

Upfront

LEE SIEW HUA meets a former queen of Bugis Street.

I was Bugis Street queen

BUGIS STREET is a memory but its mysterious, dolled-up transvestites are still out there.

They are dancing and making money in Europe — or have done an about-turn in their lives, doing mainstream jobs like nursing. Some have even married and are having children.

One of them is "Lisa Lust", who has done most of the above.

Home for the Lunar New Year, she is now 54 and lives in Washington state in the United States, where very few know about her past of nightly masquerades and sailor-lovers.

"I was the queen of Bugis Street" was her theatrical line, when she called up out of the blue.

When she meets me at a restaurant in Orchard Road, it is clear she is a faded queen. What comes to mind is the word Marguerite Duras uses in her autobiography, *The Lover*, to describe her face: ravaged.

Lisa has few curves now and no over-the-top sexiness — but she is compelling, promising "a story that will make you laugh and cry", like the movies.

She begins by saying in her deep, cracked voice: "I'm frank, you don't mind?"

Then she tells all, unstopably. About her life before and after Bugis Street, her sex change, her American husband, her house with skylights, her little philosophies, her views on religion, the premonitions she has about other people's deaths, the book she wants me to write, the new Bugis Street.

And men, always men.

Her luck ran out early. She was the third in a family of 12, the son of an insurance agent and a housewife. "I had to wash, iron and cook because my mother was giving birth all the time."

"I lacked love. At 10, I started feeling an attraction for men. I asked myself why I was born and whether I was the only one like this. At 10, can you imagine?"

She says she was punched up by her father, but family still comes first, for her and many transvestites. "Men can never take my money, only my family."

"Money talks, people walk."

She keeps stringing in earthy quotes that clank like clichés, except that she has lived out every one of them.

After leaving school with no O levels at 18, she worked for a couple of uncles and her last job was with the then Singapura Hotel. "I was made a supervisor in three months with 13 cashiers under me."

She quit when a Pan-Am pilot said he could find her a job in San Francisco. "But my Mum cried every day, so I didn't go. I couldn't go back to my job."

"I was already a gay boy, and one day, I dressed like a woman and went down to Bugis Street."

"It was my first day and I got caught. I pleaded. But as soon as the police took my 10 fingerprints, I told myself: 'That's it.'"

"I thought I might as well make it pay, because I would never get a good job." Besides, "it was easy to make money and I had legs".

She was in her 20s and felt like a movie queen when tourists and servicemen on R & R from the Vietnam War went: "Lisa Lust! Lisa Lust!"

Play, abuse, the kindness of strangers, extortion by gangsters — life was crammed with contradictions in the '70s.

With her bent for organisation, she planned parties and beauty contests and made lots of money. She hired two junks and invited 25 Australian men and 25 girls. "We wore bikinis and swam with wigs. The men didn't care, they still loved us. Everyone got sunburnt."

Another time, she threw a Christmas party for navy men, in a Lucky Heights bungalow in Siglap that she rented with three girls.

"I charged each man A\$35, and the exchange rate was S\$3.50 for every A\$1 then. I was very clever. I picked five men to take control and said no breaking of glasses, no fighting."

"One of the girls was made up to look like Sophia Loren, another like Raquel Welch. There was Indian dancing."

She says some of the men on R & R wanted companionship, not sex. She says she treated them well, and paid for cabs to send the drunken ones home.

She had many marriage proposals but the love of her life was her fiancé, who got killed in Vietnam.

"I tell you a story," she begins. "I was engaged to an officer. Three days before he died, I saw a dead ringer in Bugis Street. All he said



MALCOLM McLEOD

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was, I wanted to see how you were. All my girlfriends swore it was him but it wasn't."

"Listen to this. My grandmother told me that anyone who loves somebody and dies will come to see you as a white butterfly."

"One Christmas Eve, I was going to eat in front of the TV when I saw a big butterfly on it. Show me a sign, I said. And the butterfly landed on my plate and my tears fell. It followed me from room to room, for hours."

She keeps mixing the fantastic and the sublime with the plainest details, and I keep sifting through her story for any exaggeration or false note, and at the end of it all, an odd poignancy still lingers.

Overall, her Bugis Street days were a time of youthfulness and Saturday midnight shows, and every girl already had a man.

But brawls erupted too. "Once, two girls were going to fight me with broken bottles. I got a couple of stitches. I gave one of them a couple of stitches too. The next day, I went down to the street again."

SHE had a sex change in the early '70s. "It was like going to the butcher."

