

1948

Deputy Prime Minister of India **Vallabhbhai Patel** orders the Army to move into Hyderabad to integrate it with the Indian Union.

1948

**Margaret Chase Smith** is elected United States senator, and becomes the first woman to serve in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the United States Senate.

1953

**Nikita Khrushchev** is appointed General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.



1956

The dike around the Dutch **polder East Flevoland** is closed.



TOP  
4  
TWEETS

01



**Obama doctrine:** Give away everything, concede on every issue, get nothing in return, project weakness, & apologize for America  
**Trump doctrine:** Don't give an inch, get prisoners back, broker peace, defend America, restore faith in the West, and clean up the mistakes of the past

@charliekirk11

02



I shall approach the SC this month as to when the Bench will hear my Ram Mandir Writ Petition. This month the NH, Tirupati, Yamuna and GST / Sunanda cases are also listed for hearing

@Swamy39

03



Watch out, America! #HurricaneFlorence is so enormous, we could only capture her with a super wide-angle lens from the @Space\_Station, 400 km directly above the eye. Get prepared on the East Coast, this is a no-kidding nightmare coming for you. #Horizons

@Astro\_Alex

04



The #WorldHindu-Congress was a great success in spite of media and leftist efforts to denigrate it. I was honored to speak before its inspired audience. Those who talk about freedom of expression try to suppress any Hindu voice, which shows how much more Hindus need to speak up!

@davidfrawleyvd

Disclaimer: (Views expressed by columnists are personal and need not necessarily reflect our editorial stances)

*The enchanting and futuristic opera houses of the country's megacities don't offer Italian masterpieces every night*

# Why I'm willing to suffer through 'cats' in China



The Guangzhou Opera House is a structure that rises and falls at the foot of Zhujiang Boulevard.



DAVID BELCHER

I never thought I'd be so excited to see "Cats."

After soaking up Western culture — primarily in New York, London and Paris — about thrice a week for more than 20 years, I accepted a job two years ago in the Hong Kong office of The New York Times. No sweat, I thought: Maybe I was so Mozart-ed and Sondheim-ed to death that I really didn't need to see another production of "Don Giovanni" or "Sweeney Todd."

Well, maybe I was wrong. But just give me the right grand Chinese opera house and I'll gladly suffer through "Memory."

As summer fades and cities around the world launch their autumn offerings of culture, I've already joined in: The Hong Kong Philharmonic's 45th season opener this month was the violinist Leila Josefowicz under the baton of Jaap van Zweden. Not too shabby. Joshua Bell showed up last weekend. The small but respectable Hong Kong Opera has "Turandot," a coproduction New York City Opera, next month. I'm not Puccini-ed out, but after two years I'm looking for a more gobsmacking venue than this city's nearly 30-year-old performing arts center.

What's fascinating about living on the cusp of China is the exciting but slightly frustrating cultural pilgrimages I've embarked on of late: visiting the extravagant and sometimes

half-empty opera houses that have sprung up in the past few years in such megacities as Chongqing, Guangzhou and Zhuhai.

As China modernizes at warp speed, it's anchoring its new cities — or at least the newly bulldozed and bedazzling ones — with performing arts centers that make Lincoln Center look like an impromptu barn stage in a Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland movie. These celebrity-architect houses often upstage their performances — and I suspect that's the point. They are glorified roadhouses for splashy Broadway shows, touring ballet and modern dance companies, traveling symphonies and native-language theater. The National Centre for the Performing Arts in Beijing, often referred to as The Giant Egg, started it all in 2007, followed by the Guangzhou Opera House in 2010, which has become the opera house to beat. It's almost like amusement parks competing to have the largest and most outlandish roller coasters.

Enter my pilgrimage to see those dancing and singing cats.

"Cats" (performed in English) has set up its feline junkyard for two weeks at the Guangzhou Opera House, Zaha Hadid's \$200 million architectural masterpiece. A two-hour train ride from Hong Kong to the city of a mere 15 million was my newest weekend quest for culture. Tickets were easy to purchase on a comprehensive website with an English-language option. Simplicity goes a long way.

But my travels to see these great halls are often fraught with challenges: Most don't

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have websites with an English option and the ability to purchase tickets online. Amazingly, credit cards are often not accepted in China. WeChat Pay and Alipay are king here. The language barrier is a constant in China, but aside from the well-established opera houses in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, others aren't really set up for culture tourism. If they want to draw the masses and take their place on the world stage, it shouldn't be this difficult.

One example is the opera house in Zhuhai, which is reminiscent of Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus." It's a towering structure made up of two giant scallop-shaped facades on a man-made island where the Pearl River meets the South China Sea, adjacent to the gambling mecca of Macau. It is as stunning and revolutionary — and as city-defining — as the Sydney Opera House must have been 45 years ago. But its website is nearly incomprehensible. A friend and I were able to get tickets to a traveling philharmonic performance only

through our hotel concierge.

Sure, Hong Kong is suited to Western culture cultures like me with a sprinkling of road shows, annual performing arts festivals and high-profile concerts. We get the "Met Live in HD" opera broadcasts from New York (but delayed for several months to pass the local censors). Cover bands dot the city, with a hit song by the Carpenters most likely being sung in a hotel lobby at any given moment. Bob Dylan just breezed through Asia (if Dylan can breeze at this point). And the camp lover in me is deeply bitter that Air Supply just played Singapore but skipped Hong Kong.

I've even tried to meld the worlds that collide here. I recently attended a student production of "The Threepenny Opera" in Cantonese (with, mercifully, English subtitles). I never thought I'd miss the nuance and subtlety of the German language. Then there was the time I tried Cantonese opera (without, mercilessly, English subtitles) and wondered what on earth I was thinking. A cultural experience is fine for about 15 minutes if you don't know the language. Then you start to feel like a monolingual loser.

These journeys to English-language theater or the wordless comfort of symphony music and dance have helped devoid my cultural void. But more deeply, my nearly two years here have made me realize what culture means on a purely emotional level. It is a connection, if nothing else, to one's native language, even if you're reading subtitles in English but connecting to Italian (read: Lat-

in) words from a language class from your youth. And many of us urban denizens — often single and far from our families — depend on the arts for a certain level of fulfillment. Loneliness and big-city disconnection melt away in the presence of great art.

Part of the lure of these lavish theaters is that sense of wonder — what it must have been like to walk into a new cathedral centuries ago, seeking a spiritual connection or just a sense of architectural awe. As more people move around the world for work, connected by our devices and our ability to communicate through Google Translate and a simple smile, these cultural and architectural wonders are a modern version of the great opera houses of centuries past: temples of national pride and the transformative power of music and culture, but also places to be seen, to find comfort, to swagger. Think of the Palais Garnier in Paris, built as the lavish jewel of France's belle époque era, or the current Metropolitan Opera House, a testament to America's post-war and space-age power in the 1960s.

OK, so I'll admit that I may be overstating what I can get out of seeing "Cats" in China, but the Guangzhou Opera House and its opulent cousins give me that sense of wonder and excitement about the future of the arts across our planet. Going to heaven on a kitty-cat tire isn't exactly Mimi's final death aria in "La Bohème," but you should've seen the house.

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