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Fred Nicholas Leads an Odyssey Among the Great Halls of Europe to Envision the 'Greatest Hall' for Los Angeles

by Marc Porter Zasada

Fred Nicholas has spent the last few months touring the great concert halls of Europe, America, and Japan.

Nineteen in all.

Nicholas does not play an instrument, he just sits in the auditorium and listens. As often as possible, he and six or eight of his friends change seats, and listen some more.

It's a tough job, he says, but someone has to do it.

That's because Nicholas has been charged with building "the greatest concert hall in the world," right here in Los Angeles, just across First Street from the Music Center.

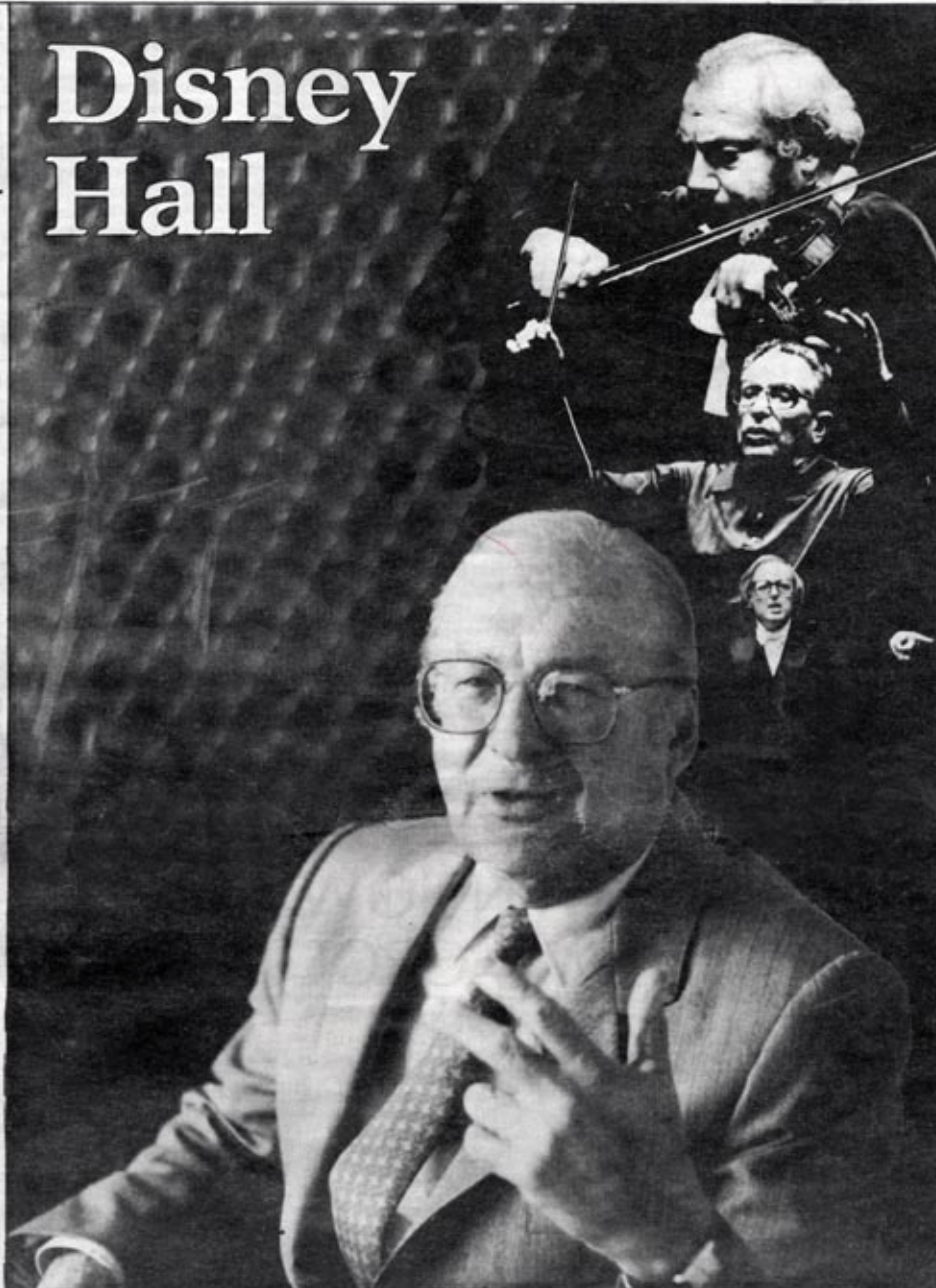
The quotemarks are supplied by Mrs. Lillian B. Disney, widow of Walt Disney, who gave those words, along with \$50 million, to the Disney Hall Committee, chaired by Nicholas. The County has promised to build the \$20 million underground parking structure, so the money appears to be in place.

The big question now is design.

Concert halls are perhaps the most difficult architectural creatures in

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Disney Hall



Developer Fred Nicholas, known for putting together MOCA, is heading up the Disney Hall team.

Show-Down on the Square

Downtown's New Police Captain Has Moved In With a Show of Force on Pershing Square. But What Happens Next?

by Steve Sibilsky

The gunfight at Pershing Square is on in earnest, and the "white hats" are finally coming out on top.

Through the closed windows of their offices high in the buildings surrounding the park, area workers have watched as one of Downtown's last remaining green spaces has deteriorated into what has come to be known as "Pushing Square."

A kind of miniature Dodge City, run by street gangs and other dope peddlers (many of whom ride the bus in from other parts of town) has overrun the park, especially during the last two years, since Pershing Square Management Association pulled out its security guards.

But finally, about three weeks ago, the marshal rode into town. And he is determined to clean the place up.

