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hype

controversy





PHOTO of the Kranji War Memorial: Sue-Ann Woo

Opening Thoughts

Of Cowboys and Countries

When President Bush of the United States of America decides to turn in for the night after ordering the start of war on Iraq, it isn't, as most would think, callousness, but – as any PR person would say – to tell the world that his conscience is free. Because if there are American, British and Australian soldiers dying at his word – it's to "set the Iraqis free". And if the Iraqis are dying, well, they do deserve it.

The Bush administration bombs Iraq in the name of democracy and to teach the Middle Eastern nation to respect the United Nations Organisation and its resolutions. Apparently it's quite all right for the US itself to ignore the UN Security Council, which could not reach a unanimous decision to attack Iraq.

Truly, Saddam Hussein's evil regime has to be stopped – through exercising the same kind of autocratic power over the international community. The people of Iraq deserve to have freedom of speech, even if it means ignoring the same right globally. And of course, it's not about gaining control of those rich Iraqi oil fields, but why not make a beeline for them anyway? And while they're at it, why not bomb the entire Iraqi infrastructure – so that they can build bigger and better ones for Iraq, right after they free its people – of course.

And since it's all about freeing the Iraqi people from the evil Saddam regime, why not place sanctions on humanitarian organisations like the International Rescue Committee to prevent them from providing aid to the very same?

So while President George W. Bush sits on his moral high horse and rounds up the 'bad guys' with his guns blazing, one wonders whether Iraq will be a corral big enough to contain his enthusiastic pursuit of "freedom".

Syeda Sana Rahman

Hold Your Fire

"Hold your fire! You fire only when you are shot at!" screamed he, who was sprinting furiously to the other side of the block.

"And how would you know when you are being fired at?" yelled the other, who was struggling with his field pack, tugging at the helmet.

"You'll know!"

Four days into the war, on my television screen, I heard a real war cry.

"I shoot only when I am shot at," said he, whose eyes darted around nervously.

I enjoy war movies. There's something about the gloomy, grainy, gory scene that intrigues me. And sometimes, just sometimes, like the exchange described above from *Black Hawk Down*, it's even funny.

People die. Every day. But when it's a real war, it seems more painful, and all the more senseless.

The people seen in military colours on the news channels aren't blue-eyed movie stars with padded trailers in the back lot. This time, it's for real.

Who gets to decide who lives and who dies? Who's right and who's wrong? War isn't just about fighting with weapons of mass destruction or patriot missiles. It's fought with blood.

And this time, all will not be okay with the director yells "cut".

Sue-Ann Woo

The world of today breeds controversy like never before, be it socially, morally or politically. **hype**'s editors give their take on what's possibly the most controversial issue of them all.

I Should

Go ahead. Tell me why I should care. Yeah, so there's a war going on somewhere in some far-off distant land. So what? How does that affect me in the least? What can I do about it? Why should I, a Singaporean living thousands of kilometres away, be bothered about the fact that thousands of innocents may die at the hands of people drunk with power? Why should I, a Catholic since birth, be concerned that millions who proclaim faith in the same God as I, are suffering? Why should I, one of Chinese descent, be at all affected by the knowledge that millions of fellow human beings are fearful not for the state of their economy or the security of their jobs, but for their very lives and the ones they hold dear to them? Why should I, one who has gone through the rigours of military service, shed any tears for those who have to do the same, not of their own will, and in a reality and environment far more harsh? Why should I, all of 25 years of age, be in the least interested that there will be some who will never reach their quarter of a century? Why should I, one who has lived with nothing but the benefits of peace, give a damn about war? Why should I care? What's in it for me? Can anyone tell me?

I'd really like to know.

Aaron Lye

To air your views and comments, email us at hype@sandrockproductions.com

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The Rivals

The quirky characters of *The Rivals* take a big leap from their usual 18th century constraints only because The Stage Club gives a new twist to Sheridan's original English satire. Singapore's oldest theatre company, The Stage Club sets its characters loose on their own *Temptation Island*. With director Daniel Toyne's choice of a contemporary set – on a tropical beach resort, *The Rivals* is a far cry from the original production staged in 1775.

The main players of this intricate comedy include protagonist Lydia Languish, heiress to her family's wealth; Jack Absolute, a Captain who must pretend to be a pauper to win Lydia's heart; and the marvellous Mrs Malaprop, Lydia's aunt with her own secret passions. The sub-plot is filled with manipulative cousins, hung-up lovers, lavish ladies, angry fathers, and scheming servants. *The Rivals* boasts duels, deception and unconditional love. Sheridan's works have long been likened to those of Oscar Wilde's in his provocative approach. Toyne's choice of a tropical island and modern location allows *The Rivals* to demonstrate human shortcomings and obsessions in a relevant and entertaining way, without losing the classical touch.

7 to 10 May. 8pm. DBS Arts Centre, Robertson Quay. Tickets at \$35, \$25, (concession available for students, NSmen and senior citizens) from SISTIC.

P. Gaayathri



hype spices up

your semester break with a selection of

events

Alladeen

Two leading theatre organisations, New York-based The Builders Association and London-based Motoroli, collaborate on *Alladeen*, a global cross-cultural performance putting the story of *Aladdin* into today's context of media and technology.

Alladeen highlights how media and technology make an impact on global culture, bridging the first and third worlds. The performance will address the controversial issue of Indian call operators at international call centres being trained to pass off flawlessly as Americans. It will also explore how our voices and perceptions travel from culture to culture as we engage with technology.

Alladeen will rotate between call centres – where the performers act as call operators in New York, London and Bangalore. There are vibrant fantasy sequences inspired by the Arabian fable while incorporating visuals of early Hollywood and Bollywood films.

7 to 8 June. 8pm, (3pm for matinee on June 8). Victoria Theatre. Tickets at \$52, \$42, \$32 and \$22 from SISTIC.

Ng Yi Lian



Singapore Street Festival

Orchard Road will sizzle with action when young budding talents showcase their creativity and artistic abilities in the Singapore Street Festival 2003. Returning for a second year, this year's theme of "Street Revolution" is set to provide a colourful display of Singapore's street culture.

The first of its kind in Southeast Asia, performers will be both professionals and amateurs. With the use of open spaces near The Heeren Shops, the NYC Youth Park, Cathay Cineleisure Orchard Mall, NYC Skate Park, Faber House and Orchard Building, outdoor stages will be assembled for the crowds. This 16-day event, expected to have more than the 765 performers that took part last year, hopes to draw about 200,000 people.

There'll be break-dancing, musicals and film screenings. Belly dancing and hip-hop competitions are also part of the programme. Performers include Absolut Encounter, FhLY, Gloria, ISD and Ngee Ann Polytechnic's Radio Heatwave.

Organised by the Orchard Road Business Association, this festival is jointly supported by the National Arts Council, Ministry of Community Development and Sports, National Youth Council and Singapore Tourism Board.

31 May to 15 June. 6.30pm to 9.30pm on weekdays and 3pm to 10pm on weekends. Orchard Road. Admission is free.

Joann Chia



certain to appeal to the young, and the young at heart

(information correct at time of print)

NUSSU Welfare Bash

The NUS Students' Union Welfare Bash Committee is set to bring the house down with a party themed "Out-Of-The-Blue".

The annual *NUSSU Welfare Bash* aims to raise funds for the NUSU diaries which are distributed to all NUS students. But this event, fortunately, is open to anybody looking for a good time – non-NUS students included.

On top of the usual clubbing activities, the line-up for the event includes games and lucky draws. The fun-filled activities coupled with the thrill of winning exciting prizes is reason enough to join in the revelry. But if that fails to lift your mood, the familiar good sounds at Zouk should placate you. All party-goers will receive a door gift, and doors open as early as 8pm.

Slated for 6 May, the *NUSSU Welfare Bash* is a timely event, for most of us will be done with examinations, and we'll need that boost to help us get in the mood for all those holiday activities.

6 May. 8pm until late. China Black. Tickets at \$15. To book, contact Harianto at 9035 1793. Tickets are also available at the door.

Shikin Ahmad



Party-goers at the NUS 2002 Welfare Bash



MODEL: Zul Hakim PHOTO: Chen Zilin ILLUSTRATIONS: Chen Zilin & Jonathan Leong

Hip Hop Galore



From MTV to street fashion to advertising jingles, hip hop smacks us in the face. Addictive beats and slammin' moves aside, **Shikin Ahmad** looks beyond hip hop's controversial and explicit musical content to try and understand its influence here.

The profanity, hedonism and misogyny we hear in many hip hop songs are usually dismissed as part of the cool culture young people today emulate. But hip hop was not always like that. Says 22-year-old Imran Aiman, "Early hip hop songs were not explicit [in content] at all. One example is *Rappers' Delight* by the Sugar Hill Gang which is simply a party song. But because of competition [from within the culture], rappers saw the need to address social issues like racism and drug abuse. [There] were those [who were] proud to be gangsters, drug abusers, pimps and stuff like that. So they wrote songs about these issues."

Imran's involvement in the local hip hop scene started when he was 16. He was the only Rhythm & Blues (R&B) singer at *Rhythm and Poetry*, the first local hip hop gig in 1999, and he has since produced his debut album, *Safety Measures*. According to him, there are two sides to hip hop music. On one side are those who produce songs that are message-driven and on the other are those who simply want to have fun.

"Everything then became hip hop because of commercialisation. The 'good' and 'bad' artists continued producing songs of their own agenda," he continued. Thanks to this commercialisation, songs about positive things were soon greatly outnumbered and trashy explicit lyrics became the norm for hip hop artists. In his own songs, however, Imran talks about issues close to him like family, friends, love and the Malay community.

Another player in the local hip hop scene is 21-year-old Lady E, whose real name is Emma Sazimah. A female rapper who has been making music for the past three years, she has a self-produced album, *Rewind Forward*, an instrumental that showcases only her turntable scratching skills. "Rewind Forward is just a demo. I'm writing songs at the moment. Most of my songs are about things I feel strongly about like life as a teenager, relationships and equality for women," says Lady E, explaining that rap lyrics are reflective of an

artiste's background. Hip hop, in fact, started out as something positive in America as an outlet for African-Americans to showcase their talents and compete creatively.

Roots of hip hop culture

The hip hop culture originated in the Bronx, New York City, during the late 1960s. It comprises of four distinct elements of break dancing, emceeing, graffiti painting and turntable scratching, a technique where deejays mix sounds from two records. The defining characteristic of the culture was then to compete creatively in a hip hop "battle". At a gathering, deejays would scratch the record turntable while break dancers hit the dance floor and emcees, better known as rappers, would battle it out with word play. Meanwhile, graffiti artists displayed their spray-painting skills.

The competition was healthy, capitalising on creativity. So it's ironic that hip hop today has negative associations. Back then, rappers churned out lyrics about issues that mattered, like self-improvement and social cohesiveness within the community.

The same thing can't be said for hip hop music today, where the controversially explicit lyrics are often masked by infectious tunes. We don't have to go far to be convinced of its popularity - switch on the radio and we hear hip hop songs; MTV frequently plays hip hop music videos, and even movies are made based on the lives of these hip hop stars.

Singapore, 2003

In Singapore, only edited versions of hip hop songs are played on national radio but this does not, in any way, help clean up the negative image. "Edited or not, you will get the idea of what they're singing about," says 20-year-old Faizah Sidek. Faizah, a final-year Visual Communication student at



"Rap is about reflection. It'll be better if the reflection we hear on radio comes closer to home."

- Lady E, rapper

Temasek Polytechnic, prefers drum and bass music. "I know hip hop started out as a positive thing but as time progresses, a lot of artists began singing for the sake of singing... Then you have the explicit lyrics about sex, drugs [and] women," Faizah suggests.

Like Faizah, Aloysius Tan, 17, is very much turned off by the lyrics in hip hop music. Aloysius, a soon-to-be LaSalle-SIA College of the Arts student, says, "This hip hop thing is very pretentious. It's about being cool and pretending to be who you are not... From the lyrics, you can say that hip hop is barbaric." Aloysius' main concerns are the use of "vulgar language" and the "terrible remarks about women. If hip hop is about being creative, then everyone who is vulgar or who hates women is very creative," he adds sarcastically.

Nineteen-year-old Liani Mohd, who frequents clubs that play hip hop music, is, however, not particular about the lyrics of hip hop songs. "I go to clubs to just dance and enjoy the music. I only pay attention to the chorus of the song because it's something I can sing to. Most of the time, I don't understand the rap part at all!" she exclaims. A final-year nursing student at Nanyang Polytechnic, Liani does not deny though that the lyrics of most R&B songs are explicit in many ways. "Most songs that I listen to contain sexually explicit lyrics but in the entertainment world, what sells more than sex?" she states, matter of factly.

Hip Hop Singapore

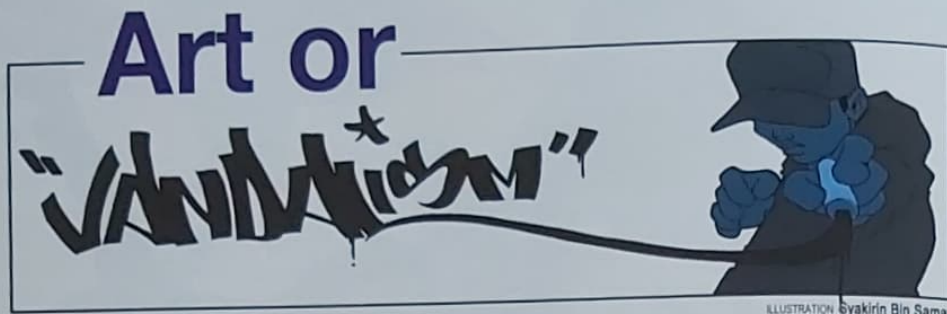
Reversing the public's negative opinion of hip hop is an almost impossible task. Many have unfortunately grown accustomed to the profanity, hedonism and misogyny glorified in rap. Packaged with catchy R&B tunes, rap has made its way to national radio, defining hip hop to listeners. "[Mainstream] radio stations do not play much local stuff... those who get airplay are

artists who are under government-funded projects like Sheikh Haikal who is with *Music and Movement* which is supported by the National Arts Council," says Imran. "The only radio station that plays local music is *Passion 99.5* but even then, it is not enough because nobody listens," adds Lady E.

If more attention is given to local hip hop artists, Lady E believes that hip hop will get the good name it deserves. Contrary to popular belief, local rappers do not rap about the negative issues their Western counterparts glorify. Popular Singaporean hip hop trio, *Triple Noize*, raps about personal experiences and issues like failures in life in their debut album, *From Where We Sit*. Reinforcing her point, Lady E says, "Rap is about reflection. It'll be better if the reflection we hear on radio comes closer to home."

Imran, on the other hand, feels that the onus is on local hip hop artists to not give up just because they're not receiving media coverage. "Hip hop [players] should buck up in order to be recognised," he says. Imran is dedicated to the local hip hop movement. He is the founder of *Sghiphop*, a prominent local hip hop website. "Hip hop artists must work for [recognition] because only then will they be able to change the situation," he adds.

