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VOILAH! FRENCH FESTIVAL SINGAPORE 2016

More than 40 events lined up

By Cheah U-Heon
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FROM art to food, museum exhibitions and science trips, the French are serious about introducing their culture to Singapore, and discovering the parallels between the two countries' pursuits in areas beyond arts.

Even though the agreement signed in 2009 between France and Singapore specifically promotes bilateral cooperation and cultural initiatives, with many events involving French artists or professionals in Singapore - 140 in 2015 for example - this "intense partnership was not visible enough", says Benjamin Dubertret, Ambassador of France to Singapore.

Hence, the revival of Voilahi French Festival in Singapore last year, which Mr Dubertret believes to be the one and only multidisciplinary foreign festival here. As the festival celebrated \$50 last year, it saw 275,000 participants in seven weeks for more than 40 events.

"Our objective is to initiate a virtual circle, Voilahi being able to help foster cooperations, which in turn can feed future Voilahi editions," he says.

The annual rendez-vous has two main objectives: to promote French creativity in a large number of fields: culture, innovation, gastronomy, cinema, etc; and secondly to improve the quality of Singapore-France bilateral cooperation, building upon institutional relationships and the dynamism of private initiatives.

Voilahi has a large number of institutional partners such as the French Chamber of Commerce, Alliance Française or private ones with sponsors from French companies or Singaporean foundations.

This year's line-up again features more than 40 events, with the opening weekend featuring programmes at three iconic locations: Marina Bay, Gardens by the Bay and the Botanic Gardens. In gastronomy, there is a focus on the Aquitaine Limousin Poitou-Charentes region in France, through a showcase of some of its food products.

"Singapore is also an important gateway to showcase French culture and innovation to the rest of Asia. In this spirit, Voilahi, in bringing the best of French culture to Singapore, will provide the platform for French and Singaporean communities to meet, exchange ideas and contribute to the cultural vitality in both countries," Mr Dubertret says.

Inspiring change through his pictures of rivers

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A SHORTAGE of clean, fresh water will be the next great global crisis, say experts who have been predicting it for a few years now. And helping to create awareness about a problem that is worldwide and not just limited to poor countries is photojournalist Franck Vogel, who has spent the last four years documenting the challenges facing the major rivers of the world.

It all started during a meeting in 2011 with Green Cross director (former Russian president) Mikhail Gorbachev, who appointed him as an ambassador," explains Vogel, who studied biochemistry and has a master's degree in engineering technology. His first project was a documentary on the Brahmaputra river in India, possibly the world's first eco-warrior. Through Green Cross, "I learned about the Nile and the Mississippi Dam project in Ethiopia. And I wanted to learn how Egypt and the local people would be affected."

His motivation comes from the fact that "we humans are made mainly of water, and we need it to survive. Since we are not able to create water molecules, we have to preserve it. There is no other option." Many of the rivers in the world face daunting challenges and countries are fighting over water-rich territories. Most conflicts and water issues involve transboundary rivers.

In 2012, he started working on a preliminary story on the Nile, which passes through Ethiopia, South Sudan and Egypt. "And I had a feeling that the Nile was not the only river with water issues in the world," he relates. He moved on to the Brahmaputra in India, followed by the Colorado and Jordan rivers. His next project will be the Mekong this summer and, next year, he will work on the Ganges and the Amazon.

Some 50 photographs from three of these rivers - the Nile, Brahmaputra and Colorado - will be exhibited in Singapore as part of the Voilahi French Festival. They capture the most powerful images I can - which are graphic, colourful, powerful, and with a real story behind them. I hope that some will become iconic symbols that inspire change. It seems the best way to spread my message worldwide," he relates.

One of the most difficult shots was in South Sudan, where he travelled to photograph an abandoned gigantic Soviet-era water-released Sudd, which had been used to dig a canal through the territory. It was a controversial project and the machine itself was attacked and destroyed during the civil war in the mid-1980s. The machine was in the middle of the bush, where dozens of



(Left) The Brahmaputra. Vogel (above) captures images which are "graphic, colourful, powerful, and with a real story behind them". PHOTOS: FRANCK VOGEL

men died during a trial fight just near the machine around the time Vogel was there. He had a military secret of night soldiers who were afraid of being attacked, but while driving through the bush, there was no ambush. Instead, they encountered thousands of huge wild antelopes crossing through a village being shot at by armed residents wanting to kill as many as possible.

