

CURTAIN UP *on a dream*

Montecasino's Teatro was one of those projects that "can't be done". But, reports Tat Wolfen, it was, indeed. All that was required was stout hearts and the input of teams of top-notch experts, to turn it into a tangible, vital entity.

Before the bricks and mortar comes passion. Don King, development manager at Mirage Leisure & Development is a whirling dervish of a man whose diminutive stature belies the gigantic enthusiasm and tenacity with which he propelled this project. Don's passion is backed by an innate ability to extract from people what he needs to realise Mirage's fantastical goals; be it moral support, budgets or creative talent.

"Originally," explains Don, "The Montecasino 'add-on' was to have been a hotel, piazza, and multi-purpose hall.

Then Pieter Toerien started talking to the guys at Monte, as he had secured the rights for the musical smash-hit, The Lion King, from the Disney organisation. It became clear to us, as discussions progressed, that we would need a proper lyric theatre to do the show justice. Of course, once The Lion King was done and dusted, this prestigious venue would continue to be a major drawcard for the complex, hosting other hot-ticket shows in the Broadway mould."

These decisions were made early in 2005, and the completion deadline was for March 2007. Two years may sound like a fair bit of time, but, with a project this size, it's merely a twinkling of an eye.

"We realised that we would have to talk to overseas consultants, as no one locally had the kind of theatre experience that we required," says Don. Enter Arts Team of London; specialists in theatre design. Their lead architect, the highly respected Nick Thompson, was on the verge of retirement, but the folks at Monte weren't going to let him slip through the cracks... His wife, Clare Ferraby, whose speciality is theatre interiors, also came on board.

With their right-hand man, Stewart King, they formed the basis of a formidable team.

Thompson had strong notions of where he and his team were headed: "From the time patrons arrive at Montecasino and approach the building, the buzz of anticipation must begin. Our role is to create a sequence of unique spaces, culminating in the auditorium as a memorable container for world-class theatre. The special African characteristics of light, colour and space will inform our design approach, and hopefully make the building synonymous with Johannesburg."

Legend goes that Clare, who's no stranger to this part of the world, held a South African plant in her hand and declared, "This is my colour theme for the auditorium." Now, I don't know what the plant in question was, but, having been inside the theatre and experienced that rich, warm symphony of reds, yellows and browns, I'm prepared to bet it was a croton.

The folks at Arts Team were to provide the concept work only, with local architects MDS interpreting and executing Nick's ideas, in addition to coordinating services

The TEATRO Factoid

OVERVIEW

The Teatro at Montecasino was constructed by Tsogo Sun at a price of close to R100 million.

It forms part of a R335 million lifestyle extension to the existing Montecasino complex.

The Teatro overlooks the rugby-field-sized Montecasino Piazza, which features a musical fountain and various restaurants and cafés.

The Teatro has the largest auditorium in South Africa, and is one of the 10 largest lyric theatres in the world.

The theatre has been developed under the guidance of a team of world-class consultants, headed up by the London-based The Arts Team and the international theatre consultant and President of the Society of London Theatre, Martin McCallum.

The theatre was designed for large-scale musical productions, with a view to attracting international Broadway-type productions.

DIMENSIONS

- The Teatro at Montecasino measures 7 700m².
- It has a maximum capacity of 1 962 people, with no orchestra; 1 900 in its current configuration, hosting The Lion King.
- The size of the foyer: 770 m² on Ground Level, 320 m² on Rear Stalls Level, and 395 m² on Upper Circle Level.
- The size of the stage: 25 m wide x 13 m deep
- 14m x 8.5m proscenium opening
- The size of the sunken orchestra pit: 66 m²
- The size of the stage trap area: 113 m²
- The height of the fly tower: 21.3m (about 8 storeys)

Looking out from the stage into the largest auditorium of its kind in the country.

Photography: Montecasino, Tat Wolfen

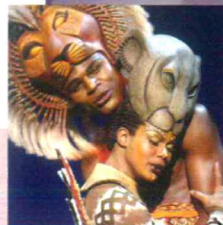
Performance photography of the Teatro's opening production, The Lion King, by Pat Bromilow Downing and John Hogg ©Disney



such as aircon, plumbing and electricity. As fast as Nick could send out his documents, they'd be acted upon at this end. Naturally, a lively telephonic correspondence crackled over the oceans between the parties. Nick declared at one point that he'd never known such a punishing deadline. His complaints were quite within reason, as a similar theatre being created anywhere else in the world would typically have required twice as long to put together!

The theatre 'lost' 10m of length in its transition from multi-purpose venue. "When Nick phoned me from London, asking to be 'given back' those 10 metres," Don recalls, "Regretfully I had to say 'sorry, but no can do'. You see, the piles had already been driven into the ground. Our footprint was cast in stone, so to speak, and there could be no revision or negotiation on that."

