

FEEDING THE MONKEYS

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On my first morning, slightly wacky with the heat and the fatigue of travelling, conscious I was in the mysterious East – Singapore, the home of dope-smugglers, where millionaires abounded for ransom, and European men outnumbered women six to one – the first thing I saw, dangling from my suitcase, was a white label with large blue letters that said ‘SIN!’

Two hours later I found that the immigration authorities were ensuring that even my private life should remain stagnant and dull – I could kiss all thoughts of romantic adventure a wistful good-bye.

I was required to sign a form stating I would not ‘Entertain’ before, during or after the performance. Feeling largely insulted, slightly amused and more than a little puzzled, I asked for a definition of the word ‘entertain’. As no one would explain, but hedged uncomfortably, I concluded I wasn’t being unnecessarily suspicious, but I remained puzzled by the manner in which I could ‘entertain’ during a performance. It meant, literally, I could talk to no one at any time except on my day off.

The apprehension of the Filipino musicians was dispelled at the sight of written music. All good musicians, readers and natural vocal harmonists, they had in the past encountered overseas vocalists arriving with no music at all, contracted as I was, to sing band-vocals and floor-show numbers. The fourteen-piece orchestra of Radio Singapore, which has four lingual channels, was like a league of nations and it compared with the Sydney ABC Orchestra favourably.

I was most impressed by the manners of the Englishmen I met. I learned to ‘hover’ in the matter of chairs, doors and lighting cigarettes – being Australian, I’d exhibited an independent strain in these matters. I remember the sad occasion, however, when I practised on an Australian Lieutenant Commander. He ‘out-hovered’ me and, after three minutes and a beetling of his eyebrows, I pushed open the door and slunk in.

I discovered various national traits – for instance when declining an invitation to a night-club in favour of having an early night, a Frenchman says suspiciously, ‘Who is he?’, an Englishman faced with a rather ‘cool’ slack-suit says, ‘You can’t wear that! What will all my friends say?’ and an American on invitation to view the finest collection of jade in the world says, ‘There’s not much value in that stuff, is there?’

I was, I thought, never nationalistic. I didn't have the Australian's defensive aggressiveness. But after two weeks in Singapore when my accent had been commented upon at least four times a day I found myself bellowing 'Advance Australia Fair' under the shower. In time, I developed an athletic outback stride all over the hotel with an occasional 'Ow're yer going' thrown in to heighten the effect.

The Presbyterian congregation will never quite recover from the regular Sunday morning spectacle of a nightclub singer (rather jaded at nine a.m.) singing doggedly among the tenors. I can't help it – I insist I'm quite normal – it's just my voice that defies description.

I decide, after a week, to buy a hat as my freckles looked like a high case of measles. Being of a practical nature I thought the most sensible were the big weatherproof hats the rickshaw drivers always wore. I noticed them when I attempted to buy one the reception was rather peculiar. Every other kind of hat was offered, with gestures and puzzled frowns, but I insisted, and left three normally impassive Chinese ladies having hysterics.

I teetered up the street, swaying from side to side, keeping the thing on by sheer will power and immense difficulty. I swung from side to side like a chocolate wheel obscuring my vision in an alarming manner.

'These Chinese', I thought, clutching 36 inches of swaying brim 'must be infernally clever. No wonder they have such good deportment!' After I'd climbed out of two storm channels, evaded death in the shape of a speeding taxi by inches tripped over two alley cats with Siamese faces, and a rooster, I became aware of an uncanny silence. All trading had stopped in the market and the entire Chinese population was watching my erratic progress with oriental-type fascination.

Not until I had knocked over a rickety fruit stall and was scrabbling companionably in the dust for Lychees with its owner was I informed that no one but the poorest menial wore these hats and that the bewildered ladies must have thought I wanted it for a wall ornament, as they'd neglected to sell me the most important part of all. This was a basket-like attachment, secured to the hat, that the head fitted into. Feeling vastly cheered that Chinese girls weren't so smart after all; I was straightaway cast down to the depths of to discover the only headpiece large enough for me, which I declined in a huff, was a bamboo breadbasket.

I made my way to the Botanical Gardens, carrying my lunch in a basket, stopping to buy some white cord to secure the hat and some biscuits to feed the monkeys I'd heard lived in the trees.

Standing in the middle of the path, looking like an animated standard lamp (unlit), I opened my basket to feed on dear little baby monkey. He was peering from behind a tree, with one little black velvet paw over his mouth, looking defenceless.

Little did I know he'd chattered from behind that paw – 'Come on boys, here's another sucker!'

The opening of the basket was the signal. Down the path, up the lawn, down the slope, down the tree-trunks, up from the lake, suddenly the gardens looked like the Domain on Sundays. There were hundreds of monkeys – black, grey, brown, babies, senile, mothers, fathers and dear little brats all converging on my basket. They swung on my hat, nibbled my scuffs, clung to my sacks, ripped the serviette, peeled the bananas, contemptuously bounded up and down in the basket and attacked my menthol cigarettes.

The hat came to an inglorious end as I threw it to stem the coughing, choking advance and ran, shaking off monkeys, many of whom surely suffered from menthol poisoning, I hope, I hope, I hope!

I learned that supposedly inscrutable Chinese are a wonderfully polite audience, beaming encouragement and unaccountably fond of Irish songs. My first 10" album has sold consistently in Singapore for four years.

My first introduction to a Singapore audience was something I may forget in time. It had something of the character of a Charles Addams cartoon and it comes back to me in the still of the night with those thoughts about taxation and what the world is coming to. Perhaps in time I won't come out in a sweat, but share the picture with me – please do.

It was a small ballroom, my opening number, an Irish song – sadder than most – was half finished when from a nearby table came the banshee-like howls of a planter from Malaya who used his serviette to mop up the crocodile tears. I backed away, too hastily, caught my heel in the extremely tight skirt of my gown and sat down heavily on the lap of a severe-looking, bemonocled lady – unmistakably British.

Recovering, I growled my way through a French chanson – à la Piaf – and was beginning to feel I had the attention of the audience once again, when the monocle dropped and an extremely clear, high voice, full of good breeding, said, in a disgusted tone that bounced off the walls, 'My deah – how ghastly... You can see her suspenders!'