"We also ended up with a bullet hitting our car. It was quite chaotic and dangerous, but in the end nobody was hurt and I got 'the shot' of the machine," he relates. Vogel agrees that the global freshwater situation has reached a critical point and that it needs immediate attention and action. Saving water is more than just simply reducing water consumption in the home or garden, he explains. That water consumption is usually 30 times more than the 130 litres used every day at home in Singapore or the 200 litres used in France daily, he points out. "This hidden water consumption is actually all the water that is necessary to produce what we eat, drink, the clothes we wear, and basically everything in our lives."

Besides holding exhibitions all over the world, Vogel will also publish a two-volume photography book. The first volume with a French publisher will be released in September to create awareness about the issues he is passionate about. The Asian premiere of Transboundary Rivers by Franck Vogel will be held from April 16 to May 20 at Gardens by the Bay, Cotuitan and Supertree Grove. He will also be holding a conference on Transboundary Rivers on April 16 at 3.30pm, at Gardens by the Bay.

Other festival highlights

■ L'Arrière-ban Balé (right) at Marina Bay - April 15 from 7.30pm and April 16, Supertree Grove, Gardens by the Bay from 7.15pm.

■ Guitar Festival by The West Coast (below), Chapin, May 21



■ Concert picnic with a classical French concert by Anany Corvatsa - soprano of the Radio France Philharmonic Orchestra - and a string quartet (right), April 17, Botanic Gardens.

■ Guizant: 120 Years of Cinema, April 12-May 13, National Design Centre, April 15-May 15

■ Christianity in Asia, featuring artworks from Musée de Louvre and Bibliothèque Nationale de France, at the Asian Civilisations Museum, May 29-Sept 11.

■ Urban Fork Exhibition by Philippe Dery and Bob Lee (May 5-31, The Projector) Voilahi is held from April 15 to May 31. More information at www.voilahi.sg



An Urban Fork exhibit, where architects' names are "written" on their buildings to emphasise a sensitive connection to the urban landscape.

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"It all started during a meeting in 2011 with Green Cross director (former Russian president) Mikhail Gorbachev, who appointed me as an ambassador," explains Vogel, who studied biochemistry and has a master's degree in engineering (agronomy). His first project was a documentary on the Bishnoi community in India, possibly the world's first eco-warriors. Through Green Cross, "I learned about the Nile and the Millennium Dam project in Ethiopia. And I wanted to know how Egypt and the local people would be affected."

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One of the most difficult shots was in South Sudan, where he travelled to photograph an abandoned gigantic bucket excavator nicknamed Sarah, which had been used to dig a canal through the territory. It was a controversial project and the machine itself was attacked and destroyed during the civil war in the mid 1980s. The machine was in the middle of the bush, where dozens of men died during a tribal fight just near the machine around the time Vogel was there. He had a military escort of eight soldiers who were afraid of being ambushed. But while driving through the bush, there was no ambush; instead, they encountered thousands of huge wild antelopes crossing through a village being shot at by armed residents wanting to kill as many as possible.

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Other festival highlights

- Luminéoles Ballet at Marina Bay - April 15 from 7.30pm and April 16, Supertree Grove, Gardens by the Bay from 7.15pm
- Guitar Recital by Thibault Cauvin, Chijmes, May 13
- Gourmet picnic with a classical French concert by Amaury Coeytaux - supersoloist of the Radio France Philharmonic Orchestra - and a string quartet, April 17, Botanic Gardens
- Gaumont: 120 Years of Cinema, April 15-May 15, National Design Centre, April 15-May 15

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- Christianity in Asia, featuring artworks from Musée du Louvre and Bibliothèque Nationale de France, at the Asian Civilisations Museum, May 26-Sept 11
- Urban Fork Exhibition by Philippe Diversy and Bob Lee (May 5-31, The Projector)

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