

‘How do you compete with Bali?’

The recent Ubud Writers & Readers Festival offers lessons the Singapore Writers Festival can learn from, ranging from venue choice to ticket pricing



Clement Yong

UBUD, Bali – Every year for the past 20 years, thousands have gathered in Bali’s cultural capital, Ubud, for a few days to meet their favourite authors, exchange views on current affairs and experience a destination writers festival that has fast become one of the region’s most important.

It was no different in 2023 at the 20th edition of the Ubud Writers & Readers Festival, which was held from Oct 18 to 22.

After a sweaty, intimate opening ceremony held in the chiaroscuro forecourt of the historic Ubud Palace, more than 200 authors, activists and journalists moderated and participated in over 100 activities in a jam-packed five days.

Booker Prize winners Bernardine Evaristo and Shehan Karunatilaka, as well as International Booker Prize recipient Geetanjali Shree discussed their literary careers.

Turn a corner and you might find Pulitzer Prize winner Geraldine Brooks deep in conversation with Eka Kurniawan, the first Indonesian to be nominated for the International Man Booker Prize.

Amid the higher-than-usual temperatures in Bali, people clung to every word of Indian climate activist Vandana Shiva, who was given a standing ovation and mobbed by admirers after a panel on ecofeminism.

Ahead of Singapore’s 26th Singapore Writers Festival (SWF) in November, here are some points of comparison between the two Asian festivals, while remembering that they are very different beasts in their overall setting and target audience.

PLACE MATTERS – MOVE SINGAPORE WRITERS FESTIVAL OUT OF THE ARTS HOUSE?

When asked what distinguishes SWF from Ubud’s event, Sri Lankan author Karunatilaka says with a laugh: “I mean, how do you

compete with Bali?” The author of *The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida*, which won the Booker Prize in 2022, is no stranger to Singapore.

Until the Covid-19 pandemic, he used to split his year between working as a copywriter in advertising in Singapore and writing in Sri Lanka. In 2012, he was an invited speaker at SWF, where he talked about sports and South Asian writing.

The author, who was in Ubud with his wife and two children, recalls: “There was a lot happening at SWF, but you don’t get a sense that there was this quiet setting, where connections can be made with readers, where you can exchange ideas.”

“What really makes a festival is having a common area where people can interact. Otherwise, it can feel like I’m going from the hotel to an event then back to the hotel or airport.”

As a destination festival, one of the key selling points of the Ubud Writers & Readers Festival is Bali’s verdant nature and slow pace.

Books took place in two cooled and well-ventilated tents in a main festival area, and in the second floor of the nearby Indus restaurant, which boasts a high-vantage terrace overlooking a forested ridge.

Book signings happened in an open-air courtyard lined with chairs and tables. The smaller number of participants compared with SWF keeps the Ubud festival a relatively informal affair and, for the most part, this space doubled as a town square for participants to mingle, eat and rest.

Festival director Janet DeNeeff has made sure this is all walled off from the busy main road, with little to remind participants of the lives they might have to get back to, she says: “The key is to keep people out of anywhere that feels boring and to create magical spaces.”

The Melbourne-born restaurateur tries to attend the festival in Singapore, and praises the Republic for its “killer venues”, though she also notes that “The Arts House and Victoria Theatre can still feel a little corporate.”

“In Ubud, I’ve met people just totally blown away by the fact that they’ve been in an audience watch-



ing a writer and then suddenly, the writer is next to them,” she says. “We encourage the writers to hang out. Ubud is not a big city. It’s just a town, so the whole place is more chill.”

Though it might be difficult to imagine a similar enclave in concrete jungle Singapore, there are moments when the incongruity of current venues becomes obvious – during discussions about decolonisation, for instance, or more practically, when the narrow aisles of The Arts House preclude gathering after sessions.

Mr Francis Lau, a master’s student in creative writing at Lasalle College of the Arts who attended the Ubud festival, suggests that SWF relocate its traditional Civic District home ground.

The 52-year-old says: “If you are holding it in a former parliamentary house, there is a formality to it and it’s an unconscious reminder that there is protocol, that you may not be free to speak.”

Inspired by a conversation with a fellow writer, Mr Lau asks: “Is there anything wrong with holding it in restaurants? Or in the houses of people who are willing to host poetry reading sessions?” “I’m most impressed by how ideological or political discussions in Ubud are. The artists here feel free to speak their minds. It would be really nice to see that back home.”

THE PITFALLS OF AN INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCE

Until recently, Australians and other tourists from Britain, France and the United States made up the majority of the Ubud audience, with festival director Ms DeNeeff’s Australian connection and strong international programming successfully creating a greater awareness of the festival outside Southeast Asia.

In 2023, Indonesian participants increased to form about half of the roughly 15,000 people who took part. This total is about a third of the SWF’s more than 46,000 primarily Singaporean attendees in 2022.

But, for better or worse, white voices still dominated in Ubud. To retain foreign interest, many panels were neither moderated by, nor included, Indonesians.

Quite a number of the topics were clearly directed outwards, such as a shallow discussion of Nusantara, Indonesia’s planned future capital, scheduled to be inaugurated in 2024 and replace Jakarta over time.

Another panel on Indonesian art grated when the moderator allocated too much time to Dutch lecturer Edwin Jurriens, instead of allowing the audience to hear from the two Indonesian art practitioners present – young artist Lala Bohang and printmaker Devy Ferdianto.



There was an exception in a question-and-answer session by former minister of religious affairs Quraish Shihab. The discussion attracted many young Indonesians interested in topics such as the role Islam can play in cultivating peace, dating non-Muslims and whether Indonesians might elect a non-Muslim leader.

