

Using culture to promote the EU

French Ambassador Pierre Buhler speaks to PARVATHI NAYAR about Encore!, a European season of arts events in Singapore that launches next week and goes on till December

'EUROPE as an entity is here to stay, but the European Union - or EU - is not so well-known to the people of Singapore,' says Pierre Buhler, the Ambassador of France to Singapore. He is explaining to BT how a European season of arts/culture events in Singapore that launches next week aims to redress this issue. That would be Encore!, an umbrella platform that embraces all cultural events presented by all countries of the EU, from May to December this year. 'Culture is a very efficient way to raise the profile of the EU,' he notes.



Mr Buhler: Has been active in helping promote French culture here by forging relationships and facilitating collaborative ventures

The Encore! branding initiative kicks off next week with the 18th European Union Film Festival. Its opening film, *Angel*, is one that the Ambassador calls 'quintessentially European'; ie, *Angel* is credited as a Belgian/French/English production, directed by Frenchman Francois Ozon and has a British cast.

'If all goes according to plan, we will be the first European Season anywhere in the world,' enthuses Mr Buhler, who sees Encore! as an evolving concept - and one that he hopes will gather momentum over succeeding years and be copied by EU missions in other countries.

Cultural diplomacy is a smart tool to emphasise EU branding, since EU missions have an embarrassment of riches to choose from, among their culturally rich and diverse member countries. Encore! - with a budget of about \$650,000 in cash and \$600,000 in kind - seeks to present the traditions that exist side-by-side in EU member countries as several worlds within one.

Mr Buhler - who takes on the next presidency of the EU here, in accordance with the change of guard as agreed by the EU rules - feels that while the trade interests of the EU are being well-promoted, 'EU remains a fuzzy concept here. Launching an EU season of some 40 to 45 events will be part of our initiatives to brand Europe as an entity.'

Mr Buhler is pleased that the initiative has got support from the corporate sector here, 'who acknowledges that Encore! is a platform with multiple networking opportunities'. In terms of the private sector, the Tan Chin Tuan Foundation, Shaw Foundation and Lee Foundation have all come on board as founding partners.

An interest in the arts is not new to the Ambassador. Born in 1954, Mr Buhler's deeper involvement began as an actor in amateur theatre productions while still a university student in Paris. During his graduate studies he decided to become a career diplomat, 'as a way to breathe the air of the planet, and not just Paris'.

Later, as a junior diplomat, 'when I was posted to Warsaw and Moscow, I began a modest collection of art from these countries.' He recounts how he enjoyed the opportunities to mingle with local artists in these countries: 'It was at the beginning of Perestroika, and these were artists trying to express something that was different, new.' Examples of these paintings and prints can be seen in his home in Singapore, where he moved a year-and-a-half ago. Mr Buhler still enjoys the visual arts and goes regularly to exhibitions in Singapore, but collects more sporadically now.

He is also keen on the performing arts and as the Cultural Counsellor of the French Embassy in New York (1996-2001) was responsible for French cultural operations in the entire United States. One of the most successful programmes Mr Buhler organised was the US\$1 million event France Moves, a contemporary dance festival that brought together 10 top French companies. He was also successful in working with exciting creative partners, such as the Guggenheim Museum, to bring the best of French talent to the US.

As Ambassador in Singapore, culture is just one part of his remit, but Mr Buhler has been active in helping promote French culture here by forging relationships and facilitating collaborative ventures. As with the Singapore Arts Festival, for example, that opens with a work on Boat Quay by French street theatre company Ilotopie.

Mr Buhler says: 'The arts is a field where Singapore and France can work together to produce exciting results. My objective is to be like an electrician who gets the right contacts between people, because that is when real creative sparks can fly!'

The 18th European Union Film Festival runs from May 6 to 17; for details visit www.euff.sg