

# An Anthology of Talents

**T**HIS handsomely produced anthology presents the twenty-six prize-winners in Asiaweek's annual short story contest between 1981 and 1988. Competitions of this sort, as distinct from those — like the Booker — for books already published, play the salutary role of bringing promising talent to the notice of the general reader. Everyone knows the names in the celebrity circuit of Asian writers in English, but there are many others, such as those included here, who also deserve our attention. If the general level of competence they display is anything to go by, one can confidently say that disciplined effort and a bit of luck will secure the an enduring reputation.

The contest organisers cast their net wide, inviting contributions not only from Asians, but also from non-Asians born in the continent or resident in it for at least five years. The settings of stories might be outside the continent, provided the characters were Asian.

Leon Comber in his introduction writes like a bureaucrat of letters but succeeds nonetheless in indicating the distinctive quality of the stories: it lies in their evocation of the dust, the smell, and the feel of Asia. To put it another way, the stories are convincingly realistic, and span the class — and sometimes ethnic — distinctions that one finds in Asia. Some readers may, however, be disappointed at the absence of technical experiment; this no doubt has something to do with the popular character of the periodical that sponsored the competition. A contest sponsored, say,

## BOOK REVIEW

**Prizewinning Asian Fiction, edited by Leon Comber. Times Books International, Singapore, in association with Hong Kong University Press, Singapore \$17.50.**

by PEN would have attracted experimental writing, but then the number of entries would have been fewer.

Comber's introduction informs us that the number of entries leapt from 291 in 1981 to 382 the following year, and kept increasing each year. We are not given a countrywise breakdown, but since most of the winners and most of the judges came from South-East Asia and the Pacific Rim, which account for most of Asiaweek's circulation, I surmise that most of the entries came from this region. India, unquestionably the superpower in the field of Asian writing in English, can claim only two of the winners, which is probably proportional to the number of submissions from that country and certainly is not an indication of the talent it has produced. There are no winners at all from Pakistan or Sri Lanka, though both countries have fairly lively traditions of Anglophone writing. Interestingly, the Philippines has produced the largest number of winners — nine — followed by Malaysia and USA with four

each. The Anglophone writers of the Philippines and Malaysia seem to be responding with energy and insight to the social and psychological tensions in their countries. It is only a question of time before a major talent emerges from among them.

That Bangladesh is represented by one story is surely a tribute to individual talent rather than to tradition, which, as far as Anglophone writing goes, is conspicuously absent in this country. Naz Zaman's 'The Dance', which tied for a prize in 1981, is a meticulously crafted piece, sauced with humour, that engagingly conflates the realistic and the mythopoetic. Dr Zaman, who is Professor of English at Dhaka University, has in her quasi-autobiographical *The Crooked Neem Tree*, given us the first Bangladeshi novel in English. She is currently working on another, and I hope it will not be long before she produces a collection of stories.

I have commended the anthology's production at the outset, but I cannot end without registering a complaint about another aspect of its get-up. The back cover sports a disproportionately long biographical note on the editor, whose contribution is limited to an unmemorable introductory essay. He could at least have taken the trouble of providing a glossary, without which non-Filipinos are likely to be baffled by words like *katsa*, *lapad*, *puto*, non-Bangladeshi by *chanda*, *kaisi*, *Magh*, *Ashar*, and non-Thais by *chok dec*, *tuk-tuk*.

Reviewed by Kaiser Haq

# Capturing the Essence of Exuberance on the Canvas

**S**YED Jehangir, a senior painter with redoubtable talent and knowledge, had an exhibition of his most recent paintings at 'La Galerie', which draws patrons, connoisseurs and art lovers, mostly from the upper echelons of Dhaka Society.

He captured the essence of exuberance, *joie de vivre*, as well as the final soothing tranquillity and respite that comes to the mind of the dwellers of our congested cosmopolitan city in 'Festival in Spring', in which the essence of movement and rapport of man and his environment were expressed in the joyous buoyant and idyllic colours, put in the forms of entwining bold loops that were found scattered throughout the canvas.