The artistes say a progressive local scene and more media coverage will remedy the problem of hip hop's negative associations. In the meantime, however, they reflect on its "success" in the popular consciousness without the music.



P. Gaayathri goes underground and paints us a portrait of graffiti. Is it vandalism? Or is it art?

In Singapore, defacing public property lands one a \$2000 fine, a maximum of three years in jail and eight strokes of the cane. Whether writing or drawing on the walls of a piece of property is deemed "defacing", however is a matter for courts of law to decide. Graffiti in Singapore has slowly become accepted and has even made it to the limelight at events like the Singapore Street Festival. So while 'writers' do get paid for their art, they are also becoming more vocal in demanding attention.

"You can't stress it's an artform by keeping it underground," affirms 28-year-old Madzian B Endut. A 'writer' and founder of the urban art collective, Bring Da Paint, which regularly showcases graffiti works, Madzian believes non-commercialised graffiti can work against educating the masses about the art. By doing it illegally he argues, "You'll only prove them right that you are not an artist but just a common criminal."

Mohamed Rohaidi, 25, a 'writer' from the graffiti crew, Spray Two George, who adopts the tag (or pseudo names which 'writers' work under), "Locase", says graffiti is driven by passion. "For us, we 'writers' think it's a form of expression," highlights Rohaidi. "Maybe we're having problems with our family. So we create ourselves through graffiti."

Commercialisation versus Art

Graffiti represents a stylish independence, where 'writers' can credit their works as an identifiable piece on their own, similar to painters and composers. But the day 'writers' decide to bring it out of the underground and into the mainstream commercial world, don't they face the risk of having to be profit-driven, thereby losing the essence of the artform?

"Of course there are the corporate pigs who are just out to cash in on graffiti," says 22-year-old Muhd Sufian Hamri, cynically. Adopting the tag, "TraseOne" and a member of one of Singapore's largest graffiti crews, Operation Art Core (OAC), Sufian says "We've been pushing this art for years just trying to get people to appreciate but some do crappy tags and make t-shirts out of it, say it's graffiti and sell it." OAC, which has done graffiti backdrops for hip hop gigs in Indonesia and designs for popular Malaysian rap duo, Too Phat, in their music videos, was recently paid \$2000 to 'write' a 30m by 2.5m mural at the Esplanade - Theatres on the bay. Getting paid while living his passion, Sufian chirps, "is like extra loppings on your Mr Softee". However, being invited on several occasions to do commissioned works has landed Sufian some criticism.

"People think that I'm a 'sell out' because I've done a lot of works. But I don't think that way. It's not like I'm promoting myself or commercialising my works. People invite me to do the works," asserts Sufian.

The Feminine side

With graffiti gaining more acceptance, the local hip hop scene is seeing the emergence of female 'writers'. "There are many female writers there. Most of them are under a nick that you wouldn't guess was a girl's or they just tag their work as under their crew," says Siti Haszilah Hanafiah, 19, who tags herself as "Nyle". "Too much commercialisation makes the writers go for the money more than the art," she adds. Her graffiti was recently put up for a two-week display on the ramp at the skate park near the National Youth

Council (NYC), after which the ramp space was painted over to give other youths a fair chance to express their creativity as well.

Perceptions

Much of graffiti's commercialisation may be due to the vast amount of graffiti shops, both retail and online, which sell a wide array of goods for 'writing'. Over 25,000 graffiti sites are online with the majority of them being pro-graffiti - supporting graffiti without deeming it as a nuisance. Even though graffiti remains considered as vandalism in virtually every urban area of the world, 'writers' need a platform, "where everybody can practise their skills without having to keep watching over their shoulders", Madzian says. Locally, the NYC has been one of the key supporters of 'writers', allowing for much freedom to spray on designated spots and even organising graffiti competitions.

"Due to our events at NYC, some shops from some shopping centres now want 'writers' to design their walls", says Nadia Ahmad, 20, freelance event organiser for Youthopia, one of the departments under the NYC.

Shops like Hypno and Rastafari in Far East Plaza have graffiti backdrops for their shutters. The newly opened Level One at Far East Plaza and The Annex at Heeren shopping centre, both have graffiti backdrops adorning their walls too.

Priscilla Goh, 24, Senior Executive of Hub Services from NYC, perceives graffiti as a trend in hip hop and says NYC wants to appeal to youths with hip hop interests. "People still view it [graffiti] as illegal but only when it's done on public property instead of authorised venues. We allow it on the right places. When there are more events, there will be more avenues for exposure and in turn more ways for youths to participate," Priscilla describes.

While Nadia and Priscilla praise graffiti, Rohaidi remains sceptical about the public's perception. "It's hard to change mindsets," he laments. They think this is all just a bunch of nonsense."

Similarly Madzian acknowledges that the public has mixed reactions regarding graffiti. "We have controversial plays that are art to some but blasphemous or pornographic to others. That's how it's been with graffiti. Some say it's art while some just dismiss it as vandalism."

Amriq Ali, 19, a student at the Construction Industry Training Institute (CITI), vehemently addresses several issues which dismiss graffiti as hazardous. "First it's not environmental friendly. It's harmful inhaling the aerosol sprays used for graffiti. And besides that, graffiti is hard to comprehend, so it puts me off. I can't just stand there trying to understand it," Amriq complains.

He is also quick to add that graffiti might be a bad influence. Amriq's concern is that "when people do not have the means to do graffiti legally, they resort to public property. When that happens and kids see it, they will follow in their footsteps too".

Graffiti may still have many negative connotations. Whatever the perception of graffiti, one thing remains clear - that 'writers' in Singapore must ensure the ongoing progression of graffiti in a legal way while educating the public at the same time.

The Green Light for Red Light

Lydia Shi tackles one of the thorniest issues in conservative Singapore - prostitution.

A big burly pimp guards his own brothel amongst others which are housed in typical terrace houses in the Red Light District (RLD) in Geylang. Is this possible in Singapore? For a country that bans chewing gum and fines people for not flushing toilets, it is hard to picture the sex trade as a legal activity.

According to the Women's Charter, prostitution is the "act of a female offering her body for promiscuous sexual intercourse for hire, whether in money or in kind". The issue of prostitution is one that divides many - not all even agree on the status of the "services" being offered in this country.

For example, Dr Leong Wai Teng, from the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore (NUS) while declining to comment on this issue, did say over the telephone, "Prostitution is not illegal here."

Contradicting this statement, however, is Miss Low Hui Peng of the Business Statistics Division at the Singapore Department of Statistics. Responding to hype's enquiry with an email, she states that "prostitution is not legalised in Singapore".

Also, due to the sensitivity of this issue, many people like Mr Narayanan Ganapathy, a sociologist at NUS, are simply reluctant to comment.

To set the record straight, prostitution is indeed tolerated in Singapore. For a start, there is nothing in Singapore law that states otherwise. The sex trade is confined to certain districts where prostitutes are housed in brothels.

Mr Koh Hong Bin, 23, a Crime Prevention Officer with the Singapore Police Force confirms this, "It's legal as long as it's inside the brothel." He adds, "It's just a living for these girls but if they solicit outside, then we'll have to take them back to the station."

Some are puzzled and furious over the government's decision to tolerate the sex trade.

"It's wrong!" Mr Andrew Kong, 45, a senior executive at the Family Life Society insists. "Prostitution encourages people to instrumentalise a woman's body...and treat her like an object."

Irene Sng, 24, a Banking and Finance Studies student from Ngee Ann Polytechnic also believes that prostitution shouldn't be legalised because it's morally wrong. Unknown to many, the government did try to clamp down on the sex trade when Singapore gained independence. Associate Professor Ong Jin Hui, with the Department of Sociology in NUS, writes in *Prostitution: An International Handbook on Trends, Problems and Policies* that the government had an "anti-yellow culture" campaign that attempted to get rid of prostitution, which was considered "morally and socially offensive". However, the writer noted that the campaign failed with brothel owners moving out of established RLD areas to residential areas in a bid to escape from the "constant raids and harassment" by the police.

In order to curb widespread prostitution before it got out of hand, the government had to soften its stand and change its policy. Singapore now administers "soft enforcement", which another writer of the same book, Nanette J. Davis, says is "surveillance, containment, tolerance" and warning. This ensures prostitution is confined to certain areas and makes it easier for law enforcers to check on brothels for illegal activities.

Mr Koh explains that the police would usually raid a brothel after they receive a tip-off, which can be for drugs, under-aged sex workers or illegal immigrants.

Most Singaporeans feel prostitution is immoral but they also admit that it is indispensable to society.

Retiree Max Tan, in his late 60s, argues, "They've to do it. Whether it's open or not, there'll always be prostitution. If not, young women will be raped."

Others feel that tolerating the trade benefits both the sex workers and their customers. National Serviceman Calvin Gan, 19, who admits to frequenting brothels, confesses he feels safer knowing that the practice is seen to be legal.

Others feel this way too. "It's kind of a service to the public."

Lawrence Loh, 23, another National Serviceman says, "Of course, it's not a good thing but some people need this kind of service, so now they know where's safe to go."

Pat Tan, in her 50s, with a friend working in a brothel divulges, "It's good for the girls when it's legalised. They'll be going for check-ups, so it's safer for the customers also."

She also believes that it reduces exploitation of prostitutes by pimps. In fact, under Section 146 of the Women's Charter, sex workers are also protected from pimps who may try to control or exploit the prostitutes under his or her charge.

However, when hype checked with several brothel owners on the benefits that prostitutes receive, all refused to comment, though one said that they've been sworn to secrecy by the Criminal Investigation Department.

One prostitute at Flanders Square, however, did tell hype that prostitutes do not have to worry about police raids on their activities, as "they're under the Anti-Vice".

Additionally, a former National Service police officer with the Media Corporation Division at the Ministry of Home Affairs, who declined to be named, says brothels need to apply for permits that are renewed annually by the police. Thus, they need to follow the rules or risk getting their permits revoked. Sex workers are also required to go for regular check-ups to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. According to the prostitute at Flanders Square, prostitutes are required to go for AIDS checks every three months, Hepatitis B checks every two years and a general check-up every four weeks.

Yet, some are still less forgiving even after weighing the pros and cons of tolerating the sex trade. Daniel Yap, 24, a final-year Mass Communication student in Ngee Ann Polytechnic feels that although prostitution is believed to help reduce sexual crimes, its "ill effects far outweigh" its so-called benefits.

Residents in the RLD area maintain that although the situation is under control, it's still very "inconvenient" at times.

Terence Teo, 20, a resident of Camellia Lodge at Geylang Lorong 31 agrees sexual crimes will probably increase without prostitution being tolerated in Singapore. However, he adds, "It still affects us as the land value dropped drastically." And even though the Teos are three streets away from the RLD area, Terence is still very concerned about his sister's safety and makes it a point to accompany her home late at night.

While some feel that the tolerance of prostitution is justifiable, others find it morally degrading and absolutely unacceptable. Ultimately, the onus is on the individual - as with all laws in all countries, there will always be proponents and opponents of any given legislation. Legalised abortion has its supporters and detractors. Legalised euthanasia has people up in arms, for or against it. Why should the controversial issue of prostitution be any different?

"Of course, it's not a good thing but some people need this kind of service, so now they know where's safe to go."

- Lawrence Loh, NSman

NOT A TALENT QUEST

Television viewers have shown an increasing appetite for local dramas on TV. But these are sometimes so unrealistic, they cause much displeasure, or even dismay, in the represented group. Shikin Ahmad investigates.

The drama series, *Spin*, was notorious for portraying Singaporean polytechnic life in an unfavourable light a few years ago. Today we have *Light Years*, another series tackling the same topic but with a different approach. "The issues that we focus on in *Light Years* may not be as dramatic as that in *Spin* but *Light Years* shows the dynamics of life in polytechnic," says Dennis Hang, 21, who plays Isaac in *Light Years*. Dennis is a final-year Early Childhood Education student at Ngee Ann Polytechnic.

Spin focused more on issues such as peer pressure and the desire to fit in. "*Spin* was too dramatic and unrealistic," says 18-year-old Yvonne Felix. "I have friends in poly and their lives are not like that!" she adds. Yvonne who holds a diploma in Information Technology explained that in episodes of *Spin* that she watched, the characters were always involved in relationship problems. Very little was shown about the academic struggles of polytechnic students.

Florence Thomas, a second-year Consumer Science and Technology student at Temasek Polytechnic, echoes this viewpoint. "Issues in *Spin* were like those in *Moulinex High*, minus the uniform. Those are stuff a 16-year-old experiences. It is definitely not a fair representation of poly students." Florence also noticed that most of the characters were supposedly Mass Communication students. "If they want to show Mass Comm students, at least show what they do... like filming for projects or something," she added. She reasoned that by doing so, prospective polytechnic students would have a better picture of polytechnic life.

Spin ultimately gained more criticism than praise for its efforts. *Light Years* hopes to be different, engaging a lighter approach by focusing on beginnings, according to Dennis. "The emphasis in *Light Years* is on the transition from secondary school to polytechnic. It is something all poly students go through and can relate to," he says. His character, Isaac, comes from a broken home and has to work part-time to see himself through school. Dennis' character is realistic because there are students who have similar backgrounds. "Isaac is insensitive, probably because of his background."

And throughout the series, we will see how this affects his relationship with others," Dennis adds.

Rosalind Pho, 20, a final-year Mass Communication student at Ngee Ann Polytechnic, agrees. Rosalind plays the materialistic Elle who will do anything to be with the "in" crowd. "Elle comes from a complicated background, having a choice either to stay with her rich mother or poor father. She acts like a rich girl and splurges on stuff she cannot afford. Elle will go to the extent of [sacrificing] friendship. Just to be in," reveals Rosalind. "*Light Years* is really a lighter approach focusing on freshmen days. Stuff like trying to fit in, making new friends... skipping classes." Both Dennis and Rosalind say that the nature of *Light Years* is evident in the title itself. "*Light Years* is a half-hour drama. There's

not much you can explore, given the time span," says Dennis. With a fresher approach and a specified target group of prospective polytechnic students, they're both confident that *Light Years* will work.

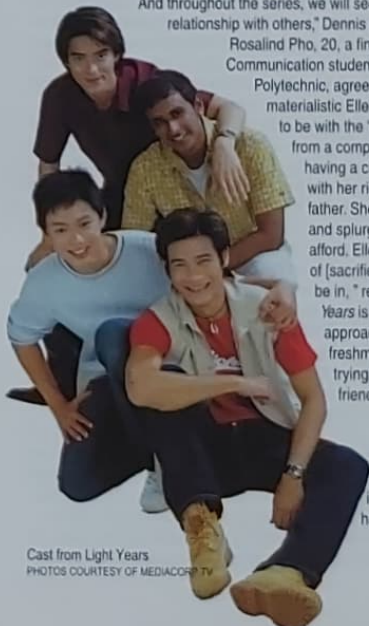
Pauline Yu, manager for programme development at MediaCorp Studios, holds the same thought. "The issues we bring up in *Light Years* are more concrete. And I think we do have a definitive audience. *Light Years* is shown over prime time. Besides prospective polytechnic students, we are also targeting the family audience," she explains. "We have a team of experienced writers and directors for *Light Years*. These people know what works and what doesn't in storytelling."

