

The Arts

size of the multi-theatre building and even the shape of the concrete structure were also criticized. It wasn't completed in time for 1967. And the final cost was \$46 million (about £18 million).

Since its official opening in June 1969, however, the National Arts Centre has proven itself such a success with Canadians that today the politicians on Parliament Hill, just across Confederation Square, subsidize its activities with scarcely a whisper of objection. Earlier this year when the federal government announced it was increasing its grant for the performing arts at the centre by 20 per cent, no objection was raised in Parliament.

The complete theatre complex

The most heavily subsidized arts centre in Canada, the National was granted

Canada's Theatre Flourishes



Canada's National Arts Centre on the banks of the Rideau Canal in Ottawa.

The theatre is alive and well and flourishing in Canada, often with help from British talent. Not flourishing with profits necessarily (more often that side of the business is subsidized by government), but flourishing with activity and even audiences.

The success-story of the decade seems to be the National Arts Centre in Ottawa. But there are others. For instance, the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton, where British actor-director John Neville recently became artistic director. And there was the rave-review performance of Siobhan McKenna at Toronto's Irish Arts Theatre during the past winter season, to mention another.

The National Arts Centre began as one of hundreds of projects intended to celebrate Canada's centennial in 1967. It soon became something of a political football. The cost kept escalating. There was controversy over its location, beside the Rideau Canal and bordering Confederation Square, in the centre of the national Capital. Some wanted it built in a more outlying area, for easier auto access. The

\$4.2 million in public funds for the current fiscal year, toward a total spending budget of \$8.8 million. What are Canadians getting for their money? From attendance at the centre, the answer seems to be "quite a bit."

There are an opera house, a theatre and an experimental studio-theatre in the centre complex, along with two restaurants, an underground parking garage and shops selling books, records, art and gifts.

The centre presents its own productions. But it also provides stages from which companies from other parts of Canada can offer their theatrical wares. By now virtually every company of standing across the country has made an appearance at the National, nearly always to substantial audiences. During a recent 12-month period, there were more than 700 performances in the centre. At least two of its three halls had something happening on stage every night of the year except Sundays. Seat sales in the theatre averaged 80 per cent.

But perhaps the most successful element in the centre's variety of activities is its

orchestra, under the direction of Mario Bernardi. He was music director of Sadler's Wells until he left in 1969 to direct the new orchestra formed for the Ottawa centre. Performances of the orchestra produced seat sales of 90 per cent over the 12 months already referred to. Further evidence of the quality of the Bernardi product can be gleaned from the pages of the *New York Times*. Of the orchestra's New York debut in February 1972, the *Times* wrote that it was "really first class."

This year Bernardi has put the orchestra to the test in a tour of five European countries during which it is giving 18 concerts. It opened the Bath Festival on May 25 and was playing at Queen Elizabeth Hall in London June 1 in the presence of Princess Alexandra and Mrs. Margaret Trudeau, wife of the Canadian Prime Minister. Back in Canada before departing on the tour, which included Moscow, Warsaw and the Versailles Festival, the orchestra had played in 35 cities and towns, from St. John's in Newfoundland in the east to Vancouver in British Columbia in the west.

Stratford Festival Theatre

A summer focal point in Canadian theatre is the Festival Theatre at Stratford, Ontario. The season opening June 4 features three plays by Shakespeare — *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Othello*, and *Pericles* — and Oliver Goldsmith's 18th-century comedy *She Stoops to Conquer*. But there seems to be no single season for Canadian theatre in its current lively condition, provided a person is willing to travel. Toronto is one of the liveliest theatre centres in Canada, particularly as a launching place for Canadian playwrights and avant-garde material. But smaller cities provide a string of theatres extending from the Neptune in Halifax, Nova Scotia, to the Greystone in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. And there is, of course, a variety of work being produced in the French language in Montreal theatres.

Fairly typical of the theatres in smaller Canadian cities is the Citadel in Edmonton, now under the direction of John Neville. He went to Canada in October 1972 to direct *The Rivals* at the National Arts Centre, and hasn't been able to get away since. For six years artistic director of the New Nottingham Playhouse, Neville has seldom been busier. In addition to keeping productions rolling in Edmonton, he has been engaged to direct his first opera, Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, at the Ottawa centre in June and July, with Bernardi conducting. He will also appear in a production of Shaw's play *Mrs. Warren's Profession*.

The impact of British artists in Canadian theatre is, obviously, considerable, both as new residents in the country and as visitors. To go back to Siobhan McKenna, she did a solo performance at Toronto's Irish Arts Theatre last winter that included the Molly Bloom monologue from *Ulysses*. A Toronto critic seeing her show for the fourth time called her one of the greatest actresses. "Her very presence on the stage makes one feel humble and grateful for being there." ♦