



The Max Bell Theatre

This 750-seat theatre stems from the central European opera house traditions of shallow galleries extending as boxes around the side walls until meeting the proscenium. The box seats, however, focus rather more towards the stage than was the historical custom and the modern technology of air castors allows the side box tiers to pivot inwards or outwards to provide a flexible proscenium zone in conjunction with a hydraulic elevator offering thrust stage or orchestra pit.

The auditorium has been repainted recently. With the original pale peach, the architecture responded in a distracting way to the bounce from the production lighting, particularly when using a thrust stage. The new deep marbled green is attractively warm under the house lighting and becomes neutral during the performance. The fly tower is a generous 23m (78 feet); the stage is trapped, and Lekos® are rigged to light from every desirable angle. The Max Bell is the home of Theatre Calgary, the city's mainstream repertory company who came to the

but with a particular dedication to fostering Canadian dramatists. Founded in 1972 in the log cabin Opera House in Heritage Park – no flies, no wings and just 198 seats – this was a company ready to respond imaginatively to adaptability of a space based on what we have recently come to recognise as one of the most flexible periods in the historical development of theatre buildings.



The Max Bell Theatre

The Martha Cohen feels very modern but its proportions and basic ground plan are pure 18th century. They belong to a time before theatres were firmly divided into stage and auditorium – when indoor theatres were like a single room and outdoor theatres were often in a courtyard.

When I first saw the auditorium from the stage I felt I was back in Bury St Edmunds and as I moved on to the deeply thrusting apron of the current production I was able to feel, for the first time, how Bury was before the stage front was cut back during the 19th century. It was a big personal moment for me because it reconfirmed my conviction that the planned restoration of Bury St Edmund's Theatre Royal by the National Theatre will bring us closer than we have ever been to an understanding of the Georgian Playhouse.

Calgary's audience of 450 sit in tiers which are curved in the manner of the more sophisticated Georgian theatres. (Smaller, simpler Georgian theatres had straight tiers following the line of the rectangular building shell in which they were installed.)

As a measure of intimacy, the furthestmost seat at floor level is only 12m (39 feet) from the stage. The log cabin genesis of Alberta Theatre Projects finds a happy reference in the vertically dark-stained timbered fascias of the tiers.

The space behind the tiers is open so that audience cir-

culcation, including access stairways, is within the auditorium. While this is undoubtedly an advantage for promenade performances, I miss the way in which an enclosing wall reinforces intimacy. But this is a matter upon which – in Calgary and elsewhere – consultant Iain Mackintosh, leader of the 'rediscovered courtyards' movement, and I, have agreed to differ in a spirit of mutual respect.

The Empress Theatre

A further theatre exists as a concrete shell. It takes its name from a theatre which stood on the site of the centre over 80 years ago. Sections of fibrous plaster and fascia railings from the balcony of the old theatre have been preserved and will be incorporated in the completion of the new Empress which will commence shortly.

An Integrated Arts Centre

A balanced integrated programme is the aim of any arts centre. But if the major proportion of a City's performing arts provision is concentrated in a single institution there can be dangers of an arts bureaucracy which not only stifles individual creativity but operates in a financial haze of cross-subsidy.

Calgary have cleverly avoided this situation by setting up an umbrella structure which not only allows each performance group to develop its individual artistic identity but divides the operation into a series of clearly defined cost centres. Thus Theatre Calgary and Alberta Theatre Projects can each operate their separate policies while benefitting from the workshops run by a jointly owned production unit. They and the many smaller companies who visit the centre on a more occasional basis also benefit from such central services as building maintenance, marketing and computer box-office.

Calgary also has the Jubilee Auditorium to house tours of musical epics. Banff with its year-round programme and summer festival is within reasonable driving distance.

The performing arts are alive and well and living on the prairie. ■

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the ingenuity with which the motorised speaker clusters disappear when not required.



Martha Cohen Theatre

The centre cluster of 48 is raised through the canopy and the side clusters of 20 track-off sideways through doors into parking chambers. The lighting pipes and trusses hang neatly within the architecture and the decorations come very close to achieving the ideal of being exciting on entering but not distracting after sitting down.

Centre's opening with a reputation for quality, built up over the previous 20 years.

The Martha Cohen Theatre

The Centre's other resident acting company, Alberta Theatre Projects, is committed to innovative work, including international plays,