Apart from *Light Years*, MediaCorp Studios has also commissioned other local dramas like *Spin*, *Moulinex High* and *First Touch*. The reason behind negative responses towards *Spin*, according to her, could be that it was one of MediaCorp's first few projects. Pauline doesn't deny that *Spin* did focus more on the "social lives of polytechnic students". She adds, "In a way, *Light Years* is more realistic because the issues brought out are relevant. Some issues explored are peer pressure, the decision to go JC or Poly and also family issues such as retrenchment in the family." She cites Melissa, another character in *Light Years*, who is denied financial support by her family as an example. Melissa has to work part-time to pay for her fees in polytechnic and her father relents when he sees the hardship she experiences.

Television portrayal versus reality is sometimes very apparent to television viewers. Secondary Four students Fiona Low and Shareena Siraj from Tanjong Katong Girls' School are not dissuaded by what they see on television. "Poly students are well-rounded and they dare to be different by choosing not to go to JC," says Fiona. They are convinced that television programmes, *Spin* and *Light Years* included, are mere entertainment and should not be taken seriously.

Others like Nur Ayuni Zainal Abidin, 19, who is studying for a Higher National Institute of Technical Education Certificate in Administration at ITE (Bishan), disagrees. To her, television portrayals do affect one's perception. "Before *Spin*, I already have a negative impression of poly students as being stuck up. Although *Spin* showed a totally opposite picture of poly life, it did [reinforce] my perception of poly students," says Nur Ayuni. After watching *Spin*, she became more convinced that polytechnic students are a condescending lot.

Whether television series portray life realistically or not, Singaporean producers are clearly trying different approaches to win audiences, if not to influence people's opinions.



Cast from *Light Years*
PHOTOS COURTESY OF MEDIACORP TV



X'ho is this?

Chris Ho's epitaph would read: "I'm not buried in Singapore, I hope. If I am, please dig me out!" This cult personality stands up for what he believes in, most of the time raising eyebrows with his "no-holds-barred" comments on peaceful Singapore. Shikin Ahmad spends some time with this controversial figure.

Chris Ho has two sides to him. "I've got a bit of that split personality for real. In other words, there is that obedient C-H-R-I-S Chris Ho and there is that 'Why-should-I-stand-for-all-this-nonsense?' X'Ho," says Chris. He owes his "pop-rebel status" to rock-and-roll music. "I came out at that time when people into rock-and-roll were giving up the rock-and-roll dreams...to become family men. The whole belief in rock-and-roll was a form of ethos, to me. But back in those days people were really scared of rock. They thought that rock is drug culture, subversive [and about] youth rebellion. I stood up for it and I think they always had reservations about me because of that. Maybe that passion and supposed dare caught people's attention," he continues. "I think it has a lot to do with 'you being the only person doing it at that time'. Can you believe nobody wants to sit and wait for Mick Jagger in the hotel, at that time, except for me and one Straits Times editor?"

The Singaporean Identity

That was him then in the early 1980s. Today, Chris Ho is a radio deejay, musician, music critic and still the rebel. But for one with the zeal to do so much, his energy level dips slightly on the subject of the Singaporean identity. With eyes fixed on the floor and hands clasped together, he says it is very sad to talk about Singaporeans. "I feel that Singaporeans as a people are very covered in fear... You sit in the bus, you sit on the MRT, everybody looks so scared or they'd look so indignant. We've lost that sense of dignity and we don't even know we have lost it." In a solemn tone, he continues, "We have substituted dignity with arrogance. We're just a bunch of arrogant people."

He attributes this arrogance to the infringement of rights that makes Singaporeans question their worth. "When you're dignified and you have that sense of dignity, you don't need to question your worth. That's the thing I see about people in other countries. They feel like, 'I'm worthy to be here because I am a native of this country'. But I don't see that in Singaporeans. They're constantly fighting for their worth to be a Singaporean. That to me is a Singaporean identity." And then, with a dash of sarcasm, he adds, "Of course, on the surface, you get the masked, whitewashed picture that 'Oh everybody is so happy as a Singaporean. Look at us on Channel 5 and Channel 8! Wow, we're groovy, funky, hip and swinging!'"

The mainstream media

In one of his essays from the *X'Ho Files*, a regular section in *BigO* magazine, Chris described the Singapore mainstream media as a "people-loving press. You're supposed to understand that all that is double-speak!" he squirms at the quoted phrase. "[The mainstream media] is very obedient, don't you think? From a personal standpoint, I think they function almost like a newsletter from the government." So, the media is as good as propaganda to him. Do we then have another outlet? An alternative culture? "Yeah, but every time it comes up, they tried to kill it!" he chips in, between roaring laughter.

"Ten years ago, we used to have this wonderful weekly [rock-and-roll] concerts at the Substation. It was great and I would go every weekend. And then suddenly it was all stopped. Why? Because the kids moshed and slammed... The New Paper blew it up, out of concern for people's safety of course, and next thing you know it's banned." Chris explains further, "And the way [they] ban things is not just like 'ban-ban'. They ban and they made sure it is an effective ban." Surprisingly however, Chris asserts that he belongs neither in the mainstream nor the alternative culture. He is "fringed" with "one leg in both", he says. And it is this "fringed" person who continues to stir seemingly calm waters with his criticism of Singapore's popular culture.

What full-time job?

A radio deejay, musician and pop critic, Chris claims he "never had a full-time job" and he was "never a careerist".

"I got into each and every one of them by chance," he explains, "[and] my real vocation is being a music fan." Chris auditioned to become a deejay for Rediffusion and he got the part because they needed part-timers, kick-starting his career as a radio deejay. At present, he deejays for Rediffusion, Radio Singapore International (RSI) and Passion 99.5, all on a part-time basis. "Being a deejay offers me the platform to expose the kind of music I like. I see it pointless just following a playlist but of course we all have to pay our dues [and] follow the rules," Chris adds. He also deejays in clubs like The Liquid Room and The Sound Bar, where he gets the chance to actually meet people. "For years and years, you just do it by yourself in the studio and you closed out. I'm a part-timer and I don't do all the road shows for them or even go out and do promotions. This is my chance to meet people," he says.

Being a vocalist in a band allows him to express himself. Back then in the 80s, Chris was in Zircon Lounge, the first new wave punk group in Singapore, and today, he is in the process of reforming the band. "We're recording an album at the moment with the original members of Zircon Lounge and a new female singer. We hope to finish this by end of April. And we're targeting this for the European market under a new name, Zircon Government Pawn Stars," explains Chris. And if you think he's tired, Chris "stretches his limits" and expresses himself, yet again, through a critical approach in his writings. "I [did] English Literature in the university and I've always liked that critical faculty... reading about music from a critical point of view... critical in a sense of being appreciative of an artist's work," he adds. As a writer, Chris started off as a music critic with The Straits Times when he was offered a job, by the same editor who waited with him for Mick Jagger. And a writer he is.

Besides his regular *Pop Life* column every other Friday in Straits Times *Life!*, Chris has published two books. His first book *Skew Me, You Rebel Me!* touched on the "Singapore and Singaporeans" issue. Clarissa Oon described Chris' first book as "[r]ambling, self-indulgent, but always the prickly alternative voice in a sea of media" in Straits Times *Life!* on December 19, 1998. "The earlier essays had a lot more about pop culture but as it went on, it was

really about griping about the system here, the whole socio-cultural and a little bit of political system as well," he explains. That was how *Attack of the S.M. Space Encroachers*, Chris's second book, came about. S.M. refers to *sng muay*, which is sour grapes in Hokkien.

A Singaporean Hypocrisy

Essays in *Skew Me, You Rebel Me!*, as *BigO Magazine* puts it, were fuelled "by a passionate sense of outrage at hypocrisy and double standards". Chris explodes in laughter when asked to elaborate on "hypocrisy and double standards". He cites the proliferation of gay saunas in Singapore as an example. Homosexuality is a crime in Singapore, even between two consenting adults. "Don't, for a minute, kid ourselves that [the authorities] don't know. They know but they just let it run now. So, isn't it very jarring? I mean on the one hand, you talk about upholding these family values and you have this law against homosexuality. And then on the other hand, you now allow these gay saunas to thrive," he rages. "Singapore is all about being a business centre. The whole culture, the whole system is all about doing business." The hypocrisy, as he puts it, extends to Singapore proclaiming Renaissance to provide cultural ballast. "There's no real love for culture and the arts. Everything about love for culture and the arts, in terms of promotion, is to gear ourselves to being a better business centre," he adds.

Why so much about Singapore?

This man is angry and he has a whole lot to say about Singapore. Ignorance is not bliss for him. This, he reasons, has a lot to do with his personality. "I'm a very confrontational person. I don't like to brush things under the carpet. If there's a problem, I want to deal with it," he explains, "On top of that, I'm always analysing. Sometimes I analyse to a fault!"

He also reveals that he had a "very bad childhood and a horrible background", which somehow explains why he wants to "make right what is wrong" and understand good from bad and right from wrong. "I live here and I have to deal with Singaporeans. That's why I'm constantly analysing and I suppose that's the reason why I tend to be more sensitive and sensitised to the Singapore issues than other people," he says.

Singaporeans, according to him, are being "bullied" and because of that, we get so ruffled up that we lose our sense of goodness. Quoting from a Joni Mitchell song, Chris explains, "I can't find my goodness because I've lost my heart." It's exactly what it is. When you feel that something good has been taken away from you, or that you're made to be angry, you can't be good to someone else. I get this feeling that Singaporeans love to bully another Singaporean all the time. They can't wait for another Singaporean to fall into the drain and then they go 'Oh you poor thing!' There's this sense of non-civility."

The only good out of Singapore, to Chris, lies in the hypocrisy itself. He thinks that Singapore is a great place to work in since the whole system is "geared towards being a business and commerce centre".



PHOTO COURTESY OF CHRIS HO

Rebel aside

His "pop-culture rebel status" aside, Chris declares, "Oh, I'm a really nice guy!", upon which laughter echoes across the dingy guest room of the Rediffusion office. "I think at the moment, a lot of what I do is related to that deep-seated anger about the whole system here. So I think people have this misconception that I'm just a very angry person. But people who have heard me on Perfect 10 know that I'm a sweet-smiling, 'choco-monster' kind of guy and that's also very me. At the end of the day, I'm actually just a very obedient little mummy's boy," Chris continues.

A confessed shopaholic, Chris is also very hooked on the Internet. He bashfully admits, "I even go shopping on the Internet. I love shopping! I'm such a good shopper. I can just go with anybody... an old auntie, a grandmother. I'll help her shop as well! There's nothing I'd want to buy but I'll go 'Oh maybe this colour is good for you!' I'm really good at that."

The Future

Besides reforming Zircon Lounge, Chris has a couple of projects up his sleeve. These include designing his own line of T-Shirts and making a movie about Singapore, for which he has already written a screenplay. Yet, he claims he's not an ambitious person. "It's more a matter of getting my creative juices flowing and making myself feel happy. How far can a 'fringed' person go, right? You know what the mainstream market is like. They're not going to open their arms to me. So for me, it's just doing my own little thing and making myself happy," he explains.

A lot has changed in the last ten years, Chris says. "To think that my book would have been published 10 years ago, it was crazy! To think that Allan Saad's *One Fierce Hour* would have been published 10 years ago... Jack Neo's *I Not Stupid* could have been filmed 10 years ago is unthinkable as well! Future is going to be a lot better... we're encouraged to be creative and enterprising. Even though, of course, they're encouraging it in the usual regimented Singapore way," he says. But ask where he'll be 10 years from now, he quips, "I hope I won't be in Singapore!" Why has he never left in the first place? "I'm still getting myself ready for that transition. The ultimate goal is to work my way towards Thailand," he says. And why Thailand? "It's everything opposite of Singapore! We're regimented, they're chaotic... Thailand really represents the escape for frustrated Singaporeans," he adds.

Dissecting Chris Ho's mind is no easy task. He is one who says what he means and means what he says – a virtue not everybody can accept here in Singapore. But at the end of the day, Chris Ho's satisfaction lies in doing what he truly believes in. That includes his attempt to make Singaporeans realise that they don't have to be afraid. Chris Ho is one person who sees through the bluff. He will not close an eye. And then they call him a rebel.

Katie.com by Katherine Tarbox

Thirteen-year-old Katie Tarbox was just like any other teenager growing up in a typical town with a typical family. A member of the school swim team and the choral group, she was the picture of normalcy.

She dealt with the everyday woes of not knowing what to wear, and wondering if she would ever look as pretty as the cover girls on magazines. "I was really obsessed with my appearance, my status, with fitting in," Tarbox writes.

Her life took an extraordinary turn, however, when she fell victim to the first online paedophile who went on trial under US federal law. *Katie.com* is her autobiography written four years after she was molested in a Texan hotel room. The now 17-year-old Tarbox details how she started chatting with 23-year-old "Mark", how she fell in love and agreed to see him while her swim team was in Texas, how she was attacked and realised that "Mark" was a 41-year-old paedophile, and the events of the trial that took place thereafter.

Tarbox paints vivid pictures of her emotional turmoil as she was swept into deeper waters each day while surfing the Internet.



Her words flow smoothly, and are easily understood, making *Katie.com* an effortless read whilst raising deeper issues. Telling the story as her 13-year-old self, she manages to capture readers with her personal and intimate style of writing.

Tarbox's story highlights the dangers of Internet chatting, and shows how easy it is for people, especially teenagers, to get hooked to the virtual world. It serves as a shocking warning to people that paedophilia can thrive on the Internet.

Frank Kufrovich, the 41-year-old "Mark", was eventually jailed for 18 months, but the guilt and shame that Tarbox went through probably left a nasty scar, for life.

The Internet remains a controversial, but integral, part of our modern day lives. While some people claim that Internet chatting is perfectly safe as long as the individual is sure of what he or she is doing, it is probably better to be safe than sorry.

Tarbox includes some useful information at the end of her book along with a list of "suggestions for protecting your child while on-line" obtained from the FBI and the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children. She has also listed nine Internet sites that filter out non-child-safe sites.

Available at Borders at \$23.50.

Sharon Wong

Porno by Irvine Welsh

With its title in bold letters and an image of an inflatable sex doll on the cover, this is one hard-to-miss book. Irvine Welsh's *Porno* returns the reader to the controversial world of drugs, sex, violence and lost hope first met in his acclaimed novel, *Trainspotting*. After 10 years, this latest effort reunites Simon 'Sick Boy' Renton, Begbie and Spud. Lead character, Simon, decides to try his hand at producing a "film in the pornographic genre" after having failed as a father, husband, pimp and businessman in *Trainspotting*.

