

A dialogue with modernity



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Cities that have tasted greatness in their past lives face a dilemma: whether to continue to bask in the shadow of faded glories, or to attempt to modernise, thus losing the distinctiveness of what made them great in the first place.

Trouble is, that decision is not always theirs to make. Travellers do not come to the great centres of antiquity to see whether their plumbing is up to 21st-century standards. They want the past – and tourist-hungry cities are happy to serve it to them, more often than not in great dollops of kitsch.

Athens and Rome are two cities that offer more than most to the culture-seeking tourist: about 1,000 years worth of bedrock of western civilisation. Visitors are happy to keep their ideas of both cities preserved in the stillness of that time. The (modern) Greeks have a word for it, *archaeolatreia*; reverence for the ancient, which has strong pejorative connotations: how is a city to look forward if its friends remind it constantly of its past?

In both of those cities, however, positive steps are being taken to keep culture alive.

In Athens, a new artistic director of the city's summer festival, Yorgos Loukos, is devising an international, eclectic programme that is finally creating a dialogue with modernity, and pulling in crowds of young spectators in the process. In Rome, a new venue, the Auditorium Parco della Musica, is similarly cranking up the cultural energy levels in the city.

Loukos, now in charge of his third festival, uses the treasures of antiquity to frame his new approach. How could he not? In the ancient theatre of Epidauros, deep in the thickly-clad woodland of the Peloponnese, he has one of the most spectacular and moving arenas in world culture. This is the quintessential place to see Greek tragedy, of course, and the festival has long put on a handful of productions a year, played in modern Greek, which are incomparably atmospheric.

Loukos has begun to broaden the repertoire, however, to include works of drama that have at least a temperamental affiliation with ancient tragedy. Last year, Fiona Shaw reprised her highly acclaimed performance in Beckett's *Happy Days*, in Deborah Warner's National Theatre production. The second of two performances was cancelled last year following the forest fires that swept through the region, but such was the first performance's success that this year it will be the opening production at Epidauros, on July 4.

As for the festival in Athens, Loukos has transformed what he calls the messy "*salade niçoise*" that used to take place over the summer months into something more coherent. He says it was partly by accident that the festival broadened its scope in the first place: in the postwar years, it happily limited itself to performing ancient Greek drama in the Odeon of Herodes Atticus in the Acropolis, before the rise of a striking young Greek singer by the name of Maria Callas encouraged the organisers to take a chance with classical music.

Today it hosts a series of world-class events, many of them co-productions with foreign houses. This year's highlights include appearances by Riccardo Muti, Renée Fleming, the Bolshoi Opera, Thomas Ostermeier's *Hamlet* and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's *Sutra*, favourably reviewed after its Sadler's Wells debut last month.

New venues, Peiraios 260 and Technopolis, provide homes for more experimental work including electronica and world music collaborations. The rise in interest has been extraordinary – ticket sales have more than doubled between 2007 and 2008, from 247,000 to 582,000, and they provide a return of €6.5m on the festival's €18m budget, making it one of the major players on the European circuit.

Rome's Auditorium Parco della Musica was designed by Renzo Piano and opened to the public five years ago, with the substantial support of the city's culture-loving mayor Walter Veltroni. The elegant and flexible design provides an external 3,500-seat amphitheatre in the summer months, which converts into an ice rink in the winter, while the impressive Santa Cecilia Hall hosts the city's acclaimed Accademia di Santa Cecilia.

The centre's managing director Carlo Fuortes says the auditorium has quenched a long-standing thirst among the Roman public for cultural events "that looked to the future, instead of being related to the city's grand heritage." This year's summer concert season, which opens with Alanis Morissette, includes

some of the biggest rock names around – Franz Ferdinand, Paul Simon, Leonard Cohen – but it is some of the premieres that are of more specific interest.

A new opera by Giorgio Battistelli, *Miracolo a Milano*, performed on June 26 and 27, is based on Vittorio de Sica's coruscating 1951 film which highlighted the plight of the homeless and marginalised in post-war Italy, and which now has an extra resonance in the wake of the divisive and bitter election campaign which saw the return to power of Silvio Berlusconi.

Battistelli describes the work as a "parable about alienated people" and uses a "mute" chorus, whose only sounds are groans, sighs and murmurs, to denote the suffering of the homeless. "In Italy, what counts is not what is heard, but what remains silent, silenced," the composer has said. Fuortes says the work cannot help but speak of the newly-marginalised elements of Italian society, immigrants from outside Europe, and will contribute towards an "important reflection" on the country's priorities.

That impulse towards societal reflection is behind the most distinctive part of the auditorium's programme, which are its non-artistic events. Recent festivals have been based on mathematics, journalism and philosophy. The mathematics festival, which included Nobel prize-winners and luminaries such as Umberto Eco, attracted 55,000 people over four days.

"They came to even some of the most difficult subjects, because it was not treated in an academic way," says Fuortes, who believes the curiosity of the Italian public for such events is partly a reaction to a television culture that is among the least sophisticated in Europe.

Both Loukos and Fuortes emphasise the success of their ventures in attracting young audiences. They understand better than anyone that it is one thing to live among the evocative ruins of a lost civilisation; but time, and culture, must move on.

Details

Athens Epidaurus Festival '08 ends August 23

Auditorium Parco della Musica

'Luglio suona bene' ('July sounds good') festival of open-air concerts runs from June 24-July 31

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