

National Theatre (国家剧场)

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From the 1960s to the 1980s, the National Theatre was the landmark venue for the performing arts in Singapore. Built to commemorate Singapore's self government in 1959, the 3,420-seat theatre was the largest and most prestigious performance venue upon its completion in 1963. While the government donated substantially towards the construction of the theatre, much of the funds were contributed by thousands of Singaporeans. The completion of the theatre was a symbol of success; achieved through the cooperation and pooling of resources amongst the people. The theatre flourished for decades, and was the venue for various local and international performances and the country's National Day Rallies before its closure in 1984 and subsequent demolition in 1986. This is the story of the theatre that was built for the people, by the people.

Background

“When the ceremonies are over, when the gay lights are put out and the banners and bunting removed, there will be a national theatre not only as a permanent reminder to us of a great event but also as a permanent reminder to future generations of what we, of today, have accomplished and handed to them.”— S Rajaratnam

Plans to build a National Theatre were announced by Singapore's then-Minister for Culture, S Rajaratnam on 21 November 1959, before Loyalty Week. The building, to be built at Kallang Park, would feature a revolving stage, lecture and rehearsal rooms. It was hoped it would be the finest theatre in this part of the world, staging open air concerts to showcase the rich and varied cultures of our people. More importantly, it was a national project that would involve the people, demonstrating the government's desire for its people to take charge and lead the way while it took on a supporting role in the background.

The National Theatre building fund was launched to raise the necessary funds. The fund drive quickly got into full swing with the proceeds from concerts, radio song requests and sales of special souvenir cards, printed by the then-Ministry of Culture to commemorate Loyalty week. A special “dollar-a-brick” campaign was also launched in which the public could buy paper bricks with a colourful imprint of the National Theatre on it. Different organisations and individuals all contributed generously and the public response to the fund drive was so enthusiastic that the chairman of the National Theatre Fund Committee, Lee Khoo Choy, praised the people and noted that the bulk of the fund raising work was carried out by public-spirited persons and voluntary organisations. The public contributed \$856,279 of the total sum of \$2.2 million, with the government supplementing the difference.

Building and Architecture

There was a minor hiccup in the building plans when it was discovered that the poor soil quality at the Kallang site would add tremendous cost to the piling work. Hence, another site at King George V Park was chosen. The design of the theatre was awarded to local architecture firm, Alfred Wong Partnership, which had won the architectural competition. They had designed a semi-open air, crescent-shaped theatre with a huge roof shielding a portion of the audience from the elements—it was described by the ballerina Dame Margot Fonteyn as being “the perfect one for this sort of climate.” The most familiar perspective was the main frontage facing River Valley Road; a five-pointed facade that represented the five stars of the Singapore flag in the same way as the fountain was supposed to represent the crescent moon. It also featured a revolving stage that was rarely used and cost S\$10,000 annually to maintain.

A Theatre for the People

Construction of the theatre officially began on 23 October 1962 but setbacks on the roof work meant that it was only partially completed when the Southeast Asian Cultural Festival was officially opened by the late Yang di-Pertuan Negara, President Yusof bin Ishak in August 1963. Nonetheless, the eight-day festival was billed as “the greatest show in the East”. Comprising 1,500 artists from 11 Asian countries, the festival included performances by Cambodian princesses and glamorous Hong Kong film stars. People crowded into the brand new theatre, and both performers and audiences enjoyed the festival.

The theatre brought all sorts of performances to Singapore, from the Russian Bolshoi Ballet, Louis Armstrong Jazz Band, Duke Ellington Orchestra, The Bee Gees, The Hollies, The Yardbirds, to Chinese opera starring Sun Ma Chai—many of these performances were played to full houses. The theatre also drove the development and promotion of local artistic talents, hosting the National Theatre Club and supporting the staging of successful shows such as “Talentime for Schools”, “Peep Pop Shows” and “Variety Shows”. Many of our local artists such as The Quests, Wilson David, and Flybaits have all also performed at the National Theatre. The National Theatre was also the venue of choice for National Day rallies and school convocations.

Complications and Eventual Demolishment

However, the National Theatre was not without its detractors. It had a good stage, but poor acoustics due to its open-air design. It was also impractical in the local climate, allowing exposure to rain, insects and birds—hardly ideal companions during a classical music concert. There was also no air-conditioning in the dressing rooms and the tropical heat took its toll on some of the performers. There were also complaints of “shoddy workmanship” in certain areas of the National Theatre such as nails protruding through the planks in the covering of the stairs; the narrow and steep stairs which became slippery when it rained; and patrons having to cross an open area to get to the toilets.

Unfortunately, it was also not feasible to convert the semi-open air National Theatre into a covered hall—high conversion costs being one of the many reasons. Instead, the

Kallang Theatre was bought over and converted into a cultural theatre that would serve as an alternative to the National Theatre. The National Theatre continued on with other improvements, such as the installation of air conditioning in the dressing rooms.

In early January 1984, it was announced that the building was structurally unsound, owing to the National Theatre's 150,000 kilogramme steel cantilever roof that was suspended without any supporting pillars. The high cost of renovation, an estimated \$12 million, was prohibitive and the only other alternative was to demolish the building. Since there were plans to construct an eight-lane expressway in front of the theatre along Clemenceau Avenue, the government decided to pull down the building, which had closed on 16 January, a week prior to the announcement.

There were strong reactions from all quarters over the closure of the theatre. Still, safety took precedence and the theatre took its last curtain call after an Indian musical on 15 January 1984. Demolition works were carried out between June and August 1986, just as the Kallang Theatre opened its first performance in June, that same year. Today, the former site has been marked as a Heritage Site by the National Heritage Board for "signifying a spirit of self-help and nationhood in the early days of nation building."

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