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A Titanic Undertaking

To accommodate pop superstar Celine Dion's return to the stage, a magnificent new \$95 million theater has been built expressly for her.

When Grammy Award-winning French-Canadian chanteuse Celine Dion retired from live performing several years ago to concentrate on starting a family, her legion of fans the world over were devastated. Dion, the sensation who had tantalized her audiences with her pitch-perfect, multiple-octave vocal stylings, was receding from public view indefinitely. But that was then. Now, the pop phenomenon (and new mother) is on the cusp of a major comeback in Las Vegas, where she is contracted to perform 200 evenings per year for at least three years beginning March 27, 2003—and a brand new venue, the Colosseum at Caesars Palace, is being built for this milestone event.

Scéno Plus, a Montreal-based entertain-

ment/theatrical consulting/design firm, has been entrusted with the gargantuan task of creating from scratch the 4,000-seat theater, the playground for the superstar's new show. The challenge for the firm is to make it as intimate and attractive as possible for both the songstress and her adoring audience—notwithstanding the lavish dimensions.

Since 1985, Scéno Plus has been the consultant behind a vast portfolio of stunning theatrical spaces, most prominently the Cirque du Soleil theaters in Las Vegas, Orlando, Florida and Biloxi, Mississippi; recently, the firm added a new moniker to its professional shingle—that of architect. In the case of the Colosseum, Scéno Plus needed to design a theater with a large seating capacity for an unusual situation.

Most Las Vegas shows run two performances per night, but since Dion's exploit is a one-woman star vehicle, it's essential to her vocal health that she perform only one show per evening. Scéno Plus' mission was to devise a venue that's at once imposing and quaint.

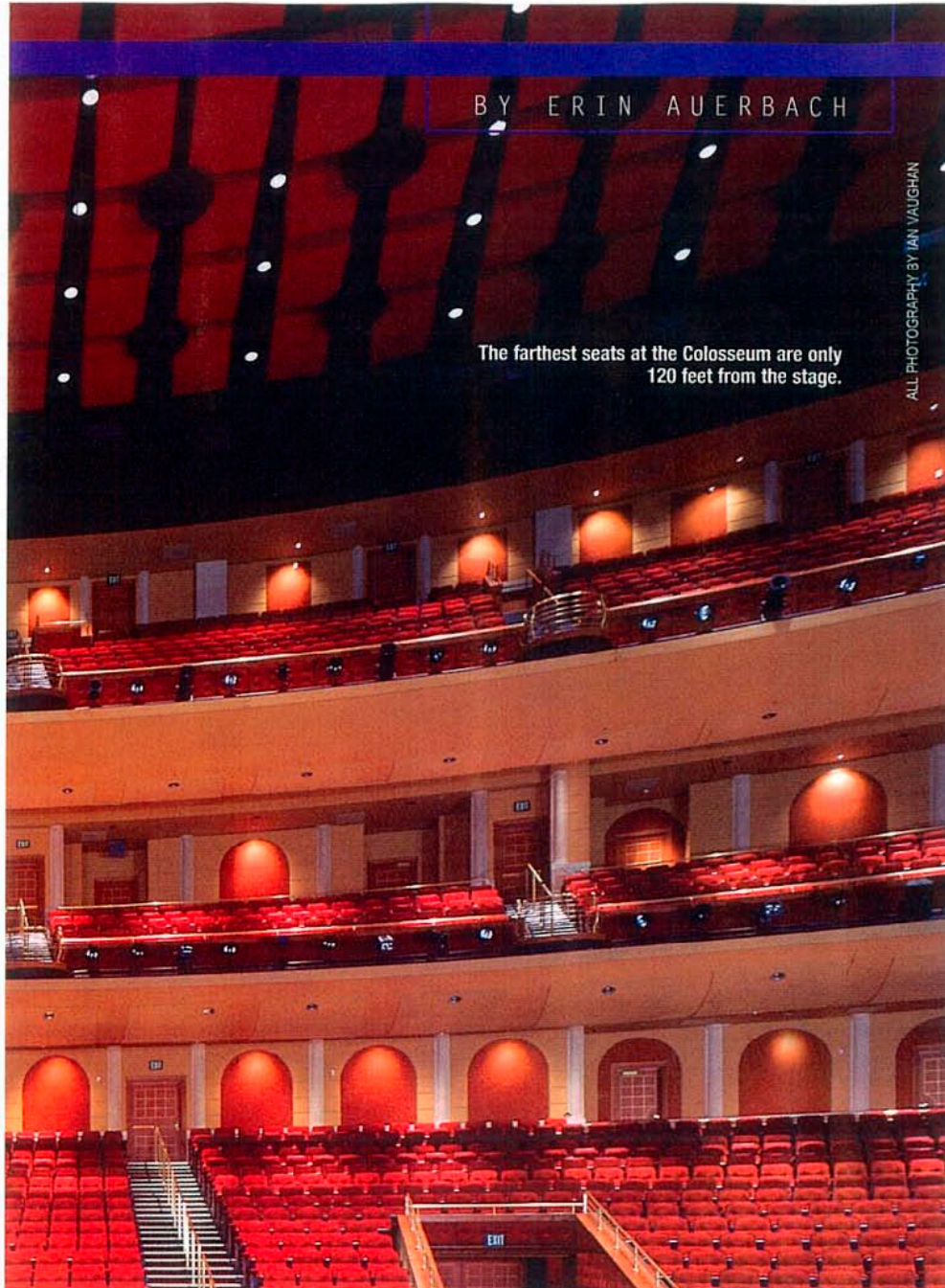
Dion and her husband/manager, Rene Angelil, had tremendous input in this creative venture. Claude-André Roy, principal theater designer of the Colosseum, worked closely with Patrick Bergé, project designer and president of Scéno Plus.