It's interesting to note how that 10m was reclaimed. The bars on the Rear Stalls Level, for example, are recessed into the incline of the auditorium (i.e. under the raked seating). The foyer on the Upper Circle Level is similarly tucked under the gallery seating, but a generous, curved skylight draws the eye up and out of the foyer, increasing the sense of spaciousness. The downstairs foyer had to be slightly pulled in, but this was compensated for by the glass walls and doors leading onto the piazza. This extended vista gives the foyer an expansive, roomy feel. Any architect, I suppose, can create a workable area under optimal conditions, but it takes the 'crème de la crème' of architects to wrap and compress three levels of foyers under less-than-favourable conditions, while retaining a sense of light, space and freedom.



The TEATRO Factoid

FACILITIES

- Front of House Facilities
- Stalls bar at ground level with coffee bar and merchandising outlet
- Balcony Bar
- Two VIP function rooms on the Balcony Level
- Back of House Facilities
- 2 x Star dressing rooms
- 3 x 2-person dressing rooms
- 7 x 4-person dressing rooms
- 3 x 6-person dressing rooms
- 2 x 10-person dressing rooms
- 1 x Green Room and 1 x musician's lounge
- Male + female musicians' change rooms and lounge
- Dedicated conductor's dressing room
- Rear stage door entrance and control area
- Various rooms that can be used for office space or workshop space, for the use of visiting companies.
- 14 versatile rooms on a dedicated production level, to be utilised by visiting company management i.e. wig room, running wardrobe room, laundry, physio room, technical team room, stage/technical manager.
- Resident administration level containing offices used for general management, technical management and meeting room with outdoor terrace.
- Staging and Special Features
- 21.3m grid in fly tower
- Sunken orchestra pit, fitted with a mechanical lift mechanism.
- Stage with a versatile steel substructure that can be dismantled to accommodate or create trap areas.

An expansive skylight leads the eye upwards and out.



The bars on the Rear Stalls Level are recessed under the auditorium's raked seating.

An interesting feature of the middle foyer, or Rear Stall Level, is that it's a floating bridge, connected only on its ends. This has obviated the need for supporting columns, which would only have cramped the foyer area beneath it.

Blacksmith Interior Design (who, coincidentally, are situated just across the road from the theatre) accepted and implemented Clare's concept work, localising it along the way. Barry Freeman of BFH project-managed the whole affair by coordinating the ongoing in-and-out stream of designs and information, and managing the building process. The structural engineers were LC Consulting.

Visitors to the theatre will notice that there are no supporting columns to be seen. This was a crucial design consideration, bearing in mind the importance of clear sightlines. "The concrete roof sits on a sturdy set of steel girders," Don will point out. "The concrete had to be of sufficient density to block out outside noises. These same girders support the lighting bridges and other access walkways for technical staff, as well as acoustic blankets, the ribbon ceiling, acoustic panels and aircon ducts." The seating areas are made of precast elements.

Richard Cowell, the acoustician who consulted on the job, came in on Nick Thompson's recommendation. Richard, who came courtesy of Arup – arguably the most prestigious firm of consulting engineers in the world – presented a generic document of what the auditorium's acoustics should be, and locally, Steve Moss of Steve Moss & Associates interpreted that document.

Despite the rapid speed at which the building progressed from blueprint to bricks, no compromises were made in design safety, building integrity and safety

planning. Again, the experience of the British theatre experts was drawn upon, to make this the safest venue of its sort. Few people know, for example, that a battery of six air-samplers, in the auditorium and fly tower, are constantly working, 'sniffing' the air for the faintest trace of a fire. These communicate with a sophisticated computer program (linked to fans, water sprinklers, standby generators and the aircon system) that reassuringly runs in the background, 24/7.

"The stage and associated mechanicals are an engineering marvel on their own," Don points out, still clearly in awe of the logistics involved. "The part of the stage that the audience sees is merely the bottom of a large tower (about eight storeys high). This 'fly tower' is where scenery is lifted out of the way – or, conversely, from where it is lowered. The scenery elements, heavy as they may be, are supported by a system of weights and counterbalances, which allows them to be lowered or lifted with the slightest human exertion."

The orchestra pit (which can accommodate up to a 70-piece orchestra) can, between performances, be lifted – right up to the point where it becomes an extension of the stage. For shows not requiring an orchestra, this area can be minimised, to the point where three more rows of seats can be installed, bringing the theatre's capacity up to 1962.

Richard Moore, of Sedas Engineering in London, designed the fly tower mechanisms and the orchestra pit lift. He was so closely involved with the project that he eventually even became its contractor, sourcing materials and having them put together. Don picks up the story: "The professionalism of these guys was unbelievable. The

pit lift and all its associated machinery was assembled and test-loaded in London. Once they were happy that it was 100%, they dismantled it, shipped it over here and reconstructed it in our theatre."