A new addition, Nikki, a university student-cum-masseuse, joins the friends as the would-be porn star in their film-making journey. "I want to be a porn star. I want to have men masturbating to images of me," states Nikki, hiding her insecurities behind a veil of ignoble ambitions and audacity.

Sub-plots include the long-time rivalry between Begbie and Renton, and Spud's attempts to write a story about his hometown.

Like *Trainspotting*, the thick Scottish lingo and syntax makes reading challenging and leaves you either hating or loving the book after the first few chapters. Don't be surprised if you find yourself attempting the dialogue out loud to figure out its meaning. Phrases like, "En's gaunnae be working wi me" and "what dae ye mean?" will have you giving up



and saying, "that's the way it goes".

Unlike *Trainspotting*, there isn't a glossary where you can translate the Scottish words into everyday language. You just have to accept this strong accent as it brings out the colourful personalities of the characters.

It's a disturbing book filled with controversial issues. Although they clearly know drugs "blow holes in your brain, rob you of your memories, your past", the gang still indulges, just to find themselves "depleting [their] spiritual, mental and physical resources".

The use of explicit headings in this piece of modern fiction seems to glorify Begbie and Simon's sexual escapades. Headings like 'killer cystitis' and 'sex monsters' are disturbing and one might ask whether the author exploits our very human penchant for sleaze, scandal and violence just to capture an audience.

Although *Porno* serves as a successful sequel by compelling the reader to empathise with the characters' harsh, bleak circumstances, it would be refreshing if Welsh employed less of the 'shock factor' to entice readers into his world.

Available at Borders at \$29.85.

Dawn Ong

hype picks out the best books for an

Dress Codes by Noelle Howey

It has been very much the vogue to moan about our dysfunctional families, how messed up they are and how they make us cry. Reading Noelle Howey's *Dress Codes: Of Three Girlhoods - My Mother's, My Father's, and Mine*, however, is enough to shut us up. In this tender memoir, Noelle details not one life, but three - that of her transsexual father, her struggling mother and her own coming to terms with her femininity.

Growing up, Noelle never shared an affectionate moment with her father. Distant and disconcerted, Dick Howey did not know how to express his love for his daughter or how to be a father figure. Most comfortable in dresses and make-up, Dick knew he wanted to be a girl since the age of five. In his notebook, he would scribble the letters that soothed him. "I W.T.B.A.G. I W.T.B.A.G. I want to be a girl".

In *Dress Codes*, Howey details the pain and emotional struggle transsexuals go through, including social ostracism and their families' non-acceptance.

Noelle's mother, Dinah Howey, experienced a second girlhood when she re-discovered her sexuality after Dick left. *Dress Codes* tells of Dinah growing up, dating and marrying Dick. Dealing with a husband who cross-dressed and who eventually underwent a sex-change operation made life for Dinah excruciatingly painful.

It was when Noelle was 14 that she finally discovered the truth about her

father. While buying a pair of jeans that Noelle wanted, her mother blurted out, "Your dad likes to wear women's clothes". Instead of feeling humiliated by the revelation, Noelle was relieved, as she felt that "there's no news like hearing irrefutable proof that you're not the sole cause of your parents' woes, your father's drinking, your unshakeable feeling that you're not quite right and finding out the problem all along was your father's unrequited yearning for angora".

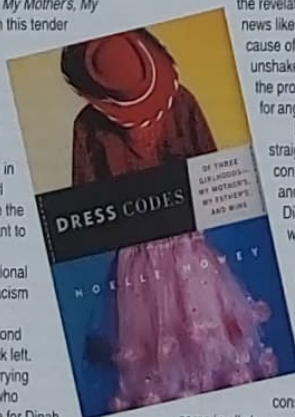
Noelle Howey's writing is self-deprecating and straightforward. While some prefer to hush up such controversial secrets, Howey is not afraid to show and tell and allows readers into the difficult worlds of a young Dick, who struggles with his own sexuality, and a child who struggles to grow up with a transsexual father.

Dress Codes, fortunately, is not a self-pity memoir. Noelle Howey has a remarkable way of drawing pictures in readers' minds. Her prose displays edgy humour with amazing sensitivity. As the Howeys grow to accept and love each other after their respective second girlhoods, reading *Dress Codes* challenges our beliefs in what constitutes a family and reminds us that good families

come in all shapes and sizes.

Available at Borders at \$42.49.

Ng Yi Lian



engrossing date with a couch and some hot chocolate

Portrait of a Killer by Patricia Cornwell

Rip your hearts out. In her first published non-fiction work, American crime novelist Patricia Cornwell plays modern-day Sherlock Holmes by employing both the scrupulous research and scientific knowledge she's well known for, and announces her verdict on the world's most infamous whodunnit case: Jack the Ripper.

World-famous British post-impressionist painter Walter Sickert, she claims, is the notorious black-coated serial killer who raped and murdered women in London in the 1880s. Cornwell told US TV personality Diane Sawyer, "That is so serious to me that I am staking my reputation on this."

"Because if somebody literally proves me wrong, not only will I feel horrible about it, but I will look terrible."

Investing a hefty six million dollars, Cornwell purchased some 30 Sickert paintings, 55 letters, hired forensic experts and even bought over the great artist's writing desk.

In *Portrait Of A Killer: Jack the Ripper - Case Closed*, Cornwell of the award-winning Scarpetta crime series (*The Last Precinct*), painstakingly draws many comparisons, if not assumptions from Sickert's disturbing paintings of women in near-dead or tortured set-ups.

Riveting too, is Cornwell's evidence of a Ripper letter, which "yielded a single-donor mitochondrial DNA sequence, specific enough to eliminate 99% of the population as the person who licked and touched the

adhesive backing of that stamp". The result? A match of Walter Sickert's letter with that of Jack the Ripper's. The watermarks on Ripper's letters also matched that of Walter Sickert's papers.

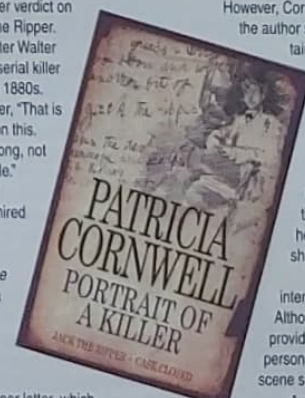
However, Cornwell falls short of hard facts and evidence. In one excerpt, the author says, "No doubt there will always be sceptics and critics tainted by self-interest who will refuse to accept that Sickert was a serial killer, a damaged, diabolical man driven by megalomania and hate. There will be those who will argue that it's all coincidence." Later she quotes FBI profiler, Ed Sulzbach, who suggests that it is just "plain stupid" to "call it coincidence after coincidence".

What she deliberately leaves out of the picture is that watermarks of these letters were widely available in those times. Suffice to say, Cornwell seems to be a little apprehensive of her ability to persuade readers to believe in what she claims to be a "case closed".

Where Cornwell fails to live up to her reputation as an intensive investigator, she makes up with a wealth of research. Although occasionally disjointed and confusing, she has provided a suspenseful page-turner. Cornwell's engaging first person narrative brings us back to the 1880s, straight into a crime scene so vivid that you'll be forgiven your delusions.

Available at Borders at \$29.40.

Agnes Teh



Straight from the Heart

No time? Don't want to meddle? Think again, as volunteering is about rising above all of that. It is dedication and responsibility. Ng Yilian speaks to three women who know it well.



ILLUSTRATIONS Sue-Ann Woo

The popular perception is that volunteering is all about visiting old folks' homes or signing up for flag days to earn CCA points. Often, we find ourselves offering the same tried-and-tested excuses for not volunteering, but three avid volunteers of different ages, races and occupations, are strong advocates to change that. Their message – that volunteering can be fun and beneficial, not just for the needy but for the volunteers themselves.

Soon Lishan, 22, Student

Soon Lishan is a third-year student at the School of Information and Communication Studies at Nanyang Technological University (NTU). She has been an active volunteer since she was 17 when she was in the Youth Executive Committee (YEC) in her community centre.

"Volunteering came very naturally to me because since I was young, my family has always been very active in volunteering," Lishan says.

She is actually busier than some working executives. This vivacious young lady juggles not just school and volunteering, she is also a varsity player with NTU's softball team and a trained lifeguard with NTU's Lifeguard Corps. She also sits on the committees of the YEC and the NTU's Rotaract Club.

"I guess it's all about time management," Lishan says. "Once you have set a schedule which you adhere to strictly, there shouldn't be a problem juggling active volunteering with school and other activities."

"However, you also need to have self-discipline and not get tempted by friends' invitations to parties that clash with your earlier commitments," Lishan advises.

She recalls, "The first time I took the lead as a volunteer was when I was 17. I was a chaperone for a group of 10-odd secondary one and two NCC cadets and their teachers. It was an 18-day trip to Nepal. For seven days, we climbed around a mountain and visited elementary schools and high schools,

which are located near the mountainside. We gave out stationery, books and money."

"It was a huge responsibility for me because I was only 17 then and I was looking after students just three or four years younger than me. I was very doubtful of myself and I often thought whether I was really capable of doing that. But when I saw the needy children's faces brighten up and smile when they saw us, I knew everything was worth it."

"It really is nothing noble. That's the problem, you see. Most people are mistaken about volunteerism. They think it's all about helping the needy and as volunteers, they think that they won't benefit in any way. But in fact, it is very rewarding."

- Soon Lishan, Student

While most of us relish spending our free time in our rooms, flipping glossy magazines or going to shopping malls or cinemas with friends, Lishan is most happy when she is volunteering.

"I don't see volunteering as an obligation. It has become my hobby," Lishan says. "It really is nothing noble. That's the problem, you see. Most people are mistaken about volunteerism. They think it's all about helping the needy and as volunteers, they think that they won't benefit in any way. But in fact, it is very rewarding. I know it sounds quite cheesy but whenever I see people enjoying the fruits of my labour, I can't help but get this warm and fuzzy feeling inside me. Nothing beats this feeling and satisfaction."

As for the perception that volunteering is only about visiting old folks' homes, Lishan says, "It's not true. Volunteerism comes in all forms. You can be a member of your school's rock-climbing team and still form a volunteering project. You don't have to be part of a volunteerism committee."

"For example, you can rope in sponsors and members of other clubs in your school and organise a fun fair. Profits of the event can go to a non-profit organisation and that is volunteerism too!"

"I hope to be able to spread the joy of volunteering. I don't want to just volunteer, I want to promote volunteerism!" Lishan says excitedly.

Eunice Olsen, 25, MediaCorp Artiste

Contrary to her presenter's role as the Singaporean version of Vanna White in Wheel Of Fortune Singapore, Eunice Olsen is very chatty and approachable.

"I'm a very *kaypo* person and I think that's what makes me a good volunteer!" Eunice exclaims. A political science graduate from the National University of Singapore, she reassures you that she is not all about looking good and glamorous. "Really! I'm serious! It's because I like to listen to people, like to ask people questions about themselves and in that sense, that makes me a good listener."

You may think that party invitations pour in for Eunice, who won the Miss Singapore Universe title in 2002, and that she is busy attending fashion shows and private parties – a norm for many models and celebrities in Singapore.

Unlike them, however, Eunice prefers busying herself with working and volunteering. "All my other precious time goes to my family and myself!" she exclaims.

Eunice started volunteering at Toa Payoh Girls' Home in November 2000, right during the period when she took part in Miss Singapore Universe. She says, "I was trying to find a meaning in what I was doing then and I thought doing charity is the best way to fulfill myself. However, I didn't know how to go about getting started on volunteering. My dad who was working for the former U.S. Ambassador, Mr Steven Green, got some contacts and helped me get in touch with Mrs Tan Chee Koon, the Executive Director of the National Volunteer Centre (NVC), who then directed me to Toa Payoh Girls'

Home."

When she first started volunteering at Toa Payoh Girls' Home, Eunice taught the girls personal grooming such as etiquette and make-up.

"It was really fun, there was a lot of interaction with the girls, I wasn't even conscious that I was volunteering," she says.

Now, Eunice goes there every once or twice a week. Though her schedule can be really hectic at times, she always makes time for the girls at the home.

"What I basically do there now is to talk to the girls. I won't exactly call it counselling because I'm not a qualified counsellor. I just go there and listen to them as friends. I made really good friends with some of the girls, to a point where I don't even see them as 'the girls at the home' any more. They have become my personal friends."

"However there are times where I doubt my capabilities to help the girls," Eunice confesses.

"I mean, I'm human after all and I'm not perfect. There are times when the girls tell me, 'Miss Eunice, you know I'm going to be here for another two years... What can I say to them? I can't tell them 'Yes, I know how you feel' because I don't! All I can tell them is that 'I know I can't understand how you feel but if you need somebody to talk to, I'm here for you.'"

"Just because I volunteer, it doesn't mean that I'm extraordinary. Whatever I'm doing for the girls, anyone can do that as well. Volunteering is not a difficult or noble act. You'll be surprised how good you yourself feel after a volunteering session. It's not just about feeling good that you've helped somebody but you feel good because you realise how fortunate you are."

"All I can tell them is that 'I know I can't understand how you feel but if you need somebody to talk to, I'm here for you.'"

- Eunice Olsen, MediaCorp Artiste

Eunice sits on the committee of the Eurasian Association Singapore (EAS) as Head of Sponsorship. EAS promotes youth volunteerism and Eunice is a strong believer that the youths are the ones who will be able to increase the percentage of volunteerism in Singapore.

Pondering over her cup of hot milk, she says, "I think everyone has it in them to volunteer, especially the youth. I think they are so full of energy and life and if there should be anyone helping troubled youths, it's the youths themselves."

Christine Laimer, 52, Founder of Food From The Heart

On 28 November 2002, The Straits Times published an article revealing that bakeries threw away their unsold bread every night.

Some of us would probably think that it was a waste of money and some could have felt the bread could be put to more meaningful use. Others maybe didn't even care.

Yet for one reader, Christine Laimer, it was something worth pursuing. She started a non-profit organisation to stop the wastage of the unsold bread and put it to better use. "I've been staying in Singapore for the past six years. When my husband, Henry, relocated here to set up his business, Omega Fusion, I followed him," says Christine, who comes from Vienna, Austria.

Not for her is the stereotypical lifestyle of the female expatriate. Christine is not your typical *lai-lai*. She prefers to play tennis and aerobics or read a book in her free time. "If I do have any leisure time, I'll rather spend it with my one-year-old baby girl, Mercedes, than to shop and spend ridiculous sums of money."

"I do not really have Caucasian friends, all my friends in Singapore are locals," Christine says. "My husband, Henry, and I enjoy our stay in Singapore so much that we want to do something in return to the kindness that has been showered on us. We don't believe in money donations because your money may not necessarily reach the really needy ones."