LAPD has been concen-

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Disney Quest

Fred Nicholas Searches the World for Great Acoustics

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the world. Hundreds of millions are spent on halls which turn out to have "dead spots," to echo around the edges, to boom out the bass notes or reverberate like empty caves.

Expensive, post-construction "fixes" like those at Carnegie or Davies Hall rarely work.

As an added wrinkle, modern halls must not only look good and sound wonderful, but comply with the complex safety and handicapped regulations which drive acousticians half-mad.

Recent and spectacular failures in concert hall acoustics have included not only Carnegie and Davies, but the hall in Denver which tried, without success, to copy the Philharmonie in Berlin.

As Nicholas puts it,

"Building a concert hall with good acoustics is an art, not a science. You need an artist, and you need luck.... There are only about 10 top acousticians in the world, and most of them haven't had a lot of successes."

Nicholas liked the Philharmonie in Berlin, but hated the one in Denver.

He has narrowed the choice of architects to four. Acousticians? Well, he's still looking.

Nicholas is a soft-spoken developer known mainly for building shopping centers. Before his recent travels, he admits that he had only been in "two or three" concert halls in his life. But Nicholas is the man who put together the team which built the internationally-acclaimed MOCA

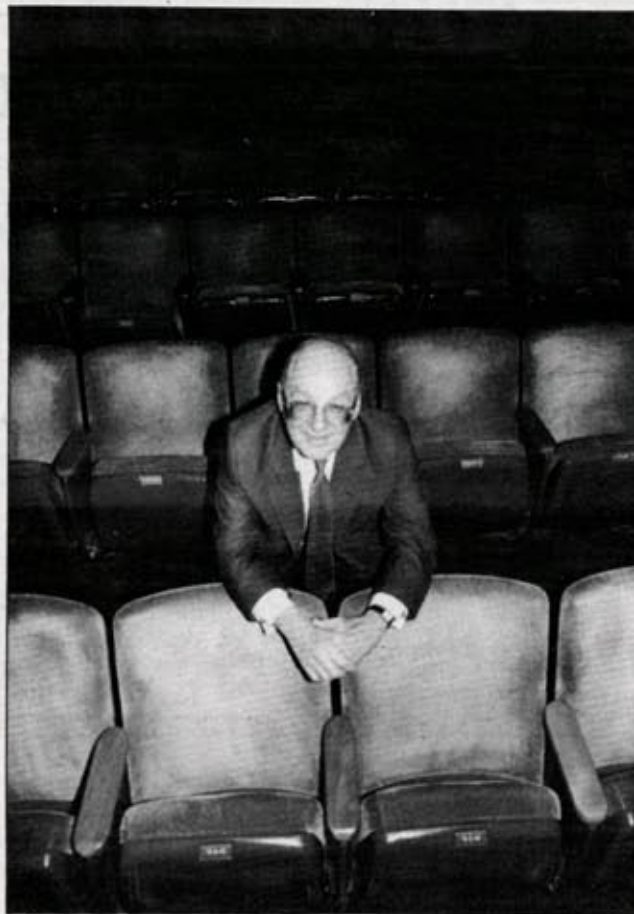
building, and he worked with architect Arata Isozaki to save that project from a rocky start.

"When they offered me this job I said I would be interested if I could talk to Mrs. Disney. I asked her if she had a commitment to great architecture and a world-class architect, and she said, 'Look, I want this hall to be built from the inside out. You can do anything you want to do, as long as the sound is the best in the world.'

"That's when I became excited about the job. To start with, I thought we had to educate the client (a group that includes the Disney family, the Music Center, and the Los Ange-

les Philharmonic, which will call the Disney Hall home). The secret of a good building is to have a good client and a good architect. So we decided to take a tour of Europe in which we picked concert halls which were roughly the size of the one we were talking about building—around 2400 or 2500 seats.

"We chose 2500 seats because it turns out that the best acoustics are in halls of 2000 and under. When you start getting above 2000, the acoustic results diminish. The biggest acceptable hall we think we can build is 2500 seats. The Dorothy Chand-



Nicholas: "It's a tough job, but someone's got to do it."

photo by Aldo Panziera

ler Pavilion has 3100 seats, and the new Orange County Performing Arts Center has over 3000."

The Philharmonic, incidentally, believes it can still make a living with just 2400 or 2500 seats, because it can run a longer season (35 weeks instead of the present 26) in its own hall.

"So we went to London, Paris, Nottingham, Cardiff,

Wales, Berlin, Amsterdam, Paris, the Hague, Cologne and Frankfurt, and we went to concerts."

Later, they headed for Tokyo and Osaka, but more on those cities in a moment.

The team included Mrs. Disney's daughter, Diane Disney Miller; Ernest Fleischmann, executive director of the Philhar-

monic, as well as two musicians elected by the orchestra; Joanne Kozberg and others from the Music Center.

"In each hall we would spread out to different seats and change seats during the performance as much as possible. Then at the end we would fill out a questionnaire as to what

The cramped, intimate halls of Europe can no longer be built—and with size come acoustic nightmares.

we liked and didn't like."

The team also arranged for tours of backstage areas and so forth.

"When we got home, there was amazing unanimity on the top two halls: the Berlin Philharmonie and the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam. The halls are much alike. Both around 2500 seats, both built since the war. Neither is what

you would call a shoebox, both are modified, wraparound designs, with seating above and behind the orchestra. Berlin even more than Amsterdam.

"We liked that idea, not just the acoustics, but that they were so intimate. The seats furthest from the orchestra were only 80 feet away. In the Dorothy Chandler, the furthest seats are over 300 feet away."

Does Nicholas propose to copy the Berlin Philharmonic? "No," he says. "In Denver, