

Taiwan's Post-Modern Triumph

Francis Reid visits
The new National Theatre and Concert hall in Taipei

Taiwan is the latest joy to join the international theatric tourist trail. No one planning a major theatre or concert hall can now fail to include a Taipei stopover on their survey of the international best. Architects should take their eyes, acousticians their ears. I guarantee that they will be stimulated. And if they are not also pleased, then let them henceforth desist from theatre construction.

Taiwan's newly opened National Theatre and Concert Hall are for those of us who like *real* theatres. Theatres which excite from the moment when they first appear on our horizon. Theatres with a compulsive *come hither* whose insistence cannot be ignored. Theatres whose foyers sweep us onward in a tingling embrace towards an auditorium whose threshold induces that little catch of breath which confirms that we are indeed in a house of magic where we may hope to extend our discovery and understanding of life's mysteries.

Taiwan's National Theatre and Concert Hall are real temples of thespis: a triumph of post-modernism. These are not concrete performance supermarkets, devoted to the short-lived and now thankfully outmoded

concept that theatre should be treated as an ordinary everyday experience. Such routine is the role of television: theatre is the special occasion. To be experienced in palaces. And that, precisely, is what the Taiwanese have done. Architect Yang has taken a moment from China's architectural heritage and grasped it uncompromisingly to produce a bold statement which is monumental yet welcoming. His choice of the period style that accords with the standard international image of Chinese architecture is not universally applauded in Taiwan. Inevitably there are those who wish to look only forward. Yet when asked to amplify their vision of a truly contemporary architectural style, national yet international, for housing the arts, their eloquence becomes somewhat subdued. But was ever a theatre built without critics? The debates about style, about scale and above all, about costs, are universal. Perhaps such discussion is essential to the nature and purpose of theatre. And if some measure of controversy is not essential, it certainly seems inevitable.

However, in Taiwan, the critics will just have to swallow their moans because their

country has acquired stunning buildings whose fitting out for performance has avoided virtually all the mistakes that are depressingly standard when a compromise has to be struck between so many conflicting priorities.

My own presence in Taiwan was in a critical role. Invited by the Ministry of Education, my brief was to observe the Theatre and Concert Hall in action in order to assist in the determination of whether the specified criteria for design and installation had been met.

My visit was towards the end of the performance-commissioning phase, a three month festival season which tested the ability of the stages and auditoria to respond to the needs of a wide range of international performance modes. Not just traditional Chinese Opera but the New York City Opera with *La Boheme*, *Traviata* and *The Student Prince*. The National Dance Troupe of Korea and the Netherlands Dance Theatre. The Cleveland Orchestra as well as Taipei's own two symphony orchestras. Soloists included Barry Tuckwell, Isaac Stern and Nicanor Zabaleta. And lots more. I caught two concerts which included new works for traditional Chinese instruments accompanied by western symphony orchestra. And the premiere of a new opera which successfully looked to both eastern and western musical and dramatic traditions for its inspiration.

Everyone who took part in the opening season, whether as performer or in back-stage support, was invited to fill in a questionnaire. As far as I am aware, this is the most positive attempt ever made to assess a new performance building by analysing the response to its users. I left immediately after the final questionnaire session, just as the statisticians were facing up to such problems as relative weighting. So I am unable to report on the effectiveness of the end result. But as a means of seeking an objective analysis of subjective opinion, it certainly warrants our attention.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire began with three summary questions requiring a simple yes or no answer: Do you consider that (a) the acoustics, (b) stage facilities and equipment and (c) theatre systems are among the best in the world? Then came a series of questions where facilities could be commented upon and graded in five categories as:

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