After reading The Straits Times' article, she immediately drafted some

ideas for the unsold bread, forming the beginnings of Food From The Heart (FFTH). "Henry and I have been thinking for ways to contribute to the society since two years ago and when I read The Straits Times story, I knew it was my call."

Within three days after the follow-up story was published, Christine had recruited more than 100 volunteers. "It was amazing. I had never expected this kind of enthusiasm. I believe that Singaporeans have a lot of kindness in them and I think it's unfair to think Singaporeans are selfish." Three months later, Christine has recruited more than 900 volunteers for FFTH.

FFTH is a non-profit organisation and voluntary food distribution programme that delivers unsold bread from bread companies such as Prima Deli, Four Leaves, Delifrance, Simply Bread and Blossoms Bakery to more than 60 homes for the needy nationwide.

A pool of 900 volunteers including students, retirees, housewives and professionals, delivers the bread every day in the mornings and evenings, using their personal vehicles or public transport.

The homes include old folks' homes, orphanages and Senior Activity Centres (SACs). SACs are leisure areas set up for the elderly at the void decks of one to three-room HDB flats.

"Most of my volunteers tell me that they've always wanted to be a hands-on volunteer but they do not know how to start and go about being one. I think there is just not enough awareness," Christine says.

Christine gave up her full-time job at Omega Fusion as general manager and plunged into FFTH full-time. Omega Fusion sponsored \$12,000 for the setting up of FFTH.

Explaining, Christine said, "There were a lot of logistic nightmares initially. From the bread companies to the homes to the volunteers, we have to take care of all the details. But thanks to the amazing volunteers we have, FFTH has taken off very well. I believe strongly that everyone who has a special talent or gift has an obligation to, not just use his talent to create his own will, but also to give something back to the society or the community."

"Most of my volunteers tell me that they've always wanted to be a hands-on volunteer but they do not know how to start and go about being one. I think there are just not enough awareness."

- Christine Laimer, Food From the Heart

She continues, "My talent lies in organising and communicating so FFTH really allows me to use my talent to the best for the benefits of the homes and the needy ones. I am just giving something back to Singapore - to thank her for giving me a comfortable home."

Volunteerism in Singapore

Volunteering may not be cited by most Singaporean youths as one of their favourite past-times but there seems to be an encouraging trend emerging through recent years.

NVC conducted a survey at the end of 2002 to find out the rates of participating volunteers in Singapore. The findings of the survey show that active volunteers have increased from 9.3 percent in 2000 to 14.9 percent in 2002.

According to the research findings, more than half (54 percent) of the current volunteers started their volunteering activities in the second half of 2002.

Keen to volunteer?

So, if you are interested in volunteering, you can log on to NVC's website or call their hotline. NVC's website has much information that a new volunteer will find useful.

It has a list of 321 non-profit organisations with the organisations' contact details and a brief description of the organisations. It also has an eMatch function that matches you to an organisation in your area of interests.



To learn more about NVC and their volunteering programmes, you can call NVC at 1800-325 0865 or log on to www.nvc.org.sg.

To learn more about FFTH or join them as a volunteer, you can log on to www.foodheart.org. You can also call Christine Laimer at 9615 6217 or email her at wula@pacific.net.sg.

Echoing the belief that anyone can be a volunteer, the Book Writing and Publishing team from Ngee Ann Polytechnic's Mass Communication programme is profiling local volunteers in an as-yet untitled book inspired by the *Chicken Soup for the Volunteer's Soul*. Initiated by the National Volunteer Council, the book will be out in December 2003.



Senses Western Fusion Restaurant



The Porridge Club



Rice Roll and Porridge

food for talk

hype turns our island-nation food paradise inside out and reveals a few mouthfuls certain to set tongues a-wagging...

Senses Western Fusion

Some say that fusion restaurants are a great place to experience different cultures and cuisine without having to travel far and wide. Many would beg to differ, especially when it comes to food where a certain amount of knowledge in both Western and Asian cooking is essential. Mr Andy Chew, Manager of Senses Western Fusion Restaurant agrees that authentic cuisine can only be enjoyed in the land of its origin. However, he explains that "Senses provides a preview of the various cuisine out there". Nevertheless, the East meets West concept can be a tricky business, and Senses has done its homework.

Although the restaurant is neatly tucked away in a quiet corner of the Esplanade Mall, it manages to capture the attention of passers-by through the modern fusion decor. Brightly-lit Chinese lanterns grace the ceiling while contemporary art pieces adorn the walls, all of which, interestingly enough, are for sale. Indian culture is evident, with delicately embroidered saris flowing charmingly above the kitchen door, while Western jazz in the background seems to help create a mellow mood for fine dining. The VIP room, which is set aside for private events, is decorated with Japanese-inspired paintings and partitions. To perfect the interior fusion design, the dining area comes complete with Western-influenced wooden furnishings and booth seats. If having good ambience ranks high on your list of dining requirements, Senses is ideal.

Upon looking at the menu, it is apparent that Western cuisine is predominant. However, as Mr Chew explains, "We incorporate the fusion element by adding Asian ingredients and spices into the Western dishes, hence the term 'Western Fusion'." The one-year-old restaurant also succeeded in bagging the Excellent Food Award, for three of its dishes, the Grilled Lemon Salmon (\$21.90), Shepherd's Pie (\$15.50) and Teriyaki Chicken (\$18.50).

Baked to perfection, the golden brown crust of the Shepherd's Pie is tasty. Stuffed with juicy beef, onions and carrots, under a layer of buttered mashed potatoes, the portion can be somewhat small for the average Singapore diner, but there is an abundant helping of garden salad to go along with it.

The Seafood Delight (\$22.50) is a generous mix of crispy prawns, calamari and fish fillets, all of which complement each other to satisfy a seafood lover's cravings.

For dessert, overlook the added calories and indulge in a Goreng Pisang Split (\$6.50). Deep-fried bananas served in rich and creamy vanilla ice cream are a great way to complete the Western fusion dining experience. Other dishes to try include the Zucchini & Mushroom Fritters (\$8.90), Avocado Salad (\$14.80) and Skewered Beef Kebab (\$18.80).

The waiters are constantly alert and accommodating. There is plenty to enjoy, from the artistic East meets West decor, to the award-winning flavours. Pluck up that sense of adventure in yourself and go savour the unique fusing of cultures and tastes.

Senses Western Fusion Restaurant. Open from 11am to 10.30pm daily.
No. 8 Raffles Avenue, Esplanade Mall, #02-12 Tel: 6423 0668.
Public Buses: 36, 56, 75, 77, 133, 162, 171, 174M, 181M, 195, 857, 960, 961.

Joann Chia

Senses Western Fusion



The Porridge Club



The Porridge Club

When 30-year-old body-builder-turned-chef, Alvin Koh asks "Do you like my balls?", he isn't being crude. Better known as Porridge King, or The Naked Chef, Koh is chef, and owner of The Porridge Club, and the creator of Balls To You, one of the many unique dishes at the restaurant, incorporating two golden-brown rice balls set on a plate with honey sauce and seafood.

Formerly The Porridge King, The Porridge Club, with one outlet located in the city, and another undergoing refurbishment in the East, has just been upgraded to include full bar facilities on the upper floors. The city outlet has a Roof Bar for diners who enjoy *à la carte* dining. They can choose to have their meals downstairs and proceed to the Roof Bar for a drink while enjoying the cool night breeze.

The ambience is better felt at night. Simple but creative lamps light up the place, giving it a warm, cosy feeling. One lamp was created using a CD rack covered with A4 sheets of paper. If you see red walls and bold signboards, you've probably got the right place. Alvin is a self-proclaimed Zen believer, "I like simplicity, with a touch of complication to it," thus he designed the restaurant to be so. According to Alvin, the warm red "doesn't strain the eye and it's easier for the eye to absorb" and the "red colour induces appetite".

Alvin proudly proclaims the renovation costs for both his outlets are below \$10,000. He undertook the task of renovating everything on his own and "when you walk into the place, you get into my world".

Peak period crowds tend to get a little noisy at times, drowning out the smooth jazz pieces playing in the background, almost but not quite like a hawker centre.

The menu boasts a wide range of dishes. Recipes four generations old, passed to Alvin by his great-grandmother, are named Sexy Sambal Belacan Fish, "because she is four generations old and still looks the same". There's also a new range of fusion dishes he has created like Claypot Bin Laden, consisting of black pepper chicken and spaghetti in a claypot. Some of the hot favourites include the Century Egg Porridge, Chili Crab Sauce Spaghetti, and Pearl Harbour, an oyster porridge cooked with "a rich paste of fresh ground oysters". The Giant Satay Fried Rice includes three huge, tantalising sticks of satay atop a generous plate of spicy fried rice, a great meal to satisfy your taste buds. A must try is the Seafood Belacan Crystal Horfun, with chewy, clear horfun that has a unique texture.

The Porridge Club is one place to consider if you have to tighten your purse strings. Nine out of ten items on the menu are between \$1 to \$5, and portions are large.

For \$1, the Homemade Barley is a good-for-value option when you get thirsty. If you're in the mood for some healthy drinks, the place offers Black Widow, a drink fortified with vitamins and said to be good for your complexion, offered at \$2.50 a glass. From upmarket hawker fare to exotic dishes in large portions, The Porridge Club with its reasonable prices is well worth a try.

The Porridge Club. Open from 11am to 11pm daily. No. 25 Boon Tat Street. Tel: 6449 1485. The Porridge Club is a short walk from Lau Pa Sat. Happy hours for the Roof Bar are from 6pm to 9pm.

Sharon Wong

Rice Roll and Porridge



Rice Roll and Porridge

Rice Roll & Porridge, a modest eatery nestled inconspicuously amongst a row of shophouses along Killiney Road, doesn't quite stand out at first glance as anything particularly impressive. With a nondescript white signboard and typical coffeshop surroundings, one could easily dismiss the outlet in favour of its more popular neighbour, the Killiney Kopitiam, just a door away.

Careful scrutiny, however, soon reveals that there's more to the place than immediately obvious, for hidden within its typically kopitiam menu of chee cheong fun, porridge and rice dishes are a few unexpected gems, among them a dessert item that's made quite a few headlines – the XO Durian Chee Cheong Fun (\$3.20).

Filled generously with mashed durian flesh and served chilled with a liberal coating of ground peanuts, this particularly inventive variation of the standard chee cheong fun was one of the better-received items on the menu – though other unfamiliar fillings (such as apple, strawberry and banana) also vied for attention.

Also popular among the non-dessert items on the menu were the Scallop Chee Cheong Fun (\$5.00) and Fresh Prawn Chee Cheong Fun (\$3.20) – generous helpings of scallop and shrimp stuffed into chewy rice rolls and served soaked in a not-too-salty soya sauce base made for a generally enjoyable experience.

Equally good was the Fried Rice With Salted Fish (\$4.50) and the Prawn Dumplings (\$4.00). The former, chock-full of typical fried-rice ingredients like egg, shrimp, char siu, and onion, was fragrant and not too stingy with the salted fish, while the latter, with surprisingly fresh prawns, was fried to perfection – the crispy outer shell complemented by the chewy shrimp stuffed within.

However, not all on the menu lived up to expectations. The Mushroom Chee Cheong Fun (\$3.00) was surprisingly unremarkable, while the various porridges that we tried, including the Abalone With Meatball (\$4.50), Abalone With Chicken (\$4.50), and Mixed Intestines (\$3.50), all shared a common trait – the dishes were all generally tasteless. However, the congee was of good consistency, thick and filling, and the toppings were generous, though one comment noted by my lunch partners was that they couldn't tell the difference between the chicken and the abalone in that particular dish. Also failing to please was one of the few non-chee cheong fun dessert items on the menu – the Yam Paste with Gingko Nuts (\$2.00), which should more accurately be called Yam Soup with Gingko Nuts.

There are, however, also other factors working against Rice Roll & Porridge, among them abrupt service, sometimes bordering on the rude – like the instance when the menu was hurriedly taken away before we had finished ordering. And while there, watching your bill might be quite a good idea as well – with the small portions on offer, it's quite easy to order far too many dishes and rack up quite a bill, something students on a tight budget might not particularly relish.

Rice Roll and Porridge. Open from 8am to 11pm, Mondays to Fridays, and from 8.30am to 11pm, Saturdays and Sundays. No. 69 Killiney Road. Tel: 6736 1355. Public Buses: 7, 14, 16, 36, 65, 77, 85, 106, 111, 123, 143, 167, 171, 174, 190, 502, 700. The Rice Roll and Porridge is a 5-minute walk from Somerset MRT.

Aaron Lye

Tisa Ng: A feminist and more

Candice Aw speaks to the woman whose passions centre on her work at AWARE, and what it means to be Singaporean.

Sweeping into the office of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) at Ghim Moh Road on a blazing hot afternoon, Tisa Ng is like a balmy breeze, a warm yet refreshing presence.

One might expect the president of AWARE, Singapore's most prominent voluntary women's organisation to be a fiery feminist, torching stubborn advocates of an old school patriarchal society along the way.

However, looking much younger than her 54 years, Tisa Ng is an interesting study in contrasts. Dressed simply in a loose cotton pantsuit cut in classic lines, she is by no means drab. Her eyes are dreamy, but they sparkle with fire when discussing women's issues and problems with the gender-discriminating policies in Singapore. Exuding warmth yet still professional, she is a refreshing change from presidents of most organisations, non-profit or otherwise.

Gazing keenly at this reporter while sipping coffee, she is a picture of calm benevolence, tinged with a no-nonsense air.

This is a woman who has championed gender equality rights with Ministers of Parliament and lived to tell the tale.

"I think all women ought to keep a lookout for others, and on the whole ensure we all progress together to achieve and fulfil our individual aspirations. This is each and every woman's right."



ILLUSTRATION Syeda Sana Rahman

"I don't think about controversy in the abstract. I do not court it, but neither would I avoid it, if I think something needs to be said or done."

Controversy is?

Given that Ms Ng is in constant friction with authorities regarding gender-discriminating policies, she might very well be a walking definition of controversy. In a recent letter to The Straits Times' Forum page (ST 15 March 2003), she took a stand against the government for its "discriminatory treatment of the women that it employs in the civil service", and cited her disappointment at its justifications. She also constantly reminds the government of the unequal opportunities facing Singapore women, be it in the political, civil or private sector. Two recent developments that give her joy, however, are the lifting of the quota on women entering medical school and the increasing number of women members in Parliament.

So what does controversy mean to her?

"Well, I don't think about controversy in the abstract. I do not court it, but neither would I avoid it, if I think something needs to be said or done."

"Singapore made me a feminist."

In a 2002 interview with The Straits Times, Ms Ng said unabashedly, "Singapore made me a feminist."

One wonders how that could possibly be so, when women in Singapore are given a similar level of education as men, suffrage and freedom in dress code.

