

THE BOURLA THEATRE, ANTWERP

A Candidate for Total Restoration

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Antwerp has lost its spectacular Hippodrome and most of the half dozen theatres it could boast before the First World War, but one of the survivors is what *Curtains!!!* would have called a three star 'sleeping beauty'. It is not quite fast asleep, since it has some occasional use for rehearsals, but the theatric tourist would do well to make advance arrangements for access. The time will be well spent. If Michelin notice such things, the Bourla would 'vaut le voyage' rather than 'merite un détour'. It is a stunner.

Formerly the French Theatre then the Royal Theatre, it is invariably and affectionately called simply 'the Bourla', after P. B. Bourla (1783-1866), city architect, who designed it in 1834. Like most theatre architects he had collaborators. The decorations and stage machinery are attributed to Parisians, Philastre and Cambon, who also worked on the Gent Royal Opera House.

Grand nineteenth century theatres on island sites are a common enough sight in continental towns and many of them seem to have been turned out of the same rather pompous mould, but the Bourla is specially engaging from the moment it is first seen.

The fact that it is tightly locked into the streetscape appeals to the British taste for 'discovered' views, but the main facade is also a fine design in its own right. The semi-circular plan with a Corinthian order raised above the entrance storey and skyline figure sculpture over the entablature is not startlingly original, but it is splendidly theatrical. Where Rennes' superficially similar facade (for example) was a scaled-down, simplified and provincialized copy of the Theatre of Marcellus, the Bourla is a confident French Palladian composition, monumental and metropolitan.

Behind this facade is the expected succession of grand spaces, altered and elaborated, like the rest of the interior, in 1863. They all look rather sad and neglected now, but any sense of disappointment is immediately erased at the sight of the auditorium.

Precisely how much remains of the theatre illustrated by Constant (1860)-, what is by Bourla or Philastre and what is to be put down to the 1863 recasting, are questions to be resolved by detailed physical investigation and documentary research, but what has come down to us is undeniably magnificent.

The stalls have been resealed and the lowest box tier heartlessly hacked away in some later 'improvement' campaign, but the four intact and architecturally varied upper horseshoe tiers rise to a majestic arcade

supporting a shallow-domed ceiling. The great chandelier rose, the gilt figures guarding the boxes and the dizzy paradis, approached by a wooden staircase through the roof trusses, combine to tremendously exciting effect. If the auditorium were to be expertly restored and re-draped, it would have a warmth of embrace to enchant audiences and performers alike.

Although the theatre closed its doors several years ago the local authority have ensured that the building is water tight. Prior to its closure fire engines were

stationed outside the theatre during every performance because of the fire risk! Certainly its internal timber construction poses problems of fire prevention and public egress, but these are not insurmountable problems. Timber is in the essence the very life blood of the building never more apparent than in the backstage regions where incredibly the stage machinery remains totally intact. Visiting 'behind the scenes' at the Bourla is like stepping straight into one of those familiar engravings from 'L'Envers Du Theatre'. Below the stage is a



Theatre Facade (David Wilmore Collection)



The Auditorium from the Stage (David Wilmore)