

Warsaw Wanderings

WARSAW THEATRES FROM STUDIOS TO PALACES

BY GLENN LONEY

From 27 September to 1 October 1989, the Polish branch of OISTAT, the International Organisation of Scenographers, Theatre Architects and Technicians, will host the 1989 OISTAT Congress in Warsaw. The theme of this congress is "The Preservation of the Arts and Crafts of the Theatre." Among the activities of the colloquium will be exhibitions and demonstrations of specialists in various theatrical arts and crafts — costume makers, tailors, shoemakers, scenic artists, prop makers, armourers, and milliners. The five-day conference will include a series of visits to Warsaw theatres. With this in mind, *Cue International* presents a tour of the theatres of Warsaw. — Editor

In a country where recent political events read like grand drama — with the daring challenge of the worker's rebellion in 1980, the imposition of martial law 16 months later, the parliamentary elections, and President Bush's recent visit to the capital — Poland, and particularly Warsaw, has remained one of the cultural centers of Eastern Europe. Live theatre, music, and dance abound in spaces grand and not-so-grand.

And in the heart of Warsaw is the grandest space of them all — the Teatr Wielki. With a seating capacity of 2,000 and a 1,159 square meter stage, it is to Warsaw what the Bolshoi is to Moscow, both in size and in standards of production and performance.

The Teatr Wielki was built in 1825, according to the design of Italian architect Antonio Corazzi. A center for the Warsaw Opera and the Polish National Ballet, the theatre quickly became a major performing arts institution. It was home to the "father of the National Opera" — Stanislaw Moniuszko — who, in an era of Czarist censorship, wrote and directed a

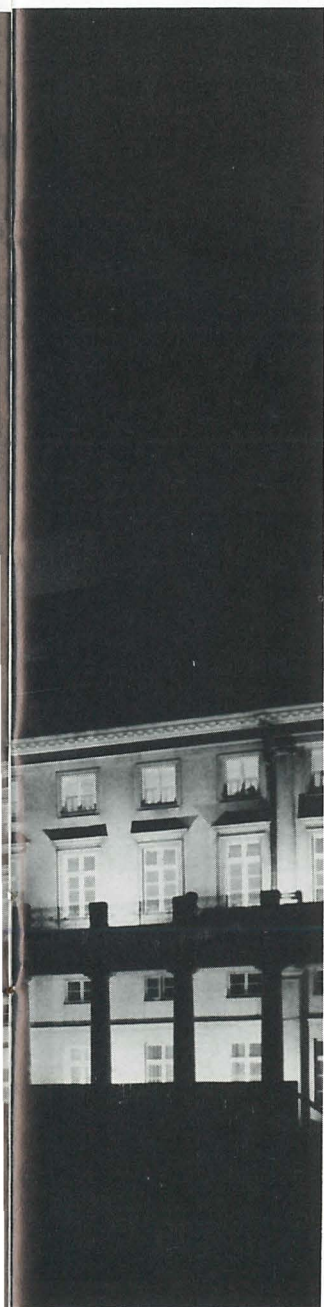
series of operas which were regarded as a testament to Polish patriotism and culture during a period of subjugation. During the beginning of the 20th century, this Warsaw stage boasted such names as singers Jan Kiepura and Enrico Caruso.

During the siege of Warsaw in 1939 the building was severely damaged and was completely destroyed during the Warsaw uprising. The classical façade alone survived. After the liberation, the government of the People's Republic of Poland began rebuilding the Wielki. The first stage of the reconstruction was completed in 1949, and comprised the rebuilding of the Right Wing.

During the remaining 16 years of reconstruction, every attempt was made by architect Bohdan Pniewski and technical designer Arnold Szyfman to make the Wielki the most advanced theatre of its time for its reopening in 1965.

The Teatr Wielki boasts some impressive technology. Its six mainstage hydraulic elevators (23 x 3 meters) easily carry heavy settings on two levels. There is a revolving stage, 21.5 meters in diameter; 56 hydraulic-powered scenery hoists and 48 manual ones; two elevators for the orchestra and two backstage.

Besides the 2,000 seat art-deco auditorium, the Wielki houses the Theatre Museum — two halls on either side of the first floor foyer totalling 855 square meters, with year-round exhibits on the history of Polish drama, opera, and ballet; the Mlynarski Room, a 250-seat theatre; rehearsal rooms; dressing rooms; workshops (flat scene-painting is done in a rotunda atop the theatre); and storage lofts. General and artistic director Robert Satanowski says, "I have here a theatre of 2,000 rooms, of which the stage, the auditorium, and foyer are only three." In addition, the Wielki normally houses the



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