

Art Decor in Melbourne

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Welcomes the Return of the Painter as Theatre Decorator

In Cue 27, Iain Mackintosh reported on his 1983 visit to the Victorian Arts Centre in Melbourne. He quoted the philosophies of its instigators, sketched its extended gestation, and described his own response to a performance in the Concert Hall and to the remainder of the complex then nearing completion. Visiting Melbourne a year later, I found that all the spaces were housing regular performances and only small details of furnishing remained to be finalised in readiness for the autumn (antipodean spring) formal opening that has now taken place. Iain (with some amendment from Denis Irving in Cue's correspondence columns) having described the concept and history in general, and the Concert Hall in particular, it is appropriate that I concentrate on the theatres. (We have both, in Cue 27 and 32 respectively, demonstrated our enthusiasm for the Performing Arts Museum within the complex.) But, firstly, a few words of general impression. . . .

Melbourne is a milestone in the development of theatre architecture. It marks a turning point. It re-admits the decorator. It recognises the essential illogicality of art. It signals the decline in that worship of purity of form which admits only functional elements, preferably displaying their material of origin, raw and unadorned. In its decorative philosophy, Melbourne points the way forward. However, its approach to the performance space is a summary of the dominant form of

our century. (Art centuries seldom correspond with neat symmetrical spans of 100 years. In theatre architecture, the current century seems likely to run from 1920 to 1990.)

The Victorian State Theatre takes the proscenium theatre of cinematically pure sightline to the limits of development. As I walked around the empty auditorium I admired the sweep of the balconies raking down towards the stage but stopping well before the proscenium so that their occupants' view is inescapably focussed on the acting area. I tried a selection of the 2000 seats and nearly every one provided a more than adequate position for a single-camera video of the stage, although in the remoter parts a spectator might well long for zoom eyesight.

But that evening, sitting in one of the best seats in the house — centre of the fourth row in the circle — I felt surprisingly distanced from the action. However, in a nineteenth century romantic opera such as *Faust*, a slight distancing is not necessarily a disadvantage. Especially as the sound was so good — not merely well balanced but positively enhancing to the voices of singers previously heard sounding less attractive in other houses that are generally regarded as having sympathetic acoustics.

Alas I also felt distanced from fellow members of the audience. We were a full house and we applauded like crazy (although, curiously, our hands did not seem to be making much noise) but there

was a distinct lack of that corporate audience togetherness that is a feature of similarly sized traditional opera houses with imperfect sightlines.

During the long period of gestation since the Victorian Arts Centre was planned (the conception in mid-sixties, revised, mainly in terms of audience capacity, in the mid-seventies) many parts of the world have felt a growing disenchantment with the loss of contact in the triangular audience-actor-audience relationship that seems inevitable when good sightlines are provided to a proscenium stage in an auditorium of any considerable size.

I believe that Melbourne has in its Victorian State Theatre a pure sightline theatre that is as near perfect as such a theatre can be. Particularly at 2000 seats. But there are inherent problems. Individuals do not readily become a corporate audience when they are isolated by not being readily aware of each other. And the rapport between audience and stage suffers when the seating does not reach completely along the side walls and through the orchestra pit zone to link with the proscenium. This theatre belongs to the period when cheap seats were placed far away but with a clear view. Increasingly it is being felt preferable to put those cheap seats close to the stage but with an impaired view.

However as a lighting designer, I should welcome forms of theatre which do not hang audience on the wall — they get in the way of good side lighting positions! And the



The largest of the three theatres, The State Theatre, seats 2000 with near perfect sightlines.



Looking across the auditorium of The State Theatre.