"The story goes that Celine Dion saw [Cirque du Soleil's] *O* at the Bellagio [Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas] and was so impressed with the theater and the show that she wanted to know who was responsible for them," relates Roy. "It was a coincidence that we're a

BY ERIN AUERBACH

ALL PHOTOGRAPHY BY IAN VAUGHAN

The farthest seats at the Colosseum are only 120 feet from the stage.



French-Canadian company," he adds. In fact, Dion hired Franco Dragone, director of *O*, to direct her return, but that's about as far as her show will get in resembling a Cirque du Soleil venture: She is using her own sound and lighting staff.

Near, Far, Wherever You Are...

The design work began about three years ago in Montreal. "Dion wanted to be surrounded by the people and be very close to the audience," says Roy. To accommodate them, Scéno Plus designed a 120-foot high theater where the farthest seats are only 120 feet from the stage. For those on the second mezzanine, that means they'll sit about 100 feet above the stage. The circular venue accommodates this need, while keeping space with the gener-

ic Roman design mandated by Park Place Entertainment, owner of Caesars Palace. "The round shape and large Roman-themed paintings help," notes Roy.

As you enter the theater's lobby from the casino, visions of slot machines and poker tables are instantly subsumed by the sheer magnitude of the foyer's size. There are 2,283 seats in the orchestra section, 745 seats on the first mezzanine and 1,074 on the second. The stage alone is 22,450 square feet, while the proscenium is 120 feet wide by 44 feet tall. "We tried to design a 5,000 seat venue, but it was too big," admits Roy. "It would've made the farthest seats 150 feet from Ms. Dion and that wasn't close enough. Plus, it would've cost us twice as much." He stresses, however, that the present \$95 million budget is paltry in light of

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The entry to the Colosseum from the casino

