapore's first unplugged and full acoustic Malay Rock Concert" and "A unique fusion of rock music with traditional theatre", this production was in fact a concert of classic rock anthems by some of the most popular names in the Singaporean and Malaysian Malay rock music scene. Presented in 5 Acts, the story was told by a narrator who told it from the perspective of the protagonist Ramli's friend. Audiences expecting a conventional musical or opera would have been disappointed. But for fans of Malay rock music, it was an evening to relive some of the great songs and singers of the era.

The artistes featured include Nasharudin Elias or Nash, the lead vocalist from Malaysia's legendary rock band Lefthanded; composer and recording artiste Zoul, brother of M. Nasir; Hanafie Warren and his band The Unwanted and Lovehunters led by Saharudin. These veteran rockers, their voices as powerful as before, sang their hearts out and gave heartfelt renditions of classic rock ballads such as *Terperangkap Dalam Sinaran*, *Penyesalan*, *Pada Syurga Di Wajah Mu*, *Blues Untuk Rakyat*, and many others. These pieces were backed by an equally passionate chorus, VoxBox led by Ann Hussein, and a mixed orchestra which had violins and cellos playing alongside drum kit, guitars and ethnic percussion.

The star of the night, was no doubt, actor Rafaat Hamzah, who played the narrator and the quintessential Mat Rock. Standing amidst a cloud of smoke and with spotlight shining from the

back, Rafaat cut an imposing and authoritative figure clad in denim. His narration was natural and he spoke directly to the audience. So convincing was he as a Mat Rock that, at one stage, a few members of the audience started heckling him. This developed into an impromptu exchange between actor and audience which was on one hand incredibly funny, but also reflected the love-hate relationship that people had with rockers in general.

The weakest parts in this production were the musical interludes in between the different acts provided by acapella group from Jakarta, Jamaica Café. While their vocal ability was sound as far as *acapella* singing is concerned, they did not contribute to the story line or to the musical landscape of the show at all. In particular, when put next to the some of the strong vocalists such as Hanafie Warren, Nash and Saharudin, they sounded rather bland and expressionless.

To the uninitiated, *Rock Opera* was simply an excuse to put Malay rock music on the Concert Hall stage of The Esplanade. But by setting it to the story of Ramli, the producers have created a show that also provided food for thought about the state of Malay traditional arts and offer some assurance for those who are worried that the younger generation of Malays in Singapore may forsake their cultural heritage altogether. On the other hand, while some of the issues raised were interesting, there was no attempt to look at them in-depth. Even the music performed, while they were very famous pieces, they did not have much to do with the story being presented. One of the issues which was never addressed, was why the rockers were frowned upon in the first place. Was it the music itself or the lifestyle that was associated with it: that of rebellion and drugs.

In an attempt to address the issue of the state of Malay music, the producers had organized a forum a few weeks before the show opened to discuss the state of Malay music in Singapore. On the panel were Dr. Larry Francis, Ms. Joyce Teo, Mr. Yusnor E.F., Mr. Zoul and Mr Azrin Rahim. The forum itself raised important points such as: what is “Malay” music in Singapore; that the Malay community itself appear not to support their own artistes; and that for Malay

music to develop, a lot more support from all levels is needed, from government support, to sponsorship and support from the mass media. Unfortunately, due to several factors none of these issues were debated in-depth.

Rock Opera itself presented the same short coming. As a piece of entertainment, it served its purpose, but if it was meant to raise some pertinent issues about Malay music, then it fell short.

Rock Opera was presented totally in Bahasa Melayu with no subtitles or translation provided, thereby implying that it was meant to reach out only to the Malay community in Singapore. In fact, it would have been as important, if not more so, to show the non-Malay communities in Singapore the dilemmas that the younger generation are faced with and the great musical legacy that the Malays have contributed to the music scene in Singapore.

Joyce Teo

LA-SALLE-SIA College of the Arts