

Royal rebirth for Vancouver's Queen Elizabeth Theatre

BY SUSAN LAZARUK, THE PROVINCE NOVEMBER 13, 2009



A worker prepares for opening night inside the newly renovated Queen Elizabeth Theatre in Vancouver.

Photograph by: Arlen Redekop, The Province

Fifty years and four months after a young Queen Elizabeth II christened Vancouver's brand-new \$9-million downtown theatre after herself, the theatre celebrated the building's rebirth Friday night with an official re-opening ceremony.

At the original grand opening, the Queen, then 33 and just six years into her reign, attracted 250,000 well-wishers on her one-day visit to Vancouver on July 15, 1959, which was capped by the official christening of the state-of-the-art building at Georgia and Hamilton streets, then one of the largest "soft-seat" theatres in Canada.

If the Queen were to return today, it would be to see, and especially hear, a different theatre, one that's been spruced up to the tune of \$48 million, or almost \$1 million for each of its years.

Its director and designers say the changes were designed to improve the experience for those who attend musical events from opera to bhangra at the 2,760-seat theatre, beginning with the ceremony Friday night featuring the Vancouver Welsh Men's Choir, the UBC Opera Ensemble and Canadian singer songwriter Judy Ginn Walchuk, named Canada's most promising new singer in 1963, followed by a Broadway musical tribute.

"What we've got is the large auditorium that Vancouver should have had all along," said Vancouver's director of civic theatres, Rae Ackerman.

“All the renovations were done to make a major improvement for every point of view for the audience,” he said.

The most immediately noticeable change is the atrium in the now bright lobby, created by removing the ceiling that separated the floors and relocating the lighting and sound control room into the theatre. A modern crushed-seashell version of the spherical chandeliers, removed during previous renovations, now hang like giant snowflakes over the lobby.

Bars have been added to the upper levels, eliminating a need to stampede down the stairs at intermission, and the washrooms have been updated with square stainless-steel sinks and 12 additional stalls in total in the women’s rooms.

Most importantly, the theatre itself has been transformed from what even in 1959 were considered poor acoustics and bad sightlines. The Queen E has been criticized since its opening for being uninteresting, shabby, lacking legroom and having terrible acoustics, said Ackerman.

The city hired John O’Keefe of Aercoustics Engineering to use the latest in acoustic engineering to remove the low ceiling — once considered state-of-the-art acoustic engineering — and add sound reflectors along the walls and ceilings, all designed to direct music back to the audience.

Even the catwalks for technical crews above the stage were designed with mesh walking surfaces that allow sound to pass through it to the proper reflectors, unlike the old solid-bottomed ones that blocked the sound but didn’t properly direct it.

Aercoustics used computer-generated and scale models to tweak its designs sometimes by as little as a half-degree to achieve optimum sound, said O’Keefe.

“We have acoustics here that rival those in the brand new Four Seasons [Centre] opera house in Toronto” that cost almost \$200 million to build in 2006, he said.

The Queen E’s carpet has been replaced with engineered dark wood flooring and the old metal seats and their perforated bottoms — which “soaked up sound,” said O’Keefe — with cushioned wooden ones, both features designed to reflect sound instead of absorb it. Even the glass in the control room at the back had to be positioned to reflect the sound back to the audience.

The seats in the centre section are now staggered (where before people sat directly behind the people in front of them) and there’s more leg room — a six-foot-one Ackerman said he used to have to splay his knees and now has a five-centimetre clearance.

The centre has more spaces for disabled seating and a “situation room,” where mothers with fussing babies or patrons with noisy respirators can watch a show; there are about 100 wider seats on certain aisles, which will eventually be identified for people wanting roomier seats; some end rows in the orchestra section swivel to allow people to pass and the ventilation system is quieter.

There are 169 fewer seats, largely because of the relocation of the control room, but Ackerman said

150 of the original 2,929 seats weren't normally sold because of poor sightlines.

The renovations, which were done over four years during the annual summer shutdown, also included "acoustic separation" to eliminate sound bleed from the adjoining Vancouver Playhouse, which was built in 1962, before the high-decibel rock shows of the 1970s and later.

The Playhouse received many walkouts and requests for refunds over the years, even though rock shows at the Queen E were scheduled to start at 9 p.m. to mitigate any overlap, said Ackerman.

Although the first show is the Warren Miller's annual ski film, on Saturday and Sunday, the first musical concert is Jann Arden next week, and O'Keefe said the big test for the acoustics will be Vancouver Opera's *Norma*, opening on Nov. 28.

slazaruk@theprovince.com

© Copyright (c) The Province