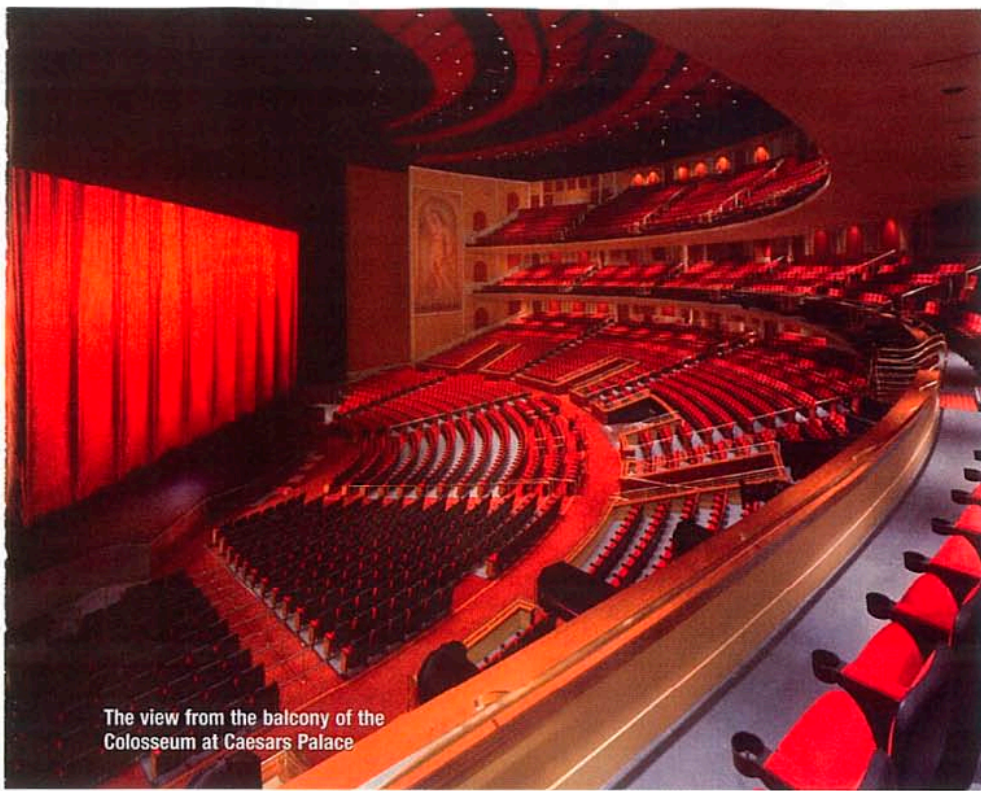
the kind of spectacle they're building.

Aside from budget crunches, there have been other snags. "It's a big building in the 'worst best site' in Las Vegas," says Roy. He explains that because the theater is attached to the casino, the design and construction process was complicated. The Omnimax Theater, a cinema house, was taken out, while the moving sidewalk that ushers pedestrians into the building from the Strip was kept intact. The design team also had to make sure that access to the Forum Shops (the mall attached to the hotel) was not altered or blocked.

The sound system installed in the Colosseum is a top-of-the-line, high-tech wonder arrayed with superior consoles. The five-channel surround system has 115 speakers powered by 125,000 watts of amplification. Two hundred acoustical pads, which look like giant red rectangular pillows, are suspended from the ceiling. The 32-square-foot pads serve as acoustic controls to maximize the quality of the sound. For the lighting, there are 1,200 dimmers controlling 1,300 fixtures, 140 of which are motorized. **Fourth Phase** managed the installation of the **Compulite Sabre** con-

trol consoles, along with a range of lighting fixtures including **Strand SL** ellipsoidals, **ETC Source Four Par EAs**, **Altman Par 64s**, **Robert Juliat 710SX** zoom profiles, **Compulite Whisper** color scrollers and **Robert Juliat Ivanhoe** and **Aramis** spotlights. Special effects equipment includes **MDG Max 5000** fog generators and **Atmosphere** hazers and the venue is equipped with **ETC Sensor** dimmer racks.

Dry weather can be a bane to a singer's existence. In this respect, Dion is no exception to the rule, and certainly performing in an arid climate like Las Vegas doesn't help



The view from the balcony of the Colosseum at Caesars Palace

matters. Bearing this in mind, a microclimate air-conditioning system is being developed to keep Dion warmer and moister onstage, while the audience sits in a comfortable room temperature. The air-

conditioning system is well insulated in its own giant room to keep the noise down.

Like any true diva, Dion has made sure that the theater boasts a very large greenroom. There are special media accommodations,

specifically designed to allow live tapings through fiber-optic paths and electronic cabling. With more than 70 musicians, dancers and supporting background artists in tow, there's plenty of dressing room space as well.

In the end, it all boils down to the intimacy of the performer/audience dynamic. "Artists speak with few words," muses Roy. "There has to be a design between the stage and house that works to let the artist relate to the audience. There must be a transfer of energy between the stage and seats." Scéno Plus worked to achieve this at the Colosseum by implementing a "living stage," with 10 lifts and massive scenery that will come in and serve as the stage during parts of the show, taking up more than 75 percent of the floor.

So far, tickets for Dion's Vegas production are in high demand, with orchestra seats running as high as \$350. But for the team behind the supernova from Quebec, that kind of demand is par for the course. "We've designed a theater with every consideration of Ms. Dion, Mr. Dragone and the audience, and we've created a space that's at once luxurious and cozy," says Roy. **SD**

Erin Auerbach is a freelance writer based in California.

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