"I paid \$2 per day for two weeks in Kandang Kerbau Hospital. It was still experimental then, but one thing about us, we have courage."

Bugis Street closed in 1985, but she left earlier, in the late '70s, to dance in Europe. She had heard about hormones for breasts there, and "I wanted to complete top and bottom".

"The European girls said

we were not real women, even after our sex change. We are the Third Sex," she says, growing conspiratorial and her eyes wickedly expressive.

"Once, six girls from the Neptune Dancers went to Egypt to work, and when the nightclub burnt down, they came to Holland to look for me. They were cultural dancers, so the agency I was with told them to strip."

"A few girls are still dancing in Holland, Switzerland, France, Belgium and Germany."

She mentions success stories — the majority — and tragic cases. "Some took drugs and died. One was murdered by gangsters because she robbed one of them."

Each account is matter-of-fact, as though normal life for her is all exaggerated peaks and troughs.

In Singapore, one is a

nurse, another three work in sales, and she names three department stores.

She also talks about those who have gone straight, like a cabbie and a hotel employee in Kuala Lumpur — "he was so vogue, so beautiful" — both of whom are married with children.

Unexpectedly, she says: "There is a way to turn back for some. I could have been married too. I was a good-looking guy. But when I was young, I didn't have my parents' love and old men corrupted me."

She goes on to say that others who have remained transvestites and lived abroad, like her, married deejays, bouncers, policemen, lawyers and even a NASA scientist.

She herself met her American husband in 1980 in Germany. He was an air-force technician who was 17 years younger, a very quiet man who found it hard to

express himself.

They were in Singapore when he proposed, first in a note which said: "I understand your way of life. I am willing to accept you for what you are. We could do something together."

She says: "I brought him to Mount Faber and he even knelt down. Wasn't it cute?"

The first five years were beautiful, but he was an alcoholic. For 12 years, she tried to change him, but last year, they got divorced. "I never expected it."

She adds: "He said: 'I must give you credit. You have been a good wife.'"

"But I feel hate because he left, now that I am old and have put on weight."

Here, she fishes out her earlier pictures in her passport and a couple of studio shots that show a more glamorous Lisa. And she also shows a photograph of "my latest boyfriend".

Irrepressible, she says:

"One door shuts, another opens. I have no problems with men."

"I am very straightforward and honest with them. I don't tiap men. I am easy-going, I can tell jokes; I am artistic, kind and gentle."

"I intend to get married, don't you worry!" she laughs and throws back her head, and everything seems to move — her flowery purple blouse, her shoulder-length curls, her diamond and jade jewellery.

Sobering, she says there is no need to tell everything to a would-be husband. "Let the past be the past. I don't even intend to tell my girlfriend in the US about Bugis Street. I left for the US to lead a normal life."

And then she launches into advice, an older woman to a younger one: "When you get married, the most important thing is to be good to your children." And: "Let men spoil you." And: "You are young and pretty. Make use of your youth."

TODAY, life for her is filled with work.

"I host international students. They stay in my house and pay me rent. I manage a 24-hour restaurant and am also a freelance tour agent. I specialise in cruises."

She likes the outdoors, and goes fishing and camping. She listens to music and reads, quoting lines from a chapter in Hiawatha's Song by Longfellow.

Sometimes she visits Singapore, though not always with happy results. "Three years ago, before Christmas, I booked a table for 12 at the Tropicana. We came from Spain, England, Belgium, Holland and Switzerland."

"We wore gowns and cheongsam. Some tourists came up to us but we said: 'Sorry, no pictures.'"

"We went to another hotel for coffee, but they didn't want to serve us. We even talked to the manager. We were so angry and tried to show our passports to show we were women."

"The next day, we came with our husbands and they served us."

"Why treat us like aliens? When you cut our wrists, what do you get? Blood. Not some green slimy thing."

But resilience is her second name, and soon, she is talking about her plans in Singapore. "Write my book," she says. "I know the story of my life will sell. I will make you famous."

A born deal-maker, she is soon talking about working in the planned Bugis Junction. She can do commercials and she can do public relations, she suggests.

"I can make it a tourist attraction. I have experience — life itself."

Looking back, she has few regrets. "I didn't ask to be who I am. But God balances everything. We have more talents than average, like the handicapped. Like the blind, who have a greater sense of touch."

It is a heartbreaking comparison, but she does not realise it.

Instead, she ends our meeting jauntily. "My purpose in life is to make men happy. And decrease the population of the Earth!"