The parallel orange and yellow bars in the forefront, blended well with the crescent form to the left of the piece and the star motif, to the right, standing for fire-crackers. These startling and almost blinding combination of colours did not stand for anguish or anxiety, as seen in the works of many younger local painters.

These were offset by the cobalt-blue geometrical serpentine, sinuous and enigmatic shapes. The pale-blue and cloud-like formations balanced a portrayal of reality seen by a romantically tinted vision. The painting delineated both ecstasy and peace, with mature strokes, and a vigorous variation of textures.

The subject of supreme sacrifice of Bangladeshis during the Liberation War was expressed in crimson forms seen in Jehangir's recent obsession with nature, seen in the overwhelming and detailed depiction of tropical leaves, branches, twigs in 'We are ready to give a river of blood if need be' — a label that was a literal translation of the lines from his brother Sikander Abu Jafer's poem titled 'Prayojon Holey Dibo Ek Nodi Rakia'. These dominant leaves were balanced and projected forward by more segments of flora, specially the lemon-yellow lily motif, juxtaposed on the left forefront, added to the evocation of a tropical paradise of flaming elegant and rapturous flamingos and herons, fascinating rainbow-coloured butterflies, and reptiles like iguanas and so stirred up one's penchant for adventure and flights of fancy.

One was reminded of the soul pitch and the tormented mind of Van Gogh's use of shades of chrome yellow, flecked with green and orange in 'Inner Structure II', which was meant to depict the emotional drive and the desperate motivations of mankind. Here, one found geometrical forms again, with a gliding bar in the background and oval shaped forms in the forefront and centre — all in predominant yellow. A delicate similarly hued curvaceous line held them together. Green and crimson-lake forms were amalgamated to juxtapose the burnished yellow patches. These forms were separated by an apparent piling of more semicircular forms of verdian green touches of delicate loops of yellow blended with deeper parallel ones in the darker pigments. The painting brought in the lust for life of mankind despite the constant

frustrations, depressions and doldrums. The maddening impulse of mankind to succeed was portrayed in the vigorous strokes.

The concept of constant struggle of mankind was brought in the four orange, white and pink bars in 'Time Watch II'. The details within these bars portrayed the muscular and distended human limbs. The artist explained that the forms also depicted the roots of banyan trees, which he felt stood for permanence and a proof of struggle for survival. The backdrop of contrasting deep-blue, touched with subtle pinks and oranges, arrested the eye too, apart from it being used for the conventional balance of composition. In this painting, Jehangir blended together mankind and nature in the same semi-ab-

stract forms. He also brought in the hope of a fair judgement in the future, as the human limbs and the banyan roots brought to mind the clarion clear call of trumpets.

Asked about the present state of art in Bangladesh which comprised senior painters of his level, the next generation and finally the relatively younger ones, who are both daring and promising, and others who qualify from the F A Department DU, and yet create little "to write home about", Jehangir replied, "due to the coming up of the galleries, there is a remarkable rise in the graph of output of the artists. This has encouraged painters, sculptors and print-makers of all ages and calibres. Individuals whose works had been arrested due

to the lack of patronage flourished with the increased number of art galleries. We have limited buyers, as you can well envisage the banyan roots brought to mind the clarion clear calls of trumpets of the Judgement Day".

It may happen that some works may have superb qualities, as in the case of Hamiduzzaman Khan, yet they may have a poor sale due to one cause or another. In contrast, mediocrity may find a profuse flow of admirers and buyers. But what of it? When the present stock of art works have diminished, the patrons will be compelled to be more selective. Again, art reviews have led to the exposure of more contemporary painters to overseas connoisseurs and critics, who, in turn, give the artists an opportunity to broaden their horizons beyond Bangladesh. Yet again, there are the persuasive artists, who can win the admiration of well-to-do patrons such as civil servants who have the sense and sensibility to value fine arts, specially amidst the sphere of the flourishing industries. Our neighbours in the subcontinent are doing a superior job of organising galleries and providing a thorough and in-depth training in fine arts," Jehangir added.

