

# Dubai Opera: triumph of Hope?

**Jasper Hope has the kind of seasoned, accomplished voice that wouldn't sound bad in front of a microphone. Or maybe on the apron stage of a brand new opera house.**

He's also a confident performer, which is probably one of the requirements for the chief executive at what is arguably the most anticipated new performance arts complex in the Middle East. So, no pressure then.

For one, he agrees it's the right time for Dubai to get such a dedicated space.

"I'm not a city master planner but I know they've been pretty busy in 45 years creating an awful lot of other stuff," he says with a commendable degree of understatement. The sense of Dubai being an experiment in city life, urban history in the making, is matched by the need to maintain the pace-setting standards that Dubai is setting.

The absence of a high-culture outpost has been noted before, and it certainly feeds into the external perception of Dubai as a hollow temple to transient and facile consumerism.

Although still relatively new to the city, Jasper sees the arrival of Dubai Opera as key to the region's cultural evolution beyond beaches, brunches and burjs.

"It's long overdue," he says. "The visual arts have led the way. No one said that because Dubai was a popular beach destination, you couldn't have an art gallery here. It's happening in design, in fashion, even in film. The performing arts are next.

"Dubai Opera is being created as a home, a hub, centre stage for the region. Because we have a strong and cosmopolitan population, we are going to be able to book an amazing range of types of shows. But it's only the beginning. We'll see how it goes."

**"Are we going to take risks? Absolutely"**

At a more practical level, there aren't many performance spaces in town that fit comfortably between the low hundreds of seats at places like the Madinat Theatre or studio layouts like The Courtyard and The Junction, and the instant conversions of the Dubai World Trade Centre halls for visiting megastars.

Dubai Opera offers around 2,000 seats in a versatile multi-purpose space. Certainly the role is a contrast to Jasper's previous job – seven years in charge of London's Royal Albert Hall; from a "150-year-old going concern" to a "brand new first building in an entire country that's going to feature world class arts and musical performance.

**“No pressure, right?”**

Developer’s render – romantic, maybe, but pretty accurate

Briefly gazing over to the distinctive building that represents his life now, Jasper Hope says it was essential that Dubai “do it and do it to this level; do it properly – and that’s what we’re going to get here”.

Ok, it’s not the gorgeously flowing Zaha Hadid design that was shelved in 2008 during the financial crisis. The design is by Danish architect Janus Rostock for WS Atkins (he is head of the company’s architecture and urban design team) and it’s likely to be a much more pragmatic building.

And it’s still an unmistakably distinctive design, next to the Burj Khalifa and jutting out into an arm of the lake. It’s an impressively high-tech building, too; it can be transformed internally to host opera, theatre and concerts, but also exhibitions, conferences and banquets. This is achieved through a high percentage of electronically moving floors, walls and ceilings that allow auditorium seating to change layouts or to disappear altogether.

## **Not the opera house: Zaha Hadid’s cancelled design**

It’s a project that won Atkins the GCC Project to the Year 2015; the judges said it showed a sophisticated, sustainable and advanced design.

But we can assume the building will work. The challenge for a while will be to put Dubai Opera on the world map, both for audiences and artist promoters.

The grand opening on 31 August sets the tone: Placido Domingo gets the honour, a performer who combines popular appeal with cultural kudos. The Spanish tenor leads an eclectic programme of 49 shows in the first four months for the Downtown Dubai venue.

Jasper says he has been given creative freedom with Dubai Opera’s calendar, but like any venue boss doesn’t relish empty seats. Still, he promises some relatively adventurous programming. “Essentially what you’re talking about is taking a risk. And are we going to take risks? Absolutely, most months we’ll try. You’ve got to find out what people want.

But there will always be a set of safety-net bookings – “shows that are almost guaranteed to be popular. That way you can create a surplus with which to have a punt. All buildings operate that way.

“At the end of the day you have to balance a programme to suit an audience. They will tell us soon enough whether they want to come to things or don’t. If we’re getting it right – or wrong – we’ll find out very quickly. If we have to adapt we will.”

