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The Barbican means business



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By Norman Lebrecht / September 20, 2006

The new look is among the season's most striking. Emerging from the fume-choked tunnel that connects the Barbican Centre to the nearest public transport, the eye is greeted by a completely reconfigured façade. The new Barbican entrance on Silk Street wears its contents on the front like a book – art, music, drama, film – luring you into a marbled white space that leads neutrally into the narrative. The foyers may resemble an airport business lounge but the atmosphere has perceptibly lightened and there is an impression, at last, that the building has overcome its disastrous reception.

Ten years ago, when its managing director John Tusa was wondering whether he had made the worst mistake of his life by giving up reading the BBC's one o'clock news to run a crisis-ridden arts centre, he ran into the philosopher Sir Isaiah Berlin. The Barbican was universally unloved: a concrete warren driven into a hole in the ground and riddled with walkways and sub-levels that made the maze at Hampton Court seem comparatively penetrable.

Attendances were poor, artists were demoralised to the point of abstention – Claudio Abbado, the last London Symphony Orchestra conductor, had pronounced a fatwa on the concert acoustic – and the press in its uniform way (self included) had pronounced the place an irredeemable disaster, deserving of demolition. Tusa, who had spent most of his career at the BBC, found himself confronting negativity on every front when the prophet Sir Isaiah offered him a crumb of comfort. 'You will never make the Barbican loved,' opined the Oxford sage, 'but you can make it respected.'

That, for Tusa, was the first light at the end of the tunnel. 'I thought I'll settle for that,' he says. 'Yes, it's a very unEnglish building – we don't do big quarters in this country – and that's why a lot of people were uneasy with it. But it is a smart building and

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a lot of what appeared to be rigidities at the beginning are actually very flexible. It's a building with which you can do a great deal, you can make it respected.'

Today, on the eve of the Barbican's quarter-century and his own final year, Tusa has completed a £34 million pound refit that has remedied the acoustic, simplified the geography and create physical and intellectual cohesion. The concert sound has been clarified to a point where it won approval last week from fastidious Vienna Philharmonic players and the theatre has been constructively reprogrammed since the Royal Shakespeare Company's departure – 'an absolute godsend,' says Tusa – to become Britain's premier venue for contemporary and international drama. The cinema is integrating Russian films this month with a Shostakovich concert season and, if the art gallery has episodes of post-modern inconsistency, its shows are at least in open conversation with whatever is going on in the rest of the centre. 'I think the people who work here,' concludes Tusa, 'have made a clever institution.'

Setting aside its rivalry with the eternally troubled South Bank, the Barbican has found a role and an identity that are unique and progressive. It is, on the one hand, the cultural face of the mercantile City of London and, on the other, a place of independent artistic vision. Unlike the South Bank, which has its strings pulled by Arts Council and Government, the Barbican feels no heat from City funders and no need to adapt to external agendas. Come 2012, says Tusa, 'we'll see if what we are planning anyway is true to Olympic ideals, and then we may take on some extra items that are true to us. But we are not going to shape our programme to make it fit – which quite a lot of people elsewhere are doing.' The barb aimed at the South Bank's artistic director Jude Kelly, who also wears an Olympic hat, is unmissable.

It has not been an easy ride this past decade and Tusa, now 70 and still inquisitive enough to make a current BBC Radio 4 series on Iran, almost walked away twice when his contract came up. What kept him going was the creative engagement with his artistic director Graham Sheffield and the various artform chiefs. 'One day, after about four years,' he reflects, 'Graham said to me, "is it your impression that things seem to be a bit easier?" We had been pushing uphill and suddenly things gained momentum. The case I'd had to make for support from the City got easier. They used to see us as a cost. We showed we are an asset. We're bloody good value for money.'

A recent survey by Oxford Economic Forecasting showed the ripple effect of the Barbican benefits. For every £10 spent on arts in the City area, another £6.50 is generated back into the general economy by way of spending on food and services. More than 10.5 million attended City-funded arts last year, a quarter of all visitors to London attractions. There is evidence that people are going out more in the City and staying out later.

And the arts quarter is still growing. The Museum of London has undergone an expensive refit, the London Symphony Orchestra runs St Luke's as a performance and education centre and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama is building a 700-seat chamber music hall, to open in 2010. With the coming of Eurostar to Kings Cross next year, the centre of cultural gravity in London will shift north and east and the Barbican will sit on commanding heights of quality and enterprise. Income was up 18 percent last year and every single artform showed an increased attendance.

There are still improvements to be made to the tunnel approaches and some of the infrastructure but, says Tusa, 'that's for my successor.' The headhunters started hitting the phones this week and the likelihood is that his job will be combined with the artistic director's, making Sheffield the preferred candidate.

What can be stated, though, with certainty is that the Barbican has overcome its physical debilities of ugliness and incoherence by making a case for integrity and seriousness, a favourite Tusa word. Define serious, I challenge him. 'You don't underestimate or patronise the audience,' he flashes back. 'You don't oversell or modify the art.' It's a simple recipe, and he has made it work.

*

The Real Porgy and Bess - at last

Just as Trevor Nunn goes into rehearsal with a snazzed-up West End version of Porgy and Bess, a recording of Gershwin's original score reveals depths and effects never heard before. So popular was Gershwin that the music was published before it went on stage and the composer, who died two years after the 1935 premiere, never got to incorporate the changes and cuts he had made during rehearsal.

Some of these, heard in a new Decca recording from Nashville, are profound and mind-altering. There is a wrong note corrected (A for A#) in the first half-minute, 'Summertime' is sung a good deal slower and two extra lines in 'Bess you is my woman now' deepen and darken the core relationship.

None of the singers is well known, perhaps because many of them sing only this one work. Alvy Powell, who plays Porgy, is a US army officer by day. Marquita Lister has sung Bess hundreds of times. Without the plumminess and posturing of opera voices, the drama springs to life with unexampled vividness under John Mauceri's busy baton. I hope Nunn gets to hear it before his revisions are set in stone.

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