"I first joined AWARE because I found the women that I met there to be inspiring and energising. Then as I got to know more about the status and condition of women in Singapore, it became apparent that there was a real need for the work being done by AWARE, to make this a truly meritocratic society, with equal opportunity for all. Being part of AWARE then became compelling."

Ms Ng contributes actively to the work of various non-government organisations to promote gender equality. She is first vice president of the Singapore Council of Women's Organisations and an executive committee member of The United Nations Development Fund For Women, Singapore, an agency of the United Nations that is dedicated to the creation and support of equality between women and men.

And what's the biggest challenge Ms Ng has to overcome?

"When people hear about AWARE, they tend to generally switch off, because they already have their assumptions and therefore made their conclusions about what we are about. They have a very vague and simplistic idea of what feminism and AWARE is about, and they think we are fighting for nothing and being overly demanding. I don't need them to love us, but I would like them to really listen to what we have to say. We are simply stating the facts that there are unequal opportunities for women and men, and that has to change."

"For some people, the word 'feminism' still conjures up now very outdated images from the 1970s, and there are some others who are still not comfortable dealing with strong women. This has to change, and would if there was the interest to become more informed."

I would say I'm very patriotic.

For someone who was born in China, grew up in Hong Kong, studied in France, worked in the United Kingdom and has called Singapore home only 16 years ago, Ms Ng is the very epitome of a global nomad. She chose to settle down in Singapore with her husband, whom she met in Hong Kong, because "Singapore is clean and safe" and out of concern for the cultural and educational environment for their two sons, now both in their 20s.

"I've actually worked here longer than I have anywhere else. I've been Singaporean for years... and I would say I'm very patriotic. I regard the work I do at AWARE as national service. It takes up a lot of my time and energy. I don't get a pay rise and very often, little thanks for what I do. But I want to do this because I care, and I'm very patriotic in that sense. That's something that's not deeply rooted in a lot of Singaporeans, especially the younger generation, and it's a cause for concern."

So, how then, can the younger generation be more informed, and less apathetic?

"Well, I think education plays an important role. Family does too. But at the end of it, it is an individual choice, whether you care enough to do something about it."

Three men & a lady

What about her own family? With her husband and two sons, does Ms Ng feel there is an overdose of testosterone in the family?

Laughing, Ms Ng replies, "We have wonderful, stimulating, open, egalitarian discussions about anything and everything. We tend not to take stereotype 'male' or 'female' points of view, but try to get the facts straight, and then argue on the basis of reason and logic. We also accept that sometimes, there are valid alternative points of view. Sometimes, my husband brings a whole new perspective on an issue, and that is helpful."

How did her husband and children react to her appointment as the AWARE president?

"They were very proud and supportive. And I hope my son's girlfriends won't be intimidated! I see no reason to be, because this is my job just like any other."

Art is still her first love

The arts, however, remain Ms Ng's first love. Trained in arts management, she first joined the Singapore Symphony Orchestra as its general manager in 1991, and remained there for the next eight years.

"I love the arts, and nothing produces a buzz quite like the performing arts. I also love books, but the feedback from a performance is much more immediate."

In her free time, she prefers to reflect and concentrate on her writing. To date, some of her recent published works include an Insight travel guidebook on Singapore - Building Social Space In Singapore, and a fictional work based on the Channel 5 television series Growing Up.

Currently, however, her main priority is still her work at AWARE.

"I think all women ought to keep a lookout for others, and on the whole ensure we all progress together to achieve and fulfil our individual aspirations. This is each and every woman's right."

Bollywood

Jiggly hip twists and rich coloured costumes aside, we have come to embrace the Bollywood phenomenon with open arms.

Ng Yi Lian scans the local movies, fashion and music scene.

America and Hollywood are the main factories of the pop culture, producing commercial movies, fashion designers and pop stars. It was always thought to be, "first America, then the world". India and Bollywood, on the other hand, were looked down on and made fun of. However, about two years ago, traces of the extravagance of Indian culture and the influence of glitzy Bollywood appeared in the western world of movies, fashion and music. India and Bollywood have since become culturally respectable and influential, producing their own money-spinning movies, top-notch designers and legendary musicians. Are India and Bollywood taking over America's and Hollywood's influences?

Movies

If you think Hindi movies are just about couples playing peek-a-boo around trees, you are way off. "Most of my non-Indian friends thought that Indian movies are about a couple running around a coconut tree. That annoyed me," says Jessica Ann Thomas, 20, a Mass Communication student at Ngee Ann Polytechnic.

Today's Bollywood attracts and inspires directors from Hollywood and Canada who are clearly captivated by the sheer lavishness of the colourful film sets and costumes coming out of Mumbai, India.

In an interview with Harper's Bazaar Singapore, Australian film-maker Baz Luhrmann even credits Bollywood with pulling him out of a creative slump by inspiring a Bollywood-like climax in *Moulin Rouge* – complete with bright costumes, brighter accessories, and a "good triumphs over evil" and "love conquers all" ending.

Has Hollywood been unknowingly influenced by its eastern counterpart, Bollywood? Hollywood is even bringing in Bollywood movies to American cinemas, not to have them laughed at but to be culturally savoured.

Bollywood/Hollywood, is the latest addition to the list of Indian-influenced movies. Directed by Canadian Deepa Mehta (*Sam & Me* and *Camilla*), it is a story about a handsome millionaire who considers himself "western" and his mother's attempts to get him married to a "nice Indian girl".

The Guru, starring Jimi Mistry, to whom Singaporeans were first introduced in the British Anglo-Indian comedy, *East is East*, is about a dance choreographer (Mistry) who is later mistaken as a love guru and makes it big in New York.

Monsoon Wedding, directed by Mira Nair and the winner of the Venice Film Festival's Golden Lion and a nominee for Best Foreign Film in this year's Golden Globe Awards, addresses the issue of Indian arranged marriages and also touches on more taboo topics such as caste and incest.

Bend It Like Beckham premiered at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival and also won the audience vote for Best Film at the Sydney Film Festival 2002. Set in London, the film is a kaleidoscope of colour and humorous cultural clashes as an Indian family tries to raise their soccer-playing daughter in the traditional Indian way.

Corinne Ng, 29, editor of Cleo magazine in Singapore, says, "I've been watching Tamil movies since I was 15 and Indian movies have the most dramatic and spectacular plots. I haven't watched a single comedy where the Indian elements have failed to entertain."

Fashion

"Indian culture has always been colourful and rich in every way," says Juliana Teo, in her early 30s, the senior marketing manager of FJ Benjamin – a distributor of labels such as Guess and Gucci. "Growing up in Singapore, I've always been fascinated by the richness of Indian fashion, the bales of sari wraps, the gold thread embroidery and the intricate yet elaborate Indian jewellery."

Hollywood artistes such as Shania Twain, Goldie Hawn and Madonna have been spotted in luscious saris and Indian-inspired outfits at swanky movie premieres, music events and awards ceremonies.

One of the biggest attractions of Indian culture is in its saris and its luscious silks. Western designers can no longer turn a blind eye to the rich textiles and culture.

John Galliano, Jean-Paul Gaultier and Michael Kors have been heavily influenced by Indian culture, the embroidered and delectable details apparent in their latest Spring/Summer collections.

Suneet Varma, a famed Indian designer who has produced embroidery collections for Donna Karan and Carolina Herrera, has also been the hand behind several of actress Sharon Stone's ball gowns.

Even Resham Melwani, a local designer of her own label, ReshamM, is a fan. "Suneet Varma designs the most amazing stuff. I just splurged on an outfit designed by him. It is a hipster skirt with a tube, both embroidered with roses and splattered with sequins. It's got to be my greatest fashion extravagance," she says.

"I enjoy wearing the Hindi-inspired long skirts and dresses. They are colourful, do not restrict my movements and exude femininity. I had also tried the *henna* body painting. The intricacies and complicated designs of *henna* are art on their own," says Nichole Koh, 19, a Business Management student at Singapore Management University.

Jessica Ann Thomas, clearly proud of her heritage, says, "I wear bangles sometimes. Occasionally, I would wear my simple *chundars* (Punjabi suits) to school. I love my flowy Indian skirts and embroidered baggy tops. I always make it a point to be the epitome of Indian charm!"

However as Yin Wen Han, 24, a fashion stylist, puts it, "In fashion, nothing stays. It's a cycle and trends get recycled all the time but of course, there are certain brands that have the Indian influences as their signature look."

Music

Ravi Shankar, legendary sitar player and Indian classical musician, introduced Indian culture to the Western music world when he took the late George Harrison of The Beatles under his tutelage. Stefanie Sun, Singapore's most popular musical export, incorporated Indian music with alternative and rock in her latest album, *to be continued* and her music videos even feature her doing some Indian dance moves.

In February this year, there was a huge Bhangra party – *Addictive* at Lox at Clarke Quay. It attracted hundreds and featured Singapore's top Bhangra DJs such as DJ Rishi and DJ Aytar.

Maniam, the tabla (a North Indian percussion instrument) player at Zouk, has graced many international dance events in Ibiza, Spain. Maniam's play set on Friday nights at Zouk lasts not more than an hour and every time the sound of his tabla is heard on the dance floor, the clubbers cheer.

The flurry of excitement surrounding all things Indian has taken off not just in Hollywood and global fashion, but in Singapore as well. Though its place in the west may not be permanent, its presence has definitely been made known to many in the media, fashion and music worlds. However, in Singapore, its place is definite as Indian culture has long been part of our society's diverse culture.

As Wen Han explains, "With such a rich history, it's difficult to ignore its presence." Juliana adds, "India's exposure in the west brings attention to it worldwide, and though the Indian trend may not last in the west, the culture however will always remain as beautiful and vibrant."

HOLLYWOOD



From blonde British babes to rappers in the 'hood, **hype** explores

music

that screams controversy

OASIS Heathen Chemistry Sony Music

Eight years after their first album, Oasis is still big, and still giving people its brand of music. After their not-so-well received last two albums, *Be Here Now* and *Standing On The Shoulder Of Giants*, they're back in form. Oasis's fifth album, *Heathen Chemistry*, looks set for a series of positive reactions.

Presented in the form of a pictorial scrapbook with the disc inserted into the last page, it bears the trademark blurry photo of the band too. The album features *The Hindu Times*, written by Noel Gallagher, where the band incorporates a touch of Indian culture in the tunes. You really hear them working away on the guitars. Unfortunately, the track doesn't impress as much as it probably intended to.

A typical Oasis-type song is *Stop Crying Your Heart Out*. Much like the band's previous hit, *Wonderwall*, it shows fans that the Oasis spirit is revived.

Hung In A Bad Place, written by Gem Archer, is perhaps the track that sounds most like a song from their glory days. With Liam Gallagher's powerful vocals, this track could well become a big hit.

Songbird, written by Liam, is surprisingly catchy. Its cheery tune makes you feel like getting up and clapping your hands. Liam's second track on the album, *Born On A Different Cloud*, changes the pace of the album. Serious in the beginning, it eventually picks up later on, and it has a short, but pleasing to the ear, guitar breakaway. The last track, *Better Man*, ends the album with a bang as they jam to a grand finale, with all promising to be better men.

We don't know if members of Oasis are really better men with better attitudes, but we do know one thing. With the launch of *Heathen Chemistry*, we are assured the Oasis brand of rock is here to stay.

Sharon Wong

DARREN HAYES Spin Sony Music

If you're a Savage Garden fan, don't expect to feed your Garden's instinct in this one. You'll be forgiven for feeling a little disappointed, because this is no spin-off from the Australian duo's classic ballads like *I knew I loved you* and *Truly Madly Deeply*.

After the split with Daniel Jones, the other half of Savage Garden, Darren Hayes, makes a much-anticipated debut album in *Spin*. The effort sees him making a deliberate attempt to steer away from up-tempo and catchy sounds linked to his former collaborator. Hayes makes clear that he's intent on carving a new sound that is uniquely his.

In his official website, the singer describes *Spin* as a combination of pop, electronic and R&B influences. He says there is a "different vibe" to the album, one that is "raw and relaxed". However, take it from us: this album is definitely as pop as you can get - with the added emphasis of Hayes'

distinctive falsetto voice.

Insatiable, the album's first single, is a blend of electronic guitars and synthesizers, which reportedly took a mere 10 minutes to pen. According to Sony UK, *Insatiable* is also one of Hayes' "absolutely... favourite songs".

The singer is also unapologetic about using "machines" on all 12 tracks, with hardly any "natural" live instruments employed. *Strange Relationship* follows *Insatiable* - catchier and smoother, unashamedly turning you into singing along to its chorus.

With his first solo album, 30-year-old Hayes also takes on a different image. Gone is the edgy black hair and leather jacket. Darren Hayes (who never photographs in "soft light") now has a mop of wavy blond hair and tuxedo - offset by the occasional Avril Lavigne tie and sneakers.

Agnes Teh

ATOMIC KITTEN Feels So Good EMI Music

It's OK - the first track on Atomic Kitten's second album, *Feels So Good* basically says it all. With breakthroughs or surprises, the three lasses have stuck with the same winning formula that propelled them to join the ranks of girl bands like the now-defunct All Saints and Spice Girls.

Feels So Good is true-blue pop and nothing more, as the girls belt out identical tunes, track after track. The two numbers that stand out are a remix of a song by Blondie, *The Tide Is High* (Get the Feeling) and *Whole Again*, the hit from their previous album, *Right Now*.

It doesn't make much sense to slam *Whole Again* in this album. It fits in nicely with the feel of the album with its infectious bubblegum pop. Sweet candy melody, *Feels So Good*, will hardly make an impression. Written by pop singer Kylie Minogue, it sadly lacks the usual catchy tune and upbeat tempo music found in her other songs.

There will obviously be mixed reactions to Atomic Kitten's version of *The Tide Is High*. However, it is hard not to give credit to them for doing a rather good job by adding a distinct flavour of their own.

Their smooth vocals blend harmoniously and have managed to make up a little for the rest of this album. Fans will be proud of the more polished voices and image too.

In fact, they've never looked better than on the covers of this album. Natasha, a proud young mother, Jenny, very much in love and Liz, newly wed to Westlife member, Kian Egan. It's hard not to feel good with such perfect lives.

On the whole, *Feels So Good* is not too hard on the ear, but not as outstanding as the first album. This one's more for staunch Atomic Kitten fans.

Lydia Shi

EMINEM & various artists Music From and Inspired by the Motion Picture 8 Mile Universal Music

If the semi-autobiographical *8 Mile* left you wanting more of the *Real Slim Shady*, then this soundtrack is for you. Unapologetic, straightforward and frank, the album is peppered with words and phrases that will invoke frowns and raised eyebrows.

Produced by Eminem, *Music From and Inspired by the Motion Picture 8 Mile* is an extension of the themes that make up the movie. With its biting sarcasm and loose adherence to rhythm and beats, some tracks sound like packaged battles that are the lifeblood of *Rabbit* (Eminem) in the movie.