I do not believe that the government should give scholarships but rather acquire paintings. There are no permanent displays even at the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy," he pointed out.

He added that there had been plans to set up a National Art Gallery at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar. However, one knows too well how plans are often made but fail to see the light of day. "Each canvas is a separate entity of its own. I have not cut my paintings into sections and then pieced them together as some contemporary artists are doing. They, I maintain, are merely dabbling and experimenting," Jehangir commented about his own work, in conclusion.



Festival in Spring

Inner Structure II



# Leaving a Narrow Margin Between Art and cartoon

by Lamis Hossain

**"W**HAT is art?" asks the cover of a book lying flat on its spine next to a slumbering artist. Around him are three canvasses splashed with colour and a grinning boy whose hands are dripping with paint.

Such is the scene staring at you from one of Ahsan Habib's pieces at the Jojon gallery exhibition held from December 2 to December 8.

Habib's work begs the question whether the cartoons he draws are indeed "art". And does he really care? After all, he seems to be poking fun at the so-called "artists".

But as long as you leave his exhibition smiling and provoked into deeper thoughts, it probably doesn't matter whether he is a "cartoonist", "artist" or "social commentator".

Habib's work tries to be more than just candy-coloured funnies. He makes it a point to comment on society in a cynically morbid fashion.

Take his view on humanity for example. One of his strips, unwrapped around the corner

of the gallery, consists of people holding hands.

Eighteen 12-inch tape measures run along the top of the entire piece. At one end is a man examining another's hand with a magnifying glass, whose other hand is holding to another person's. The human chain is made up of an assorted bunch of people: a child, a martyr or a crucifix, a pickpocket, two lovers, a headless man, a handless and even one whose hand is actually a foot. There are only two women in the entire 216-inch piece and not many more in the rest of his work.

Details are vital for Habib's pieces — whether it be a person sniggering in one corner or a crow dropping on a politician's head. Habib painstakingly bestows each character in his crowd scenes with personality. It's up to you to find the hidden gems.

Politics features prominently in his work. One piece depicts a demonstration with a colourful red bomb exploding in the middle. The demonstra-

tors carry on at the front apparently unconcerned and displaying their "Dabi mante hobe" placards. Another scene shows a politician addressing a meeting. The speaker's mouth is wide open, while another man poses coyly for the cameras. It is hard to say whether Habib is more contemptuous of politicians or their followers.

Traffic jams, shopping malls and open markets don't escape his scrutiny either. The 'tamasha' of everyday life is recorded by his keen eye. An amputated man bleeding on a zebra crossing, a policeman sleeping on duty and a man who has fallen into a manhole create an uneasy feeling. Should you laugh, cry or shout at someone?

Habib also tries to make "up to date" social commentary. One piece shows Star Plus dumping another TV into a garbage bin. "Is it 'BTB', you are left to wonder. He doesn't miss out the plague paranoia — a boy winds up a mechanical mouse to scare his friends in one of the cartoons. His subjects also include a football match complete with fire crackers, bombs, and bricks dropping on the referee's head.

As far as subject matter is concerned, Habib covers common objects of ridicule like politicians and traffic policemen. Although his morbid sense of humour makes the ordinary so interesting, Habib could still have been more adventurous with the subject matter as well.

The best thing about his work is that it can be enjoyed by children. In fact, the pieces were all hung at children's eye-level, and there were quite a few young ones present at the gallery.