## Placido Domingo inaugurates the Dubai Opera

He's convinced that the size of the potential audience won't be an issue. Dubai Opera has a hugely diverse catchment, with millions of tourists supplementing the broad international resident population; and there's the hunger for arts and culture that is behind our own plans at magpie.

"You have a melting pot of people. Most of those people are here for professional reasons, and those people have a certain amount of free time and spare income that they wish to use to consume entertainment.

"If you can mix your programming over the year you'll absolutely get anyone to look at the programme and go 'I like that'. There's no point me putting on shows that people do not want to come and see.

"If people want more Arabic artists we will book more. If people want more opera featuring great Italian stars, that's what we'll book."

"People here can have a wonderful dinner, play an amazing round of golf, they can shop, they can see the desert, go to the Burj Khalifa, have a wonderful holiday. But, if like me, you also like to go and see a show, or take the family to a play, there's very little choice in Dubai year round.

"Dubai Opera is going to change all that."

The year-round factor is interesting. Traditional the UAE has tended to shut down in peak summer, but Dubai Opera intends to take only a few days off.

"We have to close at some point during the year for maintenance, literally for a week or two, and that's probably best done in summer.

"Aside from that short period we'll be offering entertainment for the people who will still be here."

**"However long my career, however successful it becomes, I will never again have the chance to be the first person in a brand new building"**

The quality of the programme – see the entries in the Agenda – is testament to the hard work of Hope and his team. Overcoming the preconceptions was the first hurdle: "Nobody knows Dubai right now as a place that anybody comes to perform, and certainly not in a place like this. I had to accept that I would have to try an awful lot harder to explain why artists should come here.

"But maybe that's why I came. That's the point of living your life, being challenged. However long my career, however successful it becomes, I will never again have the chance to be the first person in a brand new building.

"That kind of opportunity is few and far between."

Initially around 200 shows a year are planned – and Jasper sees no reason not to double that as the venue becomes more established.

"You need to be showing you've booked the right stuff," says the boss, who hopes the programme will also reflect more homegrown talent over time.

"It takes an awful lot to put together an orchestra, for instance. You can't just create a successful rock band, but do you give them aspirational possibilities if you have a place like this to think 'one day, I could be on that stage'; that's what it's all about."

## Franchising an orchestra?

Indeed, the prospect of a Dubai Philharmonic or opera company is an exciting one, even if it is in the "very long plan".

"The only quick way to do it, like a football franchise in America, is to buy one from somewhere else and bring it over, stick it in where you live.

"That might work for sports teams, but I don't believe that's a very sensible model for the arts."

The idea could prove a catalyst for supporting infrastructure, though, such as a music academy or a conservatoire to nurture local talent.

The same goes for support staff, such as specialist lighting and sound personnel. Jasper has had to initially recruit from beyond UAE shores.

"For our technical team, we have recruited from some of the very best buildings on the planet. We have handpicked people because it is such an important component."

As is the notion of visiting artists doing more than simply turn up and perform.

"From 2017, the idea is to, at the artist request as much as ours, include educational elements every time they come, do workshops or some sort of outreach work.

"They understand this is the start of something. As well as playing and earning fees, they have to give something back, to be part of what we're trying to do – which is to say Dubai is about more than just what you knew, come and help develop it."

## Hands-on

Talking to Jasper for a short while, it is clear he is going to be a very hands-on kind of boss once the building is open. He believes in the team ethic, but he's clear that he is the one at the head.

"It's about the collective, me leading a team and everybody buying into the vision of what we want to make Dubai Opera into – this incredibly attractive destination for artists and audiences.

"You couldn't hope to do something on this scale without having your hands well and truly in the mix. People will judge us on so many measures; the experience they have, the programme we have announced, the pictures we put on the walls, the quality of the coffee in the café.

"I would not be taking advantage of the experience I have built up over so many years if I didn't put that into this project, heart and soul."

And when the curtain finally goes up, you'll most likely find the Englishman watching the crowd as much as the artists.

"I get a huge amount of pleasure standing at the back, looking at the venue full, looking at how much people enjoy it. I do it anonymously, listening when they come out, to what they're saying ... That's a huge buzz. I wasn't the one singing, but I made it happen."

by David Dunn / 18 May 2016 magpie