

A smaller Fringe Festival

er tickets sold this year
to fewer shows

Akshita Nanda
Arts Correspondent

While six of the eight productions at this year's M1 Singapore Fringe Festival were sold out, total ticket sales fell by 37 per cent, in part because fewer events were programmed this year.

The annual arts festival sponsored by telco M1 ran from Jan 4 to Sunday and had 21 ticketed performances compared with 29 last year. Sales were marginally affected by the cancellation of two headline events before the festival opened.

Organisers said both performance lecture *Naked Ladies* by Canadian artist Thea Fitz-James and interactive piece *Undressing Room* by Singaporean dancer Ming Poon would together have accounted for about 200 tickets.

A total of 2,569 tickets were sold this year, compared with last year's 4,108.

Those two shows were denied ratings by the Info-communications Media Development Authority (IMDA) last November over "excessive nudity". Organisers cancelled the shows rather than rework them to meet R18 guidelines.

Fringe events are edgy by definition, but this 13th edition of the well-known festival pushed the artistic envelope.

This year's theme, *Art & Skin*, inspired the formation of a brand-new burlesque troupe, *Skin In SIN*. Mentored by American artist Madge Of Honor and Singapore's Becca D'Bus, the ensemble of Singaporeans and Singapore residents performed its revue *Foreign Bodies* to sold-out houses at the Esplanade Recital Studio.

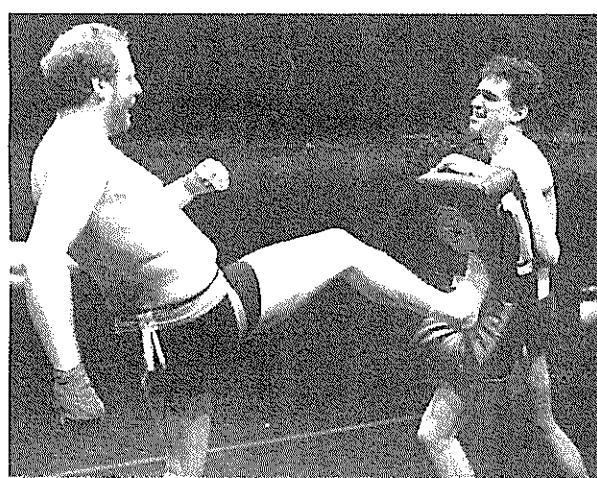
Four other commissions featuring Singaporean artists were also sold out. These included playwright-director Tan Liting's play about gender expectations, *Pretty Butch*; and *Si Ti Kay*, a variation on Noor Effendy Ibrahim's 2012 performance piece of the same name, devised with his collective *Akulah Bimbo Sakti*.

Dance work *Skin Tight* also attracted a full house. It featured the comeback of dancers Ah Hock and Peng Yu, whose last public performance in Singapore was in 2008.

Equally popular was *Fresh Fringe: Triple-Bill*, a four-hour showcase of works still in progress.

Commissions are key to the programme of the fringe festival here and often discussed in free talks during the festival. This was the first time artists got to show off raw works in a ticketed show.

"It's something we would love to continue as part of our support for experimentation and generation of



German-Swiss troupe *Peng! Palast's Fight! Palast #membersonly* (left).

PHOTO: JAMIE CHAN

new local work," said festival director Sean Tobin, who has helmed the fringe festival since 2015.

The festival is organised under the umbrella of local troupe *The Necessary Stage*.

The sixth sold-out show this year was *Labels*, a performance by *Worklight Theatre* from Britain, about skin colour and racial identity.

The organisers did not offer total attendance figures this year, but it

could be close to last year's 9,900 attendance, thanks to roving British artist Liz Atkin.

She took MRT trains here over 13 days and gave away charcoal drawings done on the spot to commuters. She draws to combat her skin-picking disorder and is estimated to have met between 500 and 800 people a day – at least 6,500 in total.

Attendance at ticketed performances went up, averaging 94 per cent full houses, an increase from 84 per cent last year.

Schools snapped up 28 per cent of all seats.

The fringe festival is also a favourite with aspiring theatre practitioners such as Ms Sonia Kwek. The 26-year-old is in her final year of the Intercultural Theatre Institute's three-year training programme and caught four shows this year.

The ticket prices – \$12 to \$25 – appealed to her, as did the "consistent-

ly good programming". She watched *Skin Tight*, *Pretty Butch*, *Foreign Bodies* and also *Fight! Palast #membersonly*, a performance-cum-workshop by German-Swiss troupe *Peng! Palast* based on the Chuck Palahniuk novel *Fight Club*.

"I really like the diversity in all the shows I watched," she says. "It's good that they brought in foreign productions. I also like that they focused on locals. Things like the *Fresh Fringe* are really for the people at my level in the industry."

akshitan@sph.com.sg

* The M1 Singapore Fringe Festival 2018 will be curated around the theme, *Let's Walk*, from the title of a series of striking street performances by Singaporean artist Amanda Heng. To find out more and apply, go to <http://bit.do/M1SFF2018>. Applications close on March 3.