

The National Arts Centre

God placed world capitals on this earth in the twilight of the sixth day, apparently, for some of them seem to lack the pizzaz of other creations. Dear old Ottawa, for example — rather removed from the urban excitement of Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver, needed great effort to make it an exciting place to live. One such effort, which has paid off in more pleasure than almost anyone expected, is the three-year-old National Arts Centre, a large culture complex which practically transformed the city into a mecca for the arts.

Its three theatres are packed every night, and, compared to similar centres in North America, it almost *pays* for itself.

The Centre's inventive spirit and hefty budget, a combination which generally works best in the abstract, has surprised many in the theatrical world who had expected more of the same financial troubles that plague the centres in Washington, D.C., New York and Los Angeles. It has served as something of a model to Canada's regional cultural showcases.

It has even surprised N.A.C. personnel, including Hamilton Southam, the Centre's director general, and Bruce Corder, its operations director.

Ticket sales at the Centre average seventy-five per cent of capacity, but this figure is deceptive: attendance for experimental music or innovationist theatre, which the Centre conscientiously supplies liberally, is low, but attendance at "straight" theatrical events runs up to ninety-five per cent of capacity. French theatre — and in the Ottawa area French can be heard on the streets almost as often as English — sells sixty-eight per cent of its tickets by subscription alone. The Centre's music presentations are ninety per cent filled by subscription, leaving only 230 seats for box office sale. Attendance for the two orchestra series consistently ranges from eighty to one hundred per cent.

The Centre houses the three theatres and an intimate salon in an interlocking series of stark concrete hexagons. The Centre's construction was financed by a federal grant of \$46.5 million. Its first operating budget, in 1969, was \$2.9 million for the year, and this has increased to almost six million for 1972-73. Today, one-third of the budget is self-generated, with ticket sales amounting to \$1.5 million, while another half-million is brought in from rentals of the halls, the boutique spaces downstairs and the catering. The Canada Council gives a half-million dollar subsidy to the orchestra and the theatre, and the balance needed comes directly from the Federal Government.

The Centre is located in the heart of the city

just below Parliament Hill. Twelve bus lines converge here, and it is a transfer point between Ottawa and the largely French-speaking city of Hull across the Ottawa River in Quebec. Parking is available for enough cars to take care of the heavy attendance at night, and by day the Centre's boutiques make it a magnet for shoppers, revitalizing Ottawa's uptown area.

The architecture of the building is austere and controversial — a combination of pebbled concrete and monumental bronze doors. Inside, the angularity is moderated by five spiral chandeliers (the biggest sixty feet high and twelve hundred pounds) of hand-chipped squares of glass, which hang in the wells of curving staircases. The National Gallery, across Elgin Street, lends changing exhibits of tapestries and sculptures, which are scattered through the three levels of the Centre.

The biggest of the theatres is the Opera, which has been called the most acoustically perfect hall in the world. When the apron is elevated, it is the second largest stage in North America. Between the acts the stage is masked by a curtain of tufted wool so delicate it must be hoisted straight up — not rolled — and so vivid and shimmering, with its splashes of color against background threads of gold, that it in itself drew a standing ovation on opening night.

The Opera seats 2300 in its three levels of balconies and orchestra, where rows are widely spaced in continental style, without any center aisles. Every three rows have their own exit to the foyer to avoid congestion at the back of the theatre.

The Opera is the hall used for major attractions from overseas, from the U.S. and Canada, and in particular, is the home of the National Arts Centre's own symphony orchestra. Organized and conducted by Mario Bernardi, three-fourths of the orchestra's forty-four members are Canadians, many of whom like Bernardi, returned to Canada from positions abroad to join