US, Japan trapped in trade deadlock

THE WEEK'S NEWS THAT MATTERS TO YOU

TAN BAH BAH

ALMOST eight months of work came to naught earlier this week with the collapse of trade talks between the United States and Japan.

Washington has been trying to get Tokyo to further liberalise its markets so that American companies can do more business in Japan.

The long-term aim is to help reduce the huge US\$50 billion (S\$80 billion) deficit that America suffers in trade with the Asian economic superpower.

Both sides agreed in July last year to review progress in four areas: cars and spare parts, telecommunications, medical equipment and insurance.

Obviously, both parties met in Washington believing that each had already gone far enough.

Japanese Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa has just announced a multi-billion-dollar economic-stimulus package to spur consumption (one of the main demands by the US in its drive to encourage Japanese to buy more foreign goods).

And US President Bill Clinton is

under pressure, with a troubled economy back home, to get Japan to do much more.

How much more may be the big problem here. The gap in perception is wide.

At this week's assess-progress talks, for example, Washington wanted "quantifiable measures". Tokyo rejected this, saying that would allow the Americans to set targets on how much the Japanese must import from them.

For the first time since World War II, both countries have reached a deadline for a trade pact and failed to conclude one.

For better or worse, America now has a Japan which can really say No.

Welcome plunge

IF THE plunge in prices for Certificates of Entitlement (COE) for cars and commercial vehicles by an average of \$9,442 was no surprise, what

can one say of the rise from \$1 to \$5 for motorcycle COEs?

Was the \$4 hike costly or too cheap? I ask this question more out of curiosity and for the sake of discussion than anything else.

On the one hand, it was a 500 per cent increase, no less. On the other, why was it so little, given that the Government has withdrawn 5,157 certificates for motorcycles this month?

Let greater minds than mine ponder over this earth-shaking issue.

Meanwhile, the plunge in car COEs was like rain over parched grassland for would-be car buyers so used to the COE prices moving in one direction — up.

Sumatra quake

SINGAPOREANS were reminded once more, albeit gently this time, that natural disasters know no physical boundaries.

A powerful earthquake in Sumatra, which killed 134 people and injured 950, sent out tremors that were felt even here.

Scores of people ran out of their high-rise homes in the central and eastern parts of Singapore after feeling the tremors.

No one was injured and no buildings were damaged.

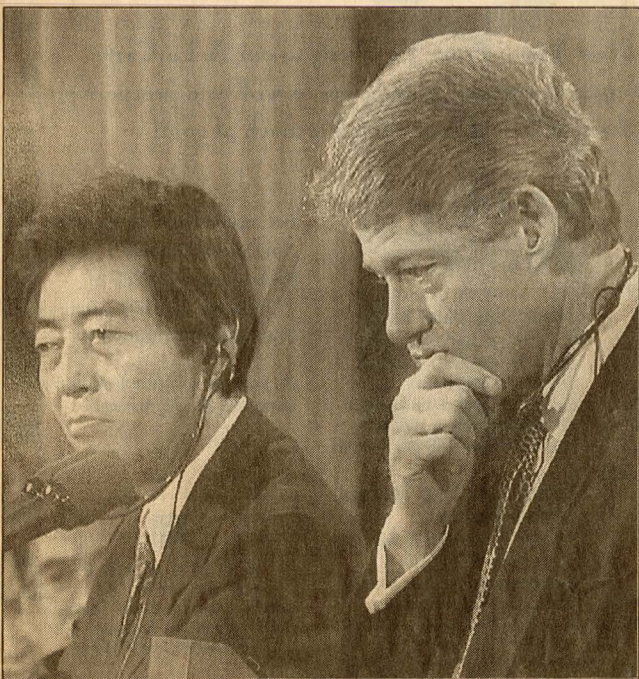
In 1991, the eruption of Mt Pinatubo in the Philippines sent ashes all the way to Singapore.

Pre-war houses, post-war prices

I DID NOT know that there were 600,000 pre-war shophouses until I read a Money Page report on how the prices of these shophouses had soared seven-fold since 1987.

Think of it. Seven years ago, a 99-year-leasehold shophouse cost \$153 per sq ft. Now, bids for some Chinatown units average \$1,069 psf.

So all those other owners of the more than a million houses should hang on tight to those swinging cowboy saloon doors and leaking Peranakan baroque courtyards.



Gloom all round as Japanese Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa and United States President Bill Clinton hit an impasse in Washington.