

Performing Arts



The curtain rises for the Teatro Colón's next act

In 1968, the Colón received a partial makeover, and in the years that followed survived a military coup and the dark days of the dirty war (1976-83). But the theatre's troubles came to a head in 1988. The stage was in desperate need of repair, and the country was experiencing such hyperinflation (in 1989 it hit an annual 3079%) that no one could afford the tickets. The Teatro Colón, like Argentina, survived.

The new millennium brought with it *El Plan Maestro* (The Master Plan) to restore the Colón to its former glory. In 2006, the theatre closed for renovations and a year later, Mauricio Macri, the newly elected mayor of Buenos Aires, proposed to make its reopening a priority. The doors were due to open in 2008, to mark the Colón's 100th birthday, but instead the grand reopening ceremony coincided with Argentina's 2010 bicentenary celebrations. After its US\$100 million makeover, the theatre looked more resplendent than ever. To the country's collective relief, the acoustics were also deemed intact.

Despite the successful reopening, it's here that the facts become increasingly slippery. As part of the renovations, all the theatre's furniture was removed from the building and put into storage. Many say it was inadequately stored in humid conditions and some even claim it was dumped outside of the building. Velvet chairs and golden radiators that bore a striking resemblance to the Colón's fittings later turned up on Mercado Libre (the Argentinian version of eBay), but it has never been affirmed whether the furniture was really from the theatre. The workers took the director, Macri and other officials to court for abusing the Colón's fittings and won their case. The director denied the charges.

In 2011, a *cartonero* sorting through the rubbish bins outside the theatre came across a bag containing 300 scores, including Verdi's *Aida*. This time, there was no doubt that the bag's contents belonged to the Colón, but whether or not the scores were originals remains disputed. The same year, as part of one of several strikes relating to working conditions and pay, the entire philharmonic orchestra played a concert on the lawn outside the theatre.

Today, the orchestra performs concerts in its rightful place and the Colón is celebrating five years since its reopening with a special programme, which includes performances from Russian pianist Evgeny Kissin and Argentinian *bandeonista* Dino Saluzzi. For now at least, the whiff of scandal seems to have died down. Like Argentina itself, the Teatro Colón must, and will, go on.

Phantoms of the opera house

Rosie Hilder delves into the history of the Teatro Colón on the fifth anniversary of its reopening

With its glorious acoustics, resplendent furnishings and illustrious list of past performers – Luciano Pavarotti, Anna Pavlova and Richard Strauss to name just three – it's hard to imagine that the **Teatro Colón** (see p137) has ever been anything other than magnificent. But like many things in Argentina, a murky past lies just beneath the surface; the theatre's history is steeped in financial and legal problems, strikes and even murder.

The Teatro Colón began life in 1857, in the **Plaza de Mayo** (see p114), in a spot now occupied by the Banco de la Nación Argentina. This theatre closed in 1888, when plans were made to build a bigger and better Teatro Colón in the city centre, one that would make Europeans green with envy. Italian architect Francesco Tamburini, who had previously helped redesign the **Casa Rosada** (see p114), laid the first stone of the new building in 1890. He worked on the project for just one year before dying unexpectedly of lung cancer. His death was the first of a series of unfortunate events to tarnish the Colón's history.

After Tamburini's death, his disciple Vittorio Meano took over. The

grand opening was scheduled for 1892, but in 1894 the project manager was declared bankrupt and the state was forced to assume financial control in order for construction to continue.

Though Meano won the bid to construct the **Palacio del Congreso** (see p114) and Uruguayan parliament building, his luck didn't last. On June 1 1904, he arrived home to find his wife in bed with the butler he had recently fired, Juan Passera, who then shot and killed him. Passera was sentenced to 17 years in jail for what he claimed was an act of self-defence, while Meano's wife, Luisa, was sent back to Italy as punishment for her involvement. Belgian architect Jules Dormal took over the project, and was the only one of the Colón's early architects not to meet a sticky end.

On May 25 1908, after nearly 20 years of construction, the Colón opened with a performance of Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Aida*. The theatre goers were extremely impressed by the building, but not the opera. After a gruelling boat journey from Italy, the performers had rehearsed for just three days. Their exhaustion was so evident that many spectators abandoned the

auditorium at the interval to explore the (still unfinished) building.

Unlike Europe's opera houses, the Colón has always been accessible to all strata of society thanks to its state-subsidised tickets. In the early days, poor immigrants bought cheap standing tickets in the theatre's top tier, known as *El Paraíso* (paradise) for its superior acoustics and proximity to the heavens. Packed in like hens, paradise's punters were such a rowdy bunch that the spot soon acquired a new nickname, *El Gallinero* (the henhouse). To decide for yourself which nickname is more fitting, buy a ticket today for just AR\$20.

When Europe's opera houses closed due to World War II, the Colón was able to harvest the talents of European stars who flocked to Argentina. The new additions to the theatre's own ballet, choir and orchestra groups led the Colón to experience its most glorious period. Between 1959 and 1968, it put on 111 operas.

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