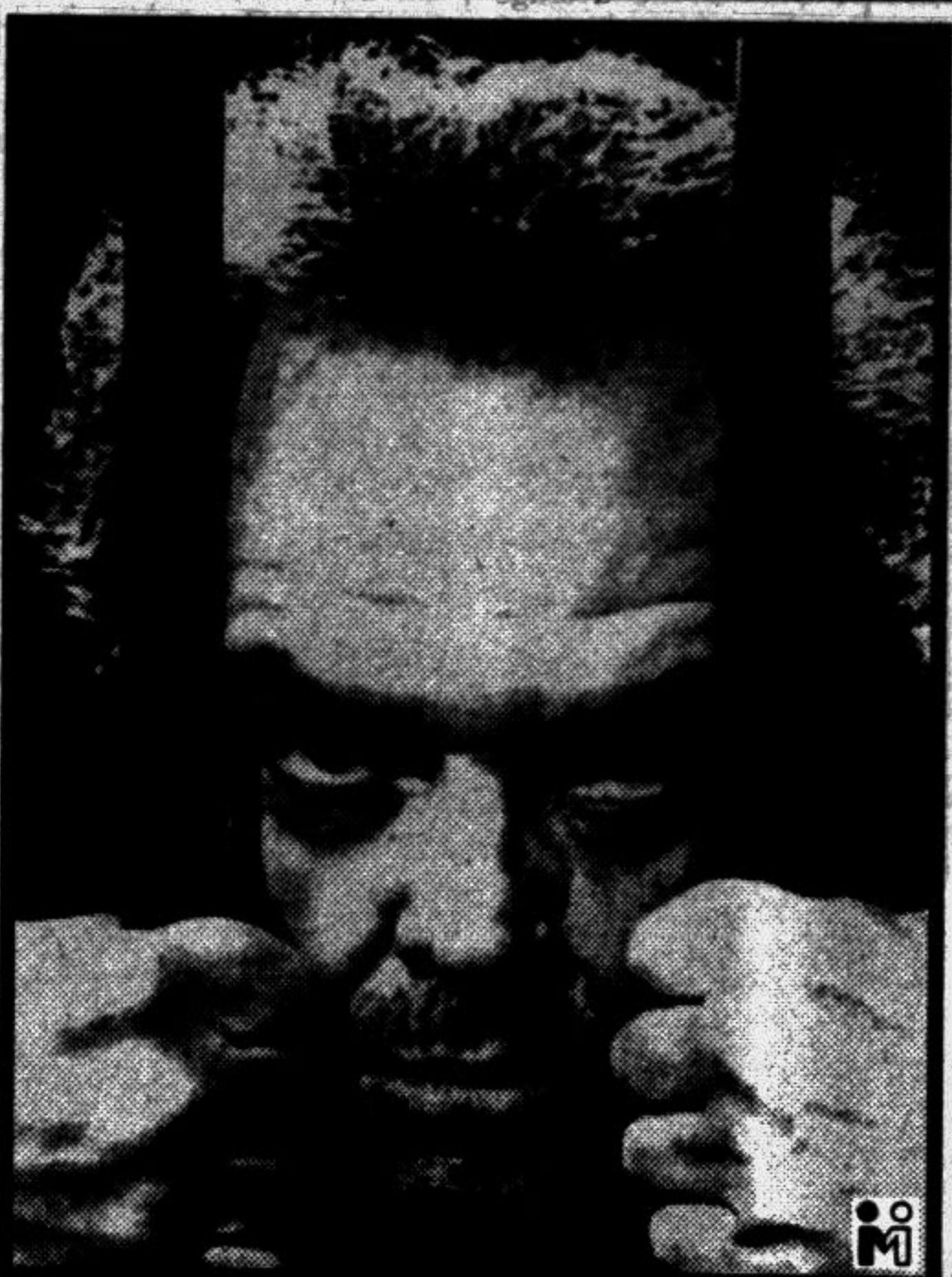
"Is it art?" ask the kids chuckling at the exhibition.



# Vampires are Forever...

by Nicola Cole writes from London

As the new film, *Wolf*, shows, vampires continue to haunt our lives. Some are traceable to mythology, reports a Gemini News Services correspondent; others have been all too real...



