

# Visit to the Grand Théâtre de Genève, 20 November

*Editor's note:*

*Due to limited space, it was unfortunately not possible to include this article by Patricia Brulant Crighton in the December/January issue of the Grapevine.*

## A Visit with the WOW Factor!!

The guided tour of the Grand Théâtre of Geneva, which took place on 20 November, was just like a visit to Fairyland, so difficult was it to come down to earth afterwards.

The 31 very fortunate participants were transported into the world of theatre, with the visit itself like an opera in three Acts, with prologue and epilogue!

Seamlessly organised by Gillian Bolingbroke, the visit helped us to realise that the Grand Théâtre is not just an imposing building, but a living entity, dynamic and necessary to the life of the city of Geneva.

So numerous were we that there were two visits, with an intervening lunch at the Grütli café-restaurant making it possible for us all to meet, eat and relax together.

Alison Porri led the morning group and Gillian the afternoon one. Fortunately, the guide was the same person, ensuring continuity and cohesion of content. She acted as the 'narrator', linking the quite different parts (acts) of the visit.



The first part (prologue) took place in the Entrance Foyer with its coldly classical architecture. Here we learned the history of the theatre, constructed in 1879 in Second Empire style.

Then, for the first act, we mounted innumerable stairs (seven floors, high ceilings!!) to a wonderfully sophisticated, totally modern, elegant but, still cosy, bar space – a perfect atmosphere for sipping champagne during intervals. Our guide explained in detail the functioning of the theatre. With a total staff of 300 people, including a permanent choir of 44 and a ballet of 22, as well as stage sets, costumes and three workplaces, coordination is not easy but essential.

For the next 'act' our guide led us into the concert hall itself - the amphitheatre.

After a disastrous fire in 1951, the interior of the theatre was completely rebuilt and... what a result! The seating capacity was extended by more than 200 seats, each one with a view of the stage and with the traditional red velvet upholstery. The stage is the largest in Switzerland and the orchestra pit can now be hoisted or lowered according to the type of music required.

BUT the miracle of the amphitheatre is the fabulous iron curtain, extending into the ceiling, metal and incrustated with 200 glass stars that shine and glitter like a galaxy of stars – the 'Milky Way' or the 'Southern Cross' perhaps!!

We then learned about the workings of the stage, lighting etc. and all our questions were answered. The Theatre, financially supported by the City of Geneva, actively promotes opera and ballet, so that they are not just arts of the past reserved for a certain class of spectator, but dynamic art forms which enrich our lives and those of future generations!! Fascinating!



*An example of the richness of the costumes*

Then, for the third 'act' guided by our 'narrator', we were led to the Grand Foyer, a fabulous space with a balcony, richly decorated in Second Empire style and glowing in golden light. With the chandeliers, mirrors and golden walls it could have been a palace of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, not cosy and contemporary as was the first bar, but brilliantly atmospheric in the classical tradition. The Grand Foyer evokes past centuries, the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles – our cultural tradition AND it has the 'Wow' factor!

But more was to come! Fun and fantasy when our guide showed us a small selection of costumes made for different performances, which we were able to try on. We were in heaven, back to childhood. And how beautiful and realistic the costumes looked, especially against the sumptuous background of the Grand Foyer!

Then for the epilogue of our tour, we were ushered out of the building and descended to the 'bowels' of the building, where the real work is carried out – rehearsals of all sorts. We caught glimpses of artists, dancers, costumes, coffee mugs, Mars bars....

Finally, to find ourselves on the street again was strange - after a visit to Fairyland, it was back to reality!!

A huge 'THANK YOU' dear Gillian and to you, too Alison! You looked after us for every minute and ensured its success and our delight!

*Patricia Brulant Crighton*



*Katya Bernasconi trying on a mask*



*Silke Vannatter in a musketeer costume*



*Gillian Bolingbroke in a mask from The Nutcracker*