Lasalle creative writing student Vanessa Chng, 28, says the lack of engagement with local issues was sometimes frustrating. “At the last SWF I attended, all three panellists were Singaporean-Malays and that perspective came from somewhere very local. But at the Ubud festival, you have panels on decolonisation made up entirely of foreign writers. So, whose decolonisation are we referring to?” she adds. “In Ubud, it’s also more of a writers’ retreat, like we are going to do some yoga and get some poetry while doing it, and look at Indone-

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(Above) The bookshop at the Ubud Writers & Readers Festival. (Left) The festival's opening gala was held at the historic Ubud Palace.

SINGAPORE WRITERS FESTIVAL

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sia to tick off some boxes. There were programmes such as bird-watching and ridge walks that were not really part of the SWF package. So there's a lot of Bali in what this festival is trying to sell."

But for Indonesian writer Kurniawan (Beauty Is A Wound, 2002), the advantages outweigh the costs. He was on several panels that included esteemed authors such as Evaristo and Brooks.

An international mix of speakers and audiences, says Kurniawan, gives Indonesians access to a diver-

sity of voices that they might not otherwise have, even if it might seem like they are being eclipsed.

A talk on reshaping the past, for instance, takes in the perspectives of Indigenous Australian author Anita Heiss and Trinidad and Tobago novelist Kevin Jared Hosein. It had many audience members, white and non-white, scrambling for the world map.

Kurniawan says: "A festival should be diverse and not insular. I would say it's now about half Indonesian and half not. What is more important is that there is space for young and emerging writers to be a part of activities."

This approach might be working. More than 800 young writers in Indonesia submitted their works in 2023 for the annual festival anthology, a huge improvement from when the festival used to have to scour the country looking for interested writers.

SWF in 2023 features many overseas speakers, from the returning English author Jeanette Winterson and Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen to Nigerian author Caleb Femi and third-wave feminist writer Judith Butler.

How they are put in conversation with Singapore writers on local, regional and international issues should contribute to whether this makes for a truly standout gathering.



(Top) Book signings, such as one with International Booker Prize recipient Geetanjali Shree, took place in an open-air courtyard at the Ubud Writers & Readers Festival. (Above) The Singapore Writers Festival, on the other hand, is held at The Arts House and Victoria Theatre, which can feel a little corporate. PHOTOS: ST FILE, UBUD WRITERS & READERS FESTIVAL

TICKET PRICES AND THE AGE FACTOR

It is not until one looks at the astronomical prices of the Ubud Writers & Readers Festival that the affordability of SWF becomes apparent.

Four-day festival passes for Ubud cost \$43 for Indonesian students, \$107 for other Indonesians and a whopping \$426 for foreigners.

In contrast, a two-week festival pass for SWF is priced at \$30. Early bird-tickets bought before Thursday are just \$24.

Young Indonesian writer Nuril Basri, who tackles queer topics in his autofiction and ofbeat stories, says: "I wouldn't be able to attend the Ubud festival if I weren't invited to be a speaker."

He points out that the writing and publishing industry remains elitist. Accessible writers festivals are very important for young writers to reach new and younger readers that might be more open to challenging topics and have less entrenched reading patterns.

"Attending festivals is as much a part of the job for writers as writing," he says.

Jokingly, he adds: "At one point, I couldn't pay a translator I wanted. What can I pay him with? With my soul? But I don't even have a soul anymore."

Young writers who impressed attendees with their eloquence include Andre Dao, the Melbourne-based Vietnamese author of Anam (2023), who is still little known outside of Australia; and American Tanwi Nandini Islam, or Tanais, whose message of using scent to decolonise mindsets led to all her books selling out on the second day of the festival.

Scottish poet Michael Pederson also gained fans with his performance of his verses in his collection Boy Friends (2022). The tribute to his late friend included details such as the seafood platter they last ate together.

By the time the bank had cleared the transaction for the expensive feast, his friend was no longer alive.

Ms Steph Harmon, culture editor of The Guardian Australia, who

moderated a panel, says Ubud's high ticket prices partially explain the older demographic of participants, though festivals everywhere are struggling to reach younger readers.

In Melbourne and Sydney, participants also tend to be over the age of 40. A good festival fundamentally lies in the "curation of the talent and the programming of ideas", but more diverse audiences can keep things interesting, she says.

"You get different answers to what you would get when you are promoting a book in radio, interviews or in other ways. Beyond age, just by coming to Ball, Australian writers are suddenly opening themselves up to a whole different group of potential readers. If they are getting the same audience in the same circuits, with the same moderators moderating them, it can start to feel quite similar."

SWF festival director Pooja Nansi's more diverse focus and willingness to take authors popular on TikTok seriously – such as Chloe Gong and Dustin Thao in 2022 – have bucked this global trend and kept the make-up of SWF vibrant, even if some of this also has to do with Singapore's greater focus on English education after its founding.

It is left to the diplomatic Shree (Tomb Of Sand, 2018) to declare that she "loves all writers' festivals" – from one in Mauritius that she just attended, comprising 10 non-Mauritius writers and 10 Mauritius writers, to the chaotic hunger for knowledge at the Jaipur Literature Festival.

"We are celebrating writers and readers, books and literature, and that is the richest and the most humane and – I think – fun way for everybody from anywhere to get together and connect and resolve differences," she says.

"To debate, to talk about opposing views in a way that does not translate into ugly wars and violent hostilities. For me, that is an absolutely great and necessary thing in today's world."

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