There are pleasant surprises to the album, however, with Taryn Manning, in *Wasting My Time*. You might remember her from Britney Spears' movie debut, *Crossroads* back in 2000. It is, however, really in *8 Mile* that Manning displays her vocal talent. The producers apparently took one listen to her and wanted her on the soundtrack. Her sultry, soulful vocals provide for

a break in the monotonous and heavy beats that punctuate this album.

And for hip hop die-hards, *More Music from 8 Mile* will fulfil your appetite. Most of the tracks on this album feature artists like Wu Tang Clan and Mary J. Blige, whose music is also showcased in the movie. The titles are typical of hip-hop albums, characterised by the distinct talk of 'da brother', with *Shimmy Shimmy Ya*, *Bring Da Pain* and *Gotta Get Mine*.

Naughty by Nature's Feel Me Flow rings of feel-good vibes with the constant linking of electronic sounds throughout the track. Notorious B.I.G.'s *Juicy* brings to mind music videos of big, bold women prancing seductively amongst rappers who talk the talk, and presumably walk the walk.

For those curious about hip hop, these are reasonable choices to induct yourself into this growing genre of music. For fans, these two need no persuasion.

Sue-Ann Woo

Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BUENA VISTA COLUMBIA TRISTAR



You've probably seen the *Charlie's Angels 2: Full Throttle* movie poster at most cinemas – the one with Drew Barrymore, Cameron Diaz and Lucy Liu in black cat suits and lots of attitude.

Full Throttle stars Cameron Diaz (*There's Something About Mary*) as the ditzy Natalie, Drew Barrymore (*Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*) as the grunge hedonist Dylan and Lucy Liu (*Ally McBeal*) as the inscrutable Alex. They are the three glamorous and tough investigative agents who work for the Charles Townsend Detective Agency.

Look out for performances by even more power-packed women – rock singer Pink in a cameo appearance in a motocross sequence, and the iconic Demi Moore (*Gl Jane*) in a supporting role as a “fallen angel” Bernie Mac (*Ocean's Eleven*) stars as Bosley's (previously played by Bill Murray) brother, Luke Wilson (*The Royal Tenenbaums*) and Matt LeBlanc (*Friends*) return as Natalie's and Alex's boyfriends respectively.

The Angels are up for a series of adventures tracking down two rings, containing a top-secret database concerning the FBI's Witness Protection Programme, that have been stolen. When five witnesses of the programme are murdered, the Angels are called in to solve the mystery.

Previously titled, *Charlie's Angels 2: Halo*, the name was changed to *Charlie's Angels 2: Full Throttle* to give the movie a more “masculine” edge. As Joseph McGinty Mitchell, the director of the movie, explained to *Zap2it*, a Hollywood entertainment website, “*Halo* – we didn't want it to feel girly and Angels-y, like it had to be feminine and soft... we have a lot of velocity in this picture and we open with gasoline tanks and Army trucks. We got the top racers from around the world to race around the track with the girls. It's all about women succeeding in conditions and environments that are traditionally male-driven.”

Apparently, the crew of the first *Charlie's Angels* did not have an easy time working with Bill Murray, and Mitchell explains away Murray's replacement, Bernie Mac, as Bosley's adopted brother.

“Hilarious and talented as he is, Bill is his own animal and that can pose a few problems,” producer Jenno Topping said.

Demi Moore, after a two-year absence since the box office flop *Passion of Mind*, was persuaded by Barrymore to appear in *Full Throttle*. Apparently, Moore's children are huge fans of *Charlie's Angels* and told their mother that this was too good a chance to let go.

Get ready to see the Angels raise hell as they get involved in fight scenes complete with wire works and slow motion.

Opens June 2003.

Ng Yi Lian

hype sifts through this season's flicks and picks out

movies

for the popcorn-popping,

Johnny English



PHOTOS COURTESY OF UNITED INTERNATIONAL PICTURES



In the same vein of spy spoofs such as the 1960s TV series *Get Smart*, 1984's comedy *Top Secret!*, and most recently, *Austin Powers* comes *Johnny English*, bringing a slightly more contemporary, if no less bumbling, touch to the spy game.

Produced by Working Title Films, a production company based in the United Kingdom which played a key role in bringing movies such as *Bean: The Movie*, *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *About a Boy*, to audiences around the world, *Johnny English* aims to be the next in a growing list of successful UK hits.

Originally titled *A Touch of Weevil*, *Johnny English* is director Peter Howitt's first foray into the action/adventure comedy genre. Howitt's previous works include the romantic drama, *Sliding Doors* and the psychological thriller, *Antitrust*. British comedian Rowan Atkinson stars as Johnny English,

an accident-prone “MI-7” agent on a secret mission. Atkinson is best known for his role as Mr Bean in the TV series and 1997's *Bean: The Movie*, which grossed US\$232 million globally. He also created much ado with the cult TV series, *Blackadder*. His recent movies include *Rat Race* and 2002's *Scorpy-Doo*.

Johnny English was originally created by the talented Atkinson for an award-winning series of 17 TV commercials for Barclaycard, a British credit card company.

According to the production company, this is expected to be the first of a possible franchise of *Johnny English* movies if ticket sales reach that of their other hit movies.

In *Johnny English*, Atkinson is an incompetent British diplomat mistaken for Britain's most famous spy, whose mission is to retrieve Britain's crown jewels from devious French businessman, Pascal Sauvage, played brilliantly by the multi-faceted John Malkovich (*Being John Malkovich*).

Apart from having a burning ambition to become the King of England, Pascal plans to turn the entire nation into a prison in a bid to solve the problem posed by overcrowded prisons around the world. All for a hefty profit, of course.

Like other spy movies, it is, of course, left to Johnny, who happens to be the sole surviving spy in Britain, to rescue the country and the monarchy. With sidekick Bough (Ben Miller), Johnny embarks on his quest to save the day.

Malkovich turns out an excellent performance as the French arch villain and is amusing in his throwaway English phrases laced with a French accent.

And what is a spy movie without gorgeous women, or in this case, woman? Australian pop singer Natalie Imbruglia makes her feature film debut as female double agent, Lorna Campbell, who eventually joins the good guys in their bid to avoid catastrophe.

Johnny English is complete with fast cars and state-of-the-art gadgets – essential to any spy movie. Fans of the *Austin Powers* franchise will definitely not want to miss this. And others can also leave their brains at the door and laugh themselves silly over this slapstick movie.

Opens May 2003.

Candice Aw

soda-slurping voyeur in you.

Homerun



PHOTOS COURTESY OF UNITED INTERNATIONAL PICTURES



Who would have thought that the critically acclaimed Iranian movie, *Children of Heaven*, would inspire an Asian remake, and by a Singaporean no less? Working together with Raintree Pictures, actor and director, Jack Neo, stepped up as screenwriter and director for *Homerun*, the Singapore version of *Children of Heaven*.

Homerun tells the story of the under-privileged Ah Kun, a 10-year-old school boy, and his younger sister, Seow Fang. Set in 1965 pre-independence Singapore, *Homerun* capitalises on the issues of “economic hardship and political instability”, which is evident in its “rural village” setting, to create an atmosphere so nostalgic that it effectively takes us back to those days.

The conflict begins when Ah Kun loses his sister's shoes while running an errand for his weak, pregnant mother. Ah Kun's father, the sole breadwinner, can't afford to replace the shoes so the boy says nothing. The siblings then make a deal to share Ah Kun's shoes. Seow Fang wears the shoes to school in the morning and then rushes home to pass them to Ah Kun when he goes to school in the afternoon. The hassle they go through helps get the audience on their side.

Ah Kun's struggles invoke a strong sense of empathy. The emphasis on humility and the “power of love in the family”, as Raintree Pictures puts it, is

just as overwhelming, leaving a lingering guilt in us for having taken most of our good lives for granted. Ah Kun's determination to find a replacement pair commands a full round of applause. Not able to afford a new pair, he participates in a cross-country race, in which the third prize is a pair of shoes.

While Ah Kun worries about the missing shoes, everyone else in his village loses sleep over Singapore's impending separation from the Federation of Malaysia. Political instability creates an atmosphere of insecurity and uncertainty. Everyone is concerned about what will eventually become of Singapore. Emotional chaos, in Ah Kun's case, within societal chaos, which is exemplified in the political trauma the nation experiences, is *Homerun's* ingenious way of bringing those hard times that much closer to home.

Familiar faces in *Homerun* include local stars Sharon Au who plays Seow Fang's teacher and Mark Lee who plays Ah Kun's Physical Education teacher. Part of the *I Not Stupid* cast, Xiang Yun, Patricia Mok and Selena Tan also star in this movie. Jack Neo himself makes an appearance in this third directorial effort. Hailed as “Singapore's biggest star” by *Time* magazine, this “Jack of all trades” obviously knows what jolts the critical mass.

Shawn Lee Chuang Rui of *I Not Stupid* fame, plays Ah Kun. A Young Talent Award winner at the MediaCorp Star Awards in 2002, Shawn is a secondary

one student at Bukit Panjang Secondary School.

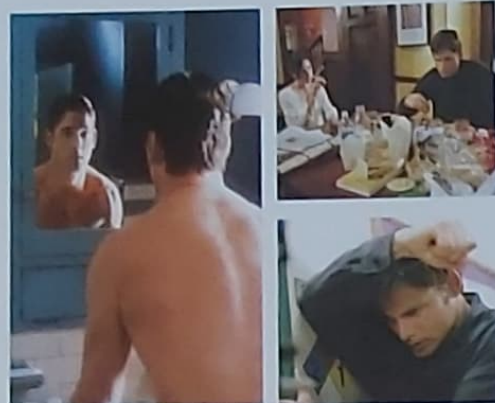
Homerun is Megan Zheng Zhi Yun's (Seow Fang) debut effort. With no prior experience, the 9-year-old Megan was selected from 1300 hopefuls in the nation-wide auditions.

Compared to his previous release, the social satirical comedy, *I Not Stupid*, Neo adopts an appropriately solemn theme in *Homerun*, bringing out the sombre mood of those poverty-stricken days. Like *I Not Stupid*, *Homerun* is in Mandarin with English subtitles. If *I Not Stupid* was a subtle critique of Singapore's education system, then *Homerun* is a commendable approach in exemplifying “the power of family love” and by the same token, shedding light on Singaporean history.

Opens May 2003.

Shikin Ahmad

The Hulk



PHOTOS COURTESY OF UNITED INTERNATIONAL PICTURES

If you are one of those who grew up with the classic Marvel Comics series, *The Incredible Hulk*, or grieved over the television adaptation's demise in 1982, count down the days to June 20 when the film adaptation, *The Hulk*, will be released.

Directed by critically acclaimed film-maker, Ang Lee (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*), *The Hulk* stars Eric Bana (*Black Hawk Down*) as the scientist/superhuman Hulk, Dr Bruce Banner, and Jennifer Connelly (*A Beautiful Mind*) as Banner's love interest, Betty Ross. It also features Nick

Nolte as the elder Dr Banner, Josh Lucas as Banner's rival, and Sam Elliott as General Ross – Betty Ross' father and Banner's boss.

A former atomic physicist, Brian Banner, jealous of his son's close relationship with his mother, murders his wife when she attempts to leave him along with young Bruce. The motherless Bruce grows up an angry man who diverts his anger into his science studies. After obtaining his doctorate in nuclear physics, he works for the research base under General Ross and there, he meets and falls in love with Betty Ross, a science prodigy.

After an accidental overdose of radiation, Bruce Banner discovers that his body's chemistry has changed and every time he is provoked and outraged, an astonishing metamorphosis takes place. He becomes stronger, bigger and green. The transformation is effected cleverly as a computer-generated image with Eric Bana's facial features expertly integrated into the images using cutting-edge visual effects technology. All thanks to Academy Award-winning special effects teams from Industrial Light and Magic, of *Star Wars* fame. Apart from the stunning special effects, *The Hulk* contains a superhero plot, a young romance and a hint of misfortune – all the ingredients needed of a blockbuster.

Universal Pictures initially banded about names like George Clooney for the role of Bruce Banner. However, after much talk between Ang Lee and Universal Pictures, Eric Bana, who greatly impressed Ang Lee with his role in the Australian film, *Chopper* and his supporting role in *Black Hawk Down*, finally clinched the role. Lou Ferrigno, who starred as title character in the original television adaptation of 1978's *The Incredible Hulk*, will have a cameo appearance in *The Hulk* as the chief security officer.

For those who have been waiting for the resurrection of the green-skinned hero since its television adaptation ended in 1982, the two-decade wait is over.

Opens June 2003

Ng Yi Lian

X-Men 2



PHOTOS COURTESY OF 20th CENTURY FOX

Charles Xavier (Patrick Stewart), leader of the X-Men team, kicks off the X-Men sequel with a quote for the uninitiated, "Mutants, since the birth of their existence, they have been regarded with fear, suspicion and hatred." Bryan Singer returns as director, while hunky Hugh Jackman, Famke Janssen, Halle Berry, James Marsden and



Anna Paquin return as Wolverine, Jean Grey, Storm, Cyclops and Rogue respectively.

The Scorpion King's Kelly Hu takes on the triple role of Deathstrike, Anne Reynolds, and Yuriko Oyama, the last being the right hand woman to another new character, William Stryker (Brian Cox) – a powerful military leader who leads a movement against the mutants. The movie centres around an attack that works to discredit mutants and which makes it all the more difficult for the heroes of the show in continuing their quest to prove themselves in a world that is afraid to accept them.

The X-Men have to decide whether to join forces with Magneto, who approaches them for an alliance after he breaks free from his plastic prison to challenge Stryker, shortly after Stryker leads an assault on Xavier's mansion. During the course of the commotion, Wolverine goes out to find out more about his reclusive past, which is linked to Stryker.

Although entertaining, like the original *X-Men*, the sequel appeals more to the fans of the *X-Men* comic books than to the general audience, who will find it hard to keep up with the new characters. The cast of over 10 *X-Men* members makes it difficult for the actors to develop their characters adequately. The movie thus focuses on Wolverine and leaves the rest like Storm and Cyclops to ease into the woodwork.

Opens April 2003

Marie Therese Anthony

To win X-Men 2 mini-posters, simply name all the three roles that Kelly Hu plays in X-Men 2. Send your answers with your contact details and student number to hype@sandrockproductions.com. There are 20 posters to be given away!

(This promotion is only valid for Ngee Ann Polytechnic students.)

Fad Diets

Lydia Shi looks into some diets that may be more harmful than you think.

Veggie diets and juice fasts. Some might find these too hard to stomach but Hollywood stars are going all out to maintain the washboard stomachs and svelte figures we see plastered across our screens.

Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston are on a "hi-protein, lo-carb regime in which fat is fine but fruit and veg are limited", according to the BBC online.

This is just one of the many controversial fad diets available. But just how effective and safe are these drastic dieting methods? They can't be dangerous with so many celebrity endorsements, can they?

