

# To Rise From the Ashes

Will the Fenice opera house soar again by 2002?

BY DANA THOMAS

**S**UNSHINE POURS DOWN BETWEEN the tarpaulins covering the roofless ruin. Pigeons flutter beneath the scaffolds. **Nicola Berlucci** shakes his head in despair at the once opulent interior of the Fenice opera house, destroyed by fire four years ago. "It's so sad, so enormous the work we have to do," the master restorer says of the Venice landmark. "There is nothing left at all." He's scarcely exaggerating: a brick shell, a few surviving plaster walls and damaged frescoes, a charred expanse of oak parquet floor in the ballroom. Not much else but rubble and a damp, lingering odor of smoke.

Even to begin the job has taken a herculean effort. On the morning after the fire, the mayor of Venice, Massimo Cacciari, promised to rebuild the 18th-century opera house without delay. After all, its name is the Italian word for phoenix. The theater was gutted by fire in 1836 and reopened the next year. But this time the restoration became almost hopelessly entangled in a thicket of lawsuits over who should get the \$50 million contract. In October the courts finally dismissed the last legal challenge. By then, however, the chief architect, Aldo Rossi, was dead, victim of a car accident. The job is now scheduled to be finished by the end of 2001—if Berlucci and the artisans can achieve a miracle.

Rossi's blueprints are no more than a start. Re-creating the lost grandeur of the Fenice is a puzzle that must be solved bit by bit. The craftsmen can copy some surviving fragments of the walls' original moldings; they withstood the heat because they were sculpted by hand directly onto the plaster. Restorers can also crib from structural remnants to replace the 36 Ionic columns that once framed the ballroom. But most of the work must be improvised. "Up there was a vaulted ceiling,"



Closing night: The 1996 blaze



Between acts: Last year

says **Berlucci**, waving toward the open sky. He gestures at the bare brick walls. "Everything else has fallen down. And you see here, where the fresco is brown? It used to be pink. The heat changed the pigment."

Italian ingenuity thrives on such challenges. The restoration team has collected thousands of photographs and illustrations from books, newspapers and magazines—

even footage from films, such as Luchino Visconti's 1954 "Senso." The next step is to scan the images into a computer, collating and layering them into a mosaic portrait of the Fenice, inch by inch and room by room. The big problem is that architecture is a three-dimensional art. "The photographs are flat," says **Berlucci**. "We have to imagine the volume and hope we get the right proportions."

Still, the idea is not to build a slavish replica of the Fenice that burned four years ago. In some ways it should be even more spectacular. Restorers are scraping through many strata of multihued paint to expose the earliest layers. The idea is to reproduce the theater's original color scheme. And behind two modern paintings destroyed in the blaze, the restorers found a pair of 18th-century frescoes

based on Dante's "Inferno." Part of the job now will be to clean and retouch the newly exhumed treasures.

Some of the most ambitious work will take place under the Fenice's skin. Most of the old wooden beams, damaged either by the fire or by the firefighters' water, will be replaced. Technicians are checking the structural soundness of the walls with the kind of endoscopy equipment used by doctors on human patients. Masons are drilling holes and injecting concrete into the performance hall's meter-thick brick bandshell to reinforce it. The new Fenice will be a high-tech marvel, featuring the latest in lighting and sound systems—and, for the first time, central air conditioning and heating. And this time all woodwork is to be treated with flame retardant. "It would be a shame to lose the Fenice to fire again," says **Berlucci**. Three times would certainly be a bit much—even for a phoenix. ■

**Encore:** A model of the new theater

