

# Stockholm's Other Gustavian Theatre

FRANCIS REID tours the theatric gem at Gripsholm.

*Drottningholm*, preserved and performing, will always be mecca for any theatric pilgrim in search of an understanding of eighteenth-century staging. But also within day-tripping distance of Stockholm by road, rail or water, is *Gripsholm*, commissioned by Gustav III, that supremely theatrical monarch whose life as a patron, playwright and performer concluded with assassination at a masked ball within Stockholm's opera house.

The Gripsholm theatre was built by Eric Palmstedt in 1782. Like *Drottningholm* it ceased to be used for performances after Gustav's death in 1792. But, unlike *Drottningholm*, it has not been brought back into performance use and there are no plans to do so now. Gripsholm is not therefore subject to the wear and tear that is becoming a serious problem at *Drottningholm* where the constant flow of audience, performers and tourists is slowly but steadily eroding the timber structure.

When describing a visit to *Drottningholm* in CUE 9, I tried to explain the traumatic impact of experiencing the quality of the lighting of both auditorium and stage upon my understanding of eighteenth-century theatre. The selectivity which light imposes upon our perception of space must be a major factor in experiencing the original atmosphere of a historic interior. And so it was also in Gripsholm — whether sitting in the auditorium or commanding it from the stage.

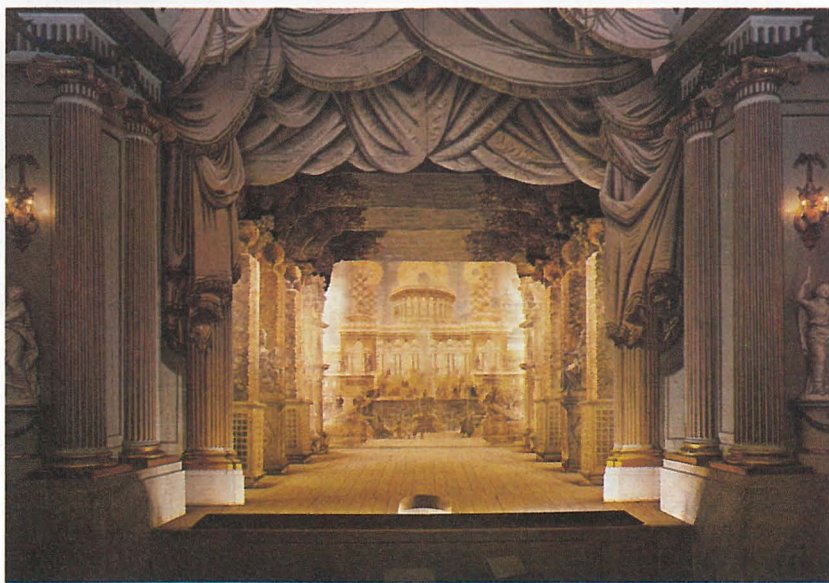
Gustav adapted a sixteenth-century castle for his winter residence and the theatre is incorporated within a tower of the original fortifications. Visitors to the theatre approach through rooms and corridors furnished in Gustavian style and so are properly prepared in terms of period atmosphere. However, the theatre is the only part of the castle attempting a period ambience in its artificial lighting — although elsewhere, when visiting by day, one can of course experience the same clear lakeland daylight that Gustav knew.

The round tower, in shape and size, has applied a considerable constraint upon the architect although, unlike the previous theatre of 1773 which also contrived to include a stage, Palmstedt used the tower for auditorium only. He has — and we note once again the creative stimulus that often gives the found space an edge over the open site in theatre architecture — he has responded to the problem by embracing the given shape to turn its limitations into positive virtue.

When Palmstedt received the commission to design the new Gripsholm theatre, he had just returned from an Italian tour which had included a visit to Palladio's Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza. A semi-circular auditorium was the natural response to the structural



*Gripsholm Slottsteater.*



*The Gripsholm stage set with the original scenery design by Louis Jean Desprez for Queen Christina in 1785.*

form of the tower, and allowed the architect to pursue the then current neo-classical ideal that harked back both to antiquity and to Palladio.

While the semi-circular seating tiers, Ionic columns and coffered domed ceiling belong to the neo-classical revival, the painted decorations and the use of mirrors to magnify and distort space belong to the

techniques of baroque illusion.

The problem commonly facing theatre architects is achieving intimacy in a large auditorium. In tiny Gripsholm the need was to make the auditorium seem larger without destroying the intimacy of contact with the stage. The solution is extremely elegant with each mirror segment set at slightly different angles to return images of varying aspect.