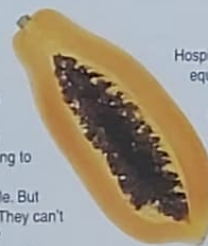
Before you embrace the seemingly wonderful fad diet, it is vital to explore the potential health risks.

High Protein, Low Carbohydrate Diets

The high protein, low carbohydrate diet is the reigning fad diet, with an impressive following that includes the likes of Gen Halliwell and Jennifer Aniston. They avoid or consume only minute amounts of carbohydrates while indulging in proteins.

Some common high protein, low carbohydrate diets are *The Atkins Diet*, *The Zone* and *Sugar Busters*.

Although CNN has reported that an Australian research group has found the high protein diet to be "effective" and reliable, Magdalen Cheong, Chief Dietitian at Changi General



Hospital, begs to differ. She reasons that high protein usually equates to high fat and thus, is very bad for health.

Cheong warns that even though it does not pose a problem in the short term, in the long run, *The Atkins Diet* may increase the risk of "cardio-vascular problems due to a high cholesterol and high fat diet".

Rosemary Stanton, a nutritionist and the author of *The Diet Dilemma-Explained*, writes that without adequate carbohydrates, body fat is burnt for energy and "highly toxic ketones" are formed. This may cause weakness, headache, nausea or even coma and death for diabetics. Dr Trisha Macnair, a medical journalist-cum-doctor, whose speciality includes renal medicine, working in the field of kidney dialysis, also wrote in BBC online, "high protein diets have been linked to kidney damage".

Sadly, many are unaware of these repercussions. An 18-year-old Ngee Ann Polytechnic student, Loh Wai Yin said, "My girlfriend's on some no rice, no noodles diet but it's okay since she's following some health book. Should be safe."

Unknown to him, cutting down entirely on carbohydrates will induce ketosis (burning of fats) and can have dire consequences.

Eating According To Your Type Diets

These are similar to the high protein, low carbohydrate diet. Christina Applegate, Hugh Grant and Kate Winslet have all tried these forms of diets. Two prevalent forms are the Blood Type Diet and the Facial Analysis Diet.

The Blood Type Diet's inventor, Peter D'Adamo, encourages people to eat food according to their blood type. His book states that blood type O people, whose "genetic ancestors" were hunters, should stick to a high animal protein diet, leaving out carbohydrates, wheat and some vegetables like lentils and cauliflower. Blood type A, on the other hand, whose forefathers were farmers, should be vegetarians and avoid meat and dairy products. Blood type B, whose ancestors were nomads can have food from both type O and type A diets but must abstain from chicken and wheat. Lastly, type AB blood should adopt a balanced combination from type A and type B diets.

Magdalen Cheong scoffs at this diet. "For the blood group diet, there's no scientific evidence."

Pamela Mason, a pharmacist and freelance writer writing in The Pharmaceutical Journal says this diet leaves out certain foods for no good reason and might result in "nutrient deficiency".

The Facial Analysis Diet is another relatively new formula where a diet plan is devised by studying one's facial appearance. This is unhealthy similar to the Blood Type Diet and poses similar risks.

Kate Winslet claims to have lost 25kg with this diet.

Lara Kilner, a journalist, writes in the Cosmopolitan magazine that the Facial Analysis Diet is an "ancient form of oriental medicine". After studying the "shape and colouring" of a person's face, a facial analyst will be able to plan out an appropriate diet.

For example, people with red and puffy cheeks need to avoid dairy products while others with blemishes on any part of the face are advised to refrain from oily food.

Food Combining Diets

Eating according to one's type may sound far-fetched but the Food Combining theory may be even more absurd.

These diets embrace fruits – to be consumed alone, and count among their numbers, the Hay System, Eat Great, Lose Weight and the Beverly Hills Diet. Very little carbohydrate, fat or protein is allowed and a cardinal rule of these diets is that people should never mix carbohydrates with fat or protein.

There is no sound reasoning behind such a rule. And pharmacist Mason expresses concerns over the low calcium and iron levels in these diets.

Calcium is needed to make bones and teeth strong. Shortage could lead to osteoporosis whereby bones become brittle. Articles abound on the dangers of osteoporosis. In its more serious form, it can result in fractures "painful and debilitating enough to lead to death". CNN online warns that iron deficiency can give rise to anaemia and "damage the functioning of the immune system".

Classic/Original Fad Diets

Out of all the diets mentioned, these are probably the earliest and most bizarre and dangerous because they often involve semi-starvation.

The Grapefruit Diet (or Orange Diet/Citrus Diet), Cabbage Soup Diet (or Chicken soup diet), and The Israeli Army Diet are classic examples of very low calorie diets. Imagine just having a salad with egg plus a grapefruit for lunch or just drinking cabbage soup for the whole day! Much worse, can anyone survive on just fruit for 10 days? With such stringent guidelines, it is no wonder people on these diets lose weight.

However, Gladys Wong, Chief Dietitian at Alexandra Hospital explains that "most fad diets are lower in total calories, thus they do appear to be successful in weight loss. However, these diets have many food restrictions which can lead to nutrient deficiencies if followed for a prolonged period".

"I tried eating only apples for a week," confessed Cynthia Ong, 16, a junior college student. "It's suppose to be a detox (detoxification) process from a magazine I read."

Abundant fad diets can be found in books like Eat More, Weigh Less and Sugar Buster, in magazines and on the Internet. Some like the Sugar Buster are written by doctors (in this case a "cardiovascular surgeon, an endocrinologist and a gastroenterologist"), hence lending a false authority to their so-called miracle diets.

In Singapore, we also have the Income 3-Day Diet, based apparently on a well-known British formula.

Seah See Ning, 19, an undergraduate at the Nanyang Technological University said, "I've tried the NTUC [Income] 3-day diet. It's okay but you've got to do it for more than three days for it to work I think."

This local fad diet version is low in calories and steers away from the traditional and safe food pyramid diet, which emphasises a balanced mix of carbohydrates, protein and a little fat. When asked online about its feasibility, the Health Promotion Board advises that it can only serve as "a short term solution to weight loss".

Dangers of Fad Diets

Fad diets in general are radical methods of losing weight in a short period of time. Fast weight loss is often accompanied by fast weight gain according to nutritionist Stanton. She states that this "yo-yo effect" may even increase cholesterol level.

Frances M. Berg, a nutritionist and family wellness specialist, also states in the Healthy Weight Journal, Health Risks of Weight Loss, that rapid weight loss, together with "very low calorie diets", increases the risk of gall stones.

Hospital dieticians Gladys Wong and Magdalen Cheong advise that the best way to really lose weight is with a balanced diet and adequate exercise.

So even though more outrageous fad diets surface frequently Cheong's advice is, "You don't gain weight overnight and you don't lose weight overnight."

Right of Expression

PHOTO: Matthew Lee

Controversial issues and angst – P. Gaayathri profiles a company and its founder, giving voice to youths.

The mission seems simple, yet hard to believe – to give young people an outlet to express their angst in a creative form and to be appreciated in return.

From the unlikelyst of beginnings, the aptly-named Awakening Productions (AP), a non-profit organisation which organises gigs synthesising fringe-culture and hip hop, has become a by-word in the local music scene. Straying away from mainstream genres, the organisation places heavy emphasis on largely untapped extreme genres. The more angst in the overtones, the more frowned upon they are, and the more Awakening Productions feels they need a stage.

The bands tend to release their pent-up energy via their music, says Gordon Khoo, 26, a volunteer at AP, who assumes the role of a project manager. "We see a lot of bands that play loud music, usually accompanied by even louder vocals and outfits. They obviously have something to say, hence all that angst." While he agrees that bands should identify themselves with certain traits, he takes a neutral stand on the effects of such music. "I can't really say if that kind of loud music can be considered as a positive influence or not. It's up to the individual to decide how positive the music can be for themselves. At the same time, I'm not saying that it's bad either."

Glenn Lim, founder of AP, an ex-rock musician himself, however has only a positive picture to paint, stressing that "every weakness can be turned into a strength", and that post-modernism has paved the way for the controversial musical genres to be positively regarded. Citing punk music as one reference to loud music, he'd rather they be known as "sub-cultures" than being generically deemed as "teen angst".

Punk, with its rebellion-driven sentiments, "can be used to speak up for the underdogs of society, being positively opinionated and guarding wholesome values uncompromisingly," says Lim.

And alternative music, which he terms "an expression of anger and a rage against the system", be it political or social, can act as a breakthrough for youths to initiate social movements against issues like war.

Being outspoken on youth issues and angst is what sets Lim apart, especially after eight years of drug abuse gone sour. Drug education and rehabilitative centre. Teen Challenge helped him survive the trauma of a possible life sentence and 24 strokes of the cane in 1993, when he was charged for possession of 350g of marijuana, smuggled in to Singapore from Malaysia after his rock performance.

During the six months in Teen Challenge pending sentence, the centre's lawyer took Lim's case, pleading intensively with law authorities using interim

reports from psychiatrists and Teen Challenge itself and Lim's promise to turn over a new leaf. For 'first time possession', Lim had his penalty reduced to a six-month jail term.

Thankful for his second chance, his youth counsellor and his pastor at the Church of Our Saviour, Lim now 32 and married, took the opportunity to set up AP in 1998, so that youths could have a conducive outlet for expression and not end up behind bars due to delinquency or substance abuse.

It might seem that AP is throwing bands a deal in exchange for nothing. But there is always a "catch" for a good deal, especially with AP's stance that the youths' talents should not be damaged by their misdeeds disposition. Prior to any event, performing bands have to sign an agreement with AP, agreeing that they will in no way damage the reputation of any gig. The most stressed clause is that bands have to refrain from using profanities at all times during an event.

However, despite its firm belief that today's vibrant and young people can influence and educate the society legitimately, AP has had its fair share of rejection from youths themselves, especially in the early years.

"They want to be heard and want a say in things, yet when granted the opportunity, regard them [the opportunities] with suspicion and ingratitude," laments Lim, on the paranoia of youths. "So they go back and complain nobody understands them, and that everyone is against them."

But now after a successful five-year period, AP has come up with some of Singapore's more outstanding gigs at Zouk, Insomnia, Sentosa and most recently at the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. All these were only possible due to the affiliation with charity establishments such as All Good Gifts Limited and Teen Challenge, and collaboration with the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA), National Arts Council and the National Youth Council. So being a non-profit organisation, what are AP's tactics for financial survival?

"We have a unique concept," says Lim. "We are more passion-driven than profit-driven. Whatever funds that come in, rolls into the next project. The agreement is, we don't touch the money that comes in."

AP, managed solely by volunteers and which holds meetings weekly to discuss event logistics, is seen as "an education in both camps [the authorities and the youths]", says Lim. Despite the government's dismissal of loud music as "noisy and as a nuisance", in the earlier years, AP has gained more favour now, trying to remove the social stigma surrounding youth angst by setting a positive tone in loud music.

Coco Lee unplugged

Standing up for her ethnic roots, Coco Lee has time and again paved the way for Asian artistes. **Dawn Ong** speaks to the lady and discovers the magic.

First Asian to perform at the Oscars. First Asian to host the MTV Asia Awards. First Asian singer to be signed on by Sony Music United States. With that impressive list of "firsts", Coco Lee has set out to receive all the applause and attention long overdue for Asian talents. As Coco Lee makes her way into the room, that contagious smile catches everyone even before she's seated at the press conference. Ever since her foray into the music industry, Coco's elegant beauty and effervescent appeal have made her a popular figure among both local and foreign media. It's hard to imagine how this petite, 28-year-old singer/songwriter has achieved so much just eight years into her career. The daunting task of breaking into the English music market is something no Asian singer has successfully done, until now.



PHOTOS Dawn Ong

Her first English Album, *Just No Other Way*, was released in February 2000, and the talented Asian-American has not looked back. The album was an instant hit, with more than two million copies sold worldwide. The first single from the album, *Do You Want My Love*, became a Top 20 hit in the American Billboard Charts and secured her a strong place in the English music industry. This international singing sensation made her mark and made everyone sit up and listen.

Sony Music US was so impressed with Coco that they even invited Rick Wuake, the Grammy award-winning producer for stars like Jennifer Lopez and Celine Dion, to produce the second album for Coco. "He (Rick) said, 'Coco, I'm going to do the whole album and we're going to make you a star,'" Coco grins. "It's a great compliment from him and I've learnt so much as a songwriter."

This diminutive singer has just five more songs to finish before audiences can listen to her eagerly anticipated second album. And she's putting her heart and soul into it. "I'm influenced by artistes in Asia, Europe and the US. From all those I absorb the best things and put them into my music."

However, it is her passion for oriental music that sparked off her interest in producing English albums. "It really had a lot to do with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* because after singing the theme song, I realised that traditional Chinese music is so beautiful," Coco says. "So I promised myself that I have to put the Chinese element into my English album, and I did that."

Coco wants to prove that Asian stars can gain a place in the competitive English music market, even when the turnover and fallout rate is high. She believes the hard work will pay off.

"I'm not releasing an English album just to be a singer. I really want to

make a difference," Coco says. "It has to be the best. An album represents me, musically, or else I will not release it until it's perfect."

She hopes to be a role model for aspiring Asian musicians, for artistes "have the power to influence the younger generation. It's really important for me to do well and succeed and to get the support from my people, especially. We need that voice. We need someone to stand for our people," Coco explains. "Musically, we don't have anybody and hopefully, I could be that first person because if I do succeed, I can help the others."

Once people have accepted Asian people singing English songs, there will

be many more Cocos to come."

She already paved the way in November 2002, when she was given the honour of singing the US National Anthem at NBA Houston Rockets, in their game against the Toronto Raptors. Her outstanding rendition touched the 16,000-strong audience and brought everyone to their feet. "When they announced that Coco Lee would be performing the US National Anthem, everyone cheered," she recalls. "It's a really important moment for us (Asians)."

Often billed as the 'Mariah of the East', her amazing vocal range was also displayed during Ricky Martin's concert tour in Asia. Coco was hand-picked by Ricky Martin to appear as his guest star. Their on-stage chemistry was so explosive that the duo was reunited a second time at MTV Asia's 6th Anniversary Celebration in 2001. Another unforgettable performance was during the 2001 Oscars when she sang, *A Love Before Time*, the theme song from the acclaimed movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

When asked what she plans to do on her second album to create and foster a stronger Asian identity, the star claims she wants to have her hair jet black again. "My hair has turned a bit darker," Coco jokes. "So do look forward to me having black hair, it's very possible. It's been six years since I last had black hair!"

This star exudes poise and confidence during the interview. "It's all about confidence," Coco says. "If you have confidence, you can carry off anything. Be charming." Indeed, this Oriental Pearl has managed to charm her way into the hearts of many.

PHOTOS of the Kranji War Memorial: Sue-Ann Woo and Syeda Sana Rahman



No one would be foolish enough to choose war over peace - in peace sons bury their fathers, but in war fathers bury their sons.

- King Croesus of Lydia (561 - 546 B.C.)

