



Mondavi Vista



By Ed Rudin, MD

This edifice complex is vast and elegant, but...

AFTER FOUR DAYS IN ASHLAND and six shows at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, we were tired but eager to cap it off at the sparkling new Mondavi Center. We had long boycotted performances at Freeborn Hall for its ricocheting sound, and looked forward to *Porgy and Bess* in the highly touted beauty and acoustics of Jackson Hall.

Tickets were hard to get, the phone lines were always busy, but, tickets in hand, we easily found close parking.

The Building

The towering structure was all too conspicuous: Ten stories of light-colored sand-stone, five stories of dark-tinted glass, and an airy, elevated canopy spanning the full terrace in front of the Center. It bespoke exuberant wealth, ostentatious refinement — and no effort to be part of the campus.

The lobby beautifully accommodated people-watchers and the evening's audience dressed accordingly. Walls of fossilized sandstone and waterlogged Douglas fir provide a luxurious setting for two tiers of tightly packed people to mingle and watch each other fondle their drinks and nibble their snacks.

The auditorium was as sumptuous as the lobby, but far more expansive. House lights brilliantly lit high walls of sandstone and wood and a lake of blue carpet and blue seats. The stage seemed very far from most of the 1,800 seats in the opera house. We who are not major benefactors and who had trouble ordering tickets, found ourselves five stories above the stage and a football field away. We had an unimpeded sight line from behind one goal line to a stage at the far goal line. Would we be able to hear?

When the house lights dimmed and the curtain parted (Yes, a real curtain, not just a darkened stage), we saw an under-lighted Catfish Row rising into the 10-story fly tower and spreading across the shadowy stage. Catfish Row was tenement more than alley. "Summertime," the lullaby that opens the opera, came from a spotlight one story above the stage. Later, sans spotlight, we could not always tell who was singing. (We had not expected to need binoculars, and we saw none for rent in the lobby.)

Even from our distant, elevated seats we heard the pit orchestra well. Others, seated elsewhere, did not.. We were disheartened to find that some of the star singers needed, or thought they needed, microphone augmentation — and their mikes went off and on. We felt remote and uninvolved, strangers in a beautiful aerie high above what we wanted to be part of.

Two weeks later we returned for the Sacramento Ballet. We sat in Row L of the orchestra. From there, on the floor of the Yosemite Valley, stone and wood rose around us and we stood and sat amidst blue waters and blue sky. On this sunny matinee, the audience was neatly and comfortably clothed, not attired. The stage was at eye level. For *The Tempest*, a

soprano and a saxophone augmented the clear, pure sounds from a pit ensemble of violin, cello, clarinet and flute. At intermission people talked rather than gawked. They even stepped outside.

The Performances

So much for the building. (I am reminded of the apocryphal story of the reporter who asked Mary Todd Lincoln the night of the shooting, "Aside from that, Mrs. Lincoln, how did you enjoy the show?")

The voices in *Porgy and Bess* were strong (with and without amplification) and the acting of the principals generally effective, the ensemble less so. Initially, the Afro-Creole-English spoken was hard to understand, but we adapted — even noticing the occasional lapses in dialect. Stage direction and stage lighting were disappointing. The storm scene, a turning point in the opera, was clumsily overdone and "Sportin' Life" was more heavily portrayed than I liked. Cab Calloway played Sportin'Life as a fun-loving devil when I first saw the debut road show over 65 years ago.

Porgy and Bess tells a powerful story of the tragic conflict between human nobility and human weakness. It is still relevant.

The highlight of the Ballet was the premiere performance of Ron Cunningham's dramatic *Tempest*. Danced with grace and passion to Jerome Begin's original music, piano-synthesizer electronics and stirring use of the soprano to augment the instruments, it told the story sparsely and clearly in a master-piece of staging. Its storm scenes put those in *Porgy and Bess* to shame. Lights, music and dancers were as one in this storm and in the fight to survive it.

We returned to Mondavi Center for a concert of baroque chamber music featuring The Academy of St. Martin's in the Fields and Joshua Bell as piano soloist. A brightly lit stage brought the players closer, although we were in the lower balcony. Even the frail baroque instruments were seen and heard clearly and beautifully, not lost but not enhanced, by the vastness of the hall.

We have now also heard and seen the opposite, the Pat Methany Group producing "now music" with "now" amplification and enormous vitality. For this we were again on the orchestra floor, this time with amplifiers and speakers towering over us. However uninvolved we were in *Porgy and Bess*, we more than made up for it with this marvelous group of musical innovators.

For a talk by Anne Fadiman, author of *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (reviewed by Dr. Wm. Peniston in the last issue), we sat in the Terrace, the presumptuously named slope behind the orchestra level. The auditorium was full and Ms. Fadiman held her audience in thrall for a one-hour talk, followed by questions and comments from the audience. She responded with pertinence and humility, but audience participation was limited to a pair of microphones on the orchestra floor. Again, the gallery must have felt a bit disconnected, despite Ms. Fadiman's warm, self-effacing humor and poignant depiction of the cultural divides that significantly complicate medical treatment. It was hardly the most desirable venue for so personal a story, but no doubt necessary to pay the speaker's fee and the facility's operating costs

That is what troubles me most about this Edifice Complex. The \$60.9 million building could use a quarter of that to make it viable as a regional performing arts center. Corporate sponsors so far seem quite happy to underwrite the programs, but how long will that honeymoon last?

Students are already protesting the limited discount seats set aside for them at unsponsored events featuring interesting and informative speakers who charge high speaker fees. If half the \$16 million in large gifts for the edifice had been put in trust to endow future operations, the hall and the region might have a more certain future and students and community could better avail themselves of the opportunities.

This 103,637 square feet, at \$588 per square foot, is more than a first-class university performing arts department needs and is too much for serving the students and faculty. An endowment would have stabilized the center, helped the community's struggling regional theaters and orchestras, and served the university and the students better.

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