"If only our experiences with the British seating manufacturers had been that pleasant!" Don laughs. "The company we'd been dealing with, offered to ship us a prototype at an exorbitant fee – well, it seemed like more of a ransom, actually!"

Fortunately, that little story had a very happy ending. A Cape Town-based seating company were approached with the specified dimensions, and they came up with the luxury perches that now plushly accommodate the Teatro's visitors. Apart from the spring mechanisms that push the bases of the seats up when they're empty, every single element of these seats – aluminium legs, upholstery, foam, and laminated boards – is locally sourced and made. For a specialised area of the market such as this, that's an astonishing achievement that we'd like to salute!

"The seats aren't just one-size-fits-all, either," Don remarks. "There are 14 different foot profiles to accommodate different positions in the theatre, and some have lights, while others don't. Also, because the seats are

arranged in concentric semi-circles pivoting from the centre back stage, we don't have the standard right-angled arrangement that you'll find in most other theatres. It could've been a major headache, but the guys took it all in their stride." In the stalls, timber was first laid into floor, and the seats were bolted into the timber. Astonishingly, every single seat in the auditorium is removable. Thus, seats and/or rows can be whisked away to specification, to accommodate the needs of various shows.

Apart from the obvious colour requirements, acoustics dictated the wall finishes of the auditorium's interior. Meranti was put to good use, as it has desirable qualities both in the acoustic and aesthetics departments. Naturally, certain surfaces had to be more absorptive than others. While this is one of the ten largest theatres of its kind in the world, it still offers an unexpected level of closeness – even to the seats furthest from the stage. The angled distance from the back wall of the gallery to the front of the stage is a comfortable 32m.

Joao Viegas, assistant lighting designer at Paul Pamboukian Lighting Design describes how Mirage brought them in to interpret Nick Thompson's concepts: "They wanted clean, uncluttered surfaces; no wall fittings,"

he explains. "This meant downlighting, some uplighting and, in the case of the bar areas, lighting behind glass panels."

The auditorium presented an interesting lighting challenge, however. It was required that the lighting bring out the warm reds of the seating and wall coverings, while breathing life into the blue tones of the carpets. The problem is that these are two diametrically opposed tasks. If you use warm lighting to lift out the reds, you deaden the blues. After a score of on-site mockups, it was agreed that there would have to be a degree of compromise, and that it would tilt in favour of warmish lighting. Firstly, there was the emotional or psychological angle: blueish light gives the more clinical feel that one would associate with offices or hospitals, whereas a warmer light is cosier and friendlier – and also favours skin tones. Naturally, patrons would want to look – and feel – at their glamorous best!

"The coves under the balcony had originally been painted blue, to suggest the African sky," Joao continues, "but that would've brought us back to a colder light, so they were repainted in warmer hues (see pic on pg 22). Eventually, we settled upon a colour temperature of 2

700°K for the auditorium; which is pretty close to the light given off by standard incandescents."

An interesting mood shift takes place between the auditorium and the foyer areas in that patrons will emerge from a warm glow into the cleaner, more modern-looking and cool-lit foyers. The bluer 3 000°K lighting of the foyer spaces seems to suggest cool water and refreshment for parched throats – which is exactly the task of the bars lining the foyers' inner walls.

Glass columns behind the bars and the glass panels fronting the bar counters are back-lit with aquamarine neon, so, if anything in the theatre is going to suggest the skies, rivers and coastlines of the South African experience, it's going to be the cool, inviting foyers.

Bringing the Teatro to life was no easy task, and Don emerged from the project somewhat exhausted and taxed – though clearly vitalised and inspired by the end product. "It's been the greatest challenge of my career so far," he states, "and has required my biggest input." His beaming visage informs me that I've no need to ask whether it was all worthwhile...



Next month, we'll look at other elements of the Montecasino lifestyle extension.

The 14 x 8,5m proscenium is the audience's window on an area that extends way above, below, left and right.

The Rear Stalls level foyer is built on a floating bridge.

Giant relief artworks adorn the walls on both sides of the foyer.



The TEATRO Factoid

INTERIOR DESIGN

- The Teatro at Montecasino was designed by Arts Team of RHWL Architects, specialist theatre consultants based in London.
- The process has been driven by Mirage Leisure and Developments, the development managers of Montecasino's Lifestyle Extension.
- Project management by BFH.
- On-site implementation of design by MDS Architecture and Blacksmith Interior Design.
- Design, architecture and development of staging, acoustics, seating and safety facilities has been done to the highest international standards.
- Skills transfer has taken place with local contractors.
- The Teatro has been designed to maximise audience-performer interaction.

Seating

- No seat is further than 32m from the stage.
- 10 seats are available for ultra-fast removal and wheeling away, to accommodate wheelchairs.

