

Museo Cerrado in Barcelona

FRANCIS REID travels hopefully

CUE readers may have noticed that the location of theatres and performing arts museums exerts some influence upon my travel plans. Whereas the prospect of a theatrical experience rarely affects my choice of destination (I wish that I could afford such an ultimate in gracious living!), it can certainly cause me to stopover and possibly travel by an indirect route. Alas the theatric tourist trail is so poorly charted that hopeful travel must needs be preceded by considerable detective work. And even when the existence of a theatre collection is established, there can be uncertainty as to whether it is a research archive, a permanent display of ephemera, a space for alternating exhibitions or a permutation of these.

Assorted clues suggested that Barcelona offered solid prospects for theatrical pleasure. A theatre sleuth pores over the small print accreditations in illustrated books and several reproduced images suggested that the *Museo de Arte Escenico* (also known as *Museo Arte Y Espectaculos*, because Catalonia is bilingual) is not only a collection of goodies but is dramatically housed in a Gaudí palace.

A 1980 tourist brochure carried the warning 'closed for reforms', so I telephoned the Tourist Office in Barcelona. They confirmed that the museum was open and gave me the visiting hours. *Opera* magazine's listings promised a *Seraglio* performance at the Liceo and so I was off. On arrival in Barcelona, the listings in the current 'Guia del Ocio' (a weekly what's on) confirmed the opening times. These were also displayed, somewhat dustily, at the closed entrance to the Palacio Guell whose facade was scaffolded and shrouded. The gentleman in the tourist office, although sympathetic, could only point to his printed information.

Now whereas others might mutter, gnash and even palpitate, the theatric tourist sighs and finds a bar with a good sightline to the nearest box-office to await its opening at the end of siesta. My reward was an alcoholic haze and a seat for the Gran Teatro Del Liceo.

The *Gran Teatro Del Liceo* is a grand opera house in the truly monumental league. All is gilt, red plush and grandeur. Some of the grandeur, particularly in the box passages is faded, even slightly tatty, and all the more theatrical as a result. Opened in 1847, incinerated in 1861 and rebuilt in 1862 – always in April – the Liceo appears to remain close to its original form apart from the formation of stalls boxes in 1883 and some new decorative treatments particularly to the proscenium arch in 1908 and foyer ceilings in 1945.

The Liceo is one of a rather small and special group of the world's theatres: the ones which are properly appreciated for

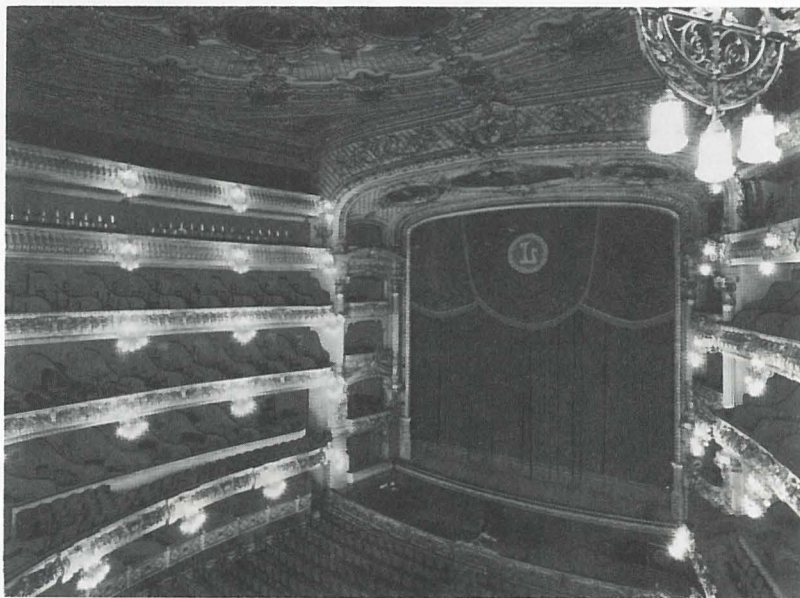
their architectural merit. Historic theatres generally – and their interiors particularly – are often neglected by those who are in a position to influence or even formulate civic pride. But there appears to be no such lack of appreciation of architectural significance in Barcelona. A large format hundred page paperback with two hundred colour illustrations is published in many languages including English, and you do not need to attend a performance or track down a specialist bookseller to buy it. The book's illustrations are particularly strong in architectural images with some ninety photographs, prints and paintings showing architectural detail.

There can be no denying the accuracy of the photographic eye and we must surely all wish that the camera had been available to

record the fullness of history. However it is frequently the artist's eye that offers a more perceptive understanding of the past since its image selection is influenced by all the varying circumstances and attitudes then current. It is not so much what succeeding generations saw that is so important as what they *thought* they saw. With a building basically unchanged over a long period, it is the engraver and the painter, juxtaposed with plans and photographs and our own eyes, who give us an insight into the intagibles of performances long past.

As always, it is auditorium lighting which causes most difficulty in trying to achieve one's personal perception of the ambience of a former age. The houselighting is today very bright and it all comes from 9-light hanging branches liberally bestowed upon all tier fronts. Old illustrations show chandeliers for balls. But performances?

My stalls seat was splendidly comfortable – a cast iron frame, much lacquered in brown, supported red plush which was as generously padded as my own person – and there was a foot rest to compensate for the



The Gran Teatro Del Liceo – all in gilt, red plush and grandeur



The Palau concert hall – a stimulating house for performances