Jack Nicholson in *Wolf*: 'Better to remain human'

**I**T is a winter night in the northern United States. Driving home along a remote country road, book editor Will Randall is forced to slam on his brakes as a dark figure suddenly looms up in front of his windshield.

There's a jolt and Will's car veers off the road. Shaken but unhurt, he cautiously follows a thin trail of blood through the snow. He does not see the feral creature until it springs up and bites him on the wrist before escaping into the darkness.

Will's life is never the same again.

This is the opening scene of *Wolf*, a new Hollywood movie with impeccable old horror credentials. The film, starring Jack Nicholson, could be described as a vampire film with attitude. But if the plot is pure fantasy, its roots are firmly embedded in fact.

Cases of lycanthropy, a form of insanity in which psychotic individuals believe they are changing into ravenous wolves, are ancient and still evident today.

Recalling one such case, French psychiatrist Michel Benezec tells how a 28-year-old patient told him in 1989: "When I'm emotionally upset, I feel as if I'm turning into

something else... I get the feeling I'm becoming a wolf. "My face changes completely. I stare. My pupils dilate and I feel as if hairs are growing all over my body, as if my teeth are getting longer."

That patient was a lycanthropic murderer. There have been many of them, dating back to long before the first medical dictionary definition of the condition appeared 310 years ago.

They include the cannibal Beane family in Scotland — three generations lived on human flesh and gore during the 1300s — and the lunatic Elisabeth Bathory, a 17th-century Hungarian countess who drank and bathed in the blood of virgins, convinced it was an excellent skin conditioner.

Fiercely cunning, Countess Bathory is credited with inventing the "iron maiden," a device which transfixed victims on metal spikes protruding from its chest. She was eventually tried and sentenced to be walled up in her own castle.

Blood-fetishists brought to justice since then have included: Kuno Hoffman, the harmless-looking "Vampire of Nuremberg," who in 1974

confessed to killing two young lovers and "sucking the blood of corpses"

• John Haigh, the "Vampire of London", executed in 1949 for slaying a wealthy widow: after killing her, he claimed to have "made an incision in her neck and collected a glass of blood which I drank."

• Peter Kurten, the horribly sadistic "Monster of Dusseldorf" afflicted with haematodipsia, a sexual thirst for blood, executed in 1931 after strangling, raping and cutting the throats of 29 victims, including children whom he had tortured.

Sexual murderers and psychotic killers are far removed from Count Dracula and other Hallowe'en-linked mythology of the living dead. Yet as many of them have drunk their victims' blood as well as abusing their bodies, they are — technically, at least — vampires.

The mythology is global. It extends from those of North America's original native residents to the supposed daylight vampires of Russia and Poland.

Along the way can be found the "flying demons" of China; India's much-feared Raksasha, believed to animate dead bodies; and the varcolaci of Romania (Dracula's homeland), said to eclipse both sun and moon by mounting the heavens and taking bites out of one or the other.

Sheer superstition? Undoubtedly — and dangerous, too: a 68-year-old Polish citizen choked not long ago on a garlic clove which he ritually placed on his tongue before going to sleep. Garlic is a traditional defence against the undead.

So is exhuming corpses and staking them through the heart, still said to be practised in remote parts of Eastern Europe even though medical advances have vastly reduced the chances of premature burial.

This often resulted from catalepsy, a death-like condition caused by nervous hysteria.

Awakening to find themselves entombed, terrified victims, would fight to free themselves as they slowly suffocated. If lucky, their screams would be heard by the living.

On other occasions, their agonised corpses, bloodstained from their frantic clawing, would be found by "bodysnatchers" who supplied medical schools with cadavers for research.

Such gruesome discoveries reinforced the vampire myth, which originated in primitive beliefs that include drinking an enemy's blood for enhanced virility and the need for evil spirits to refresh themselves by feasting on human flesh.

They survive solely in films and deranged minds. "Becoming a wolf is not preferable to remaining a human being," says *Wolf* director Mike Nichols without a trace of irony...

# Viewing Video

by Lenin Gani

**I**wonder what all the hype over *Interview With The Vampire* was about. Even though it stars Tom Cruise and Christian Slater and grossed over 38 million dollars during its first week at the box office, I personally found it to be a slow-moving drama. In short, Slater interviews a modern-day vampire who describes how his life was radically changed after Cruise befriended him.

What is irritating about this film is that most of the crucial parts are shown in the dark. It is real shame because the title seems so interesting.

Everybody knows that a man's best friend is his dog. But it is hard to believe it after watching writer/director John Lafia's film *Man's Best Friend*.

The story begins when a young TV news reporter Lori Tanner (Ally Sheedy) receives an anonymous telephone call to meet an employee of a research centre. Unfortunately, she is killed. In the meanwhile, Lori and her camerawoman become impatient and decide to go in and investigate.

They discover that weird experiments on animals have been conducted. Their presence is detected by a security guard but they manage to escape. Before they do so, a dog which was in the lab goes with them.

This is no ordinary canine but a "superdog" endowed with the very best traits of other animals. However, this oversized dog called Max has been injected with a drug that when wears off will make him an uncontrollable killing machine.

When Lori brings Max home it is involved in plenty of adventures while his creator Dr Jarret (Lance Henriksen) with the help of a police detective, played by Robert Costanzo, are frantically searching.

One thing leads to another before Jarret and Lori lure Max back to the lab. Your guess is as good as mine what happens next.

The good build-up the film created is spoilt when sequences become loose and transparent as if Lafia was rushed for time near the end. Any animal-lover will also object to the cruel death of the cat.

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# And a One, and a Two... Champagne Still Bubbles for Lawrence Welk

Jerry Nachtigal writes from Branson Associated Press Writer

It's just like old times again at the Lawrence Welk Champagne Theatre: The Lennon Sisters singing sweet harmony. Myron Floren's nimble fingers tinkling a polka on the accordion. Pianist Jo Ann Castle rattling ragtime on the ivories.

Only the "King of Champagne Music" himself is missing. Welk died in 1992 at age 89.

Hoping to cash in on Branson's popularity with the silver-haired set, Welk's son, Larry, built a theatre and resort complex bearing his father's name that opened in June. The bubble machine came out of mothballs and stars of Welk's popular television show were coaxed out of retirement or other jobs to reunite for two shows daily, six days a week.

"This is like old home week for all of us to be together again," said singer-dancer Mary Lou Metzger, who for 12 years closed each show doing a

waltz with the lovably square band leader. "We grew up together."

Thirty million people a week tuned into "The Lawrence Welk Show," which ran on the US ABC television network and then in syndication from 1955 to 1982. The show continues in reruns on the US PBS television network.

At 62, Jack Imel, a tap dancer and marimba player on the show for 25 years, jumped at the chance to rejoin his fellow cast members in Branson.

Now in their late 40s and early 50s, the Lennon Sisters — Peggy, Kathy, Dee Dee and Janet — had been retired from singing for about six years when Larry Welk told them about his plans for a Branson theatre.

Now the Lennons and Castle are regular headliners, with other cast members joining the show — which features a 20-piece orchestra — on a rotating basis.

The sisters brought about two dozen members of their families to the Ozark Mountains from California. Four daughters perform in the show, and Lennon offspring work as stage hands and sound and lighting technicians.

The show is patterned after Welk's wholesome variety show.

Other members of the Welk "musical family" who appear include dance partners Bobby Burgess and Elaine Balden, singer-comedian Ken Delo, singers Raina English, Tom Netherton and Jim Roberts, and Dancer Arthur Duncan.

The vocal duo of Gail Farrell, who performed for 13 years on the TV show, and Ron Anderson, who was on the show its final two years, take time away from jobs in the music industry in Nashville to appear in Branson.

Anderson said he's amazed by the TV show's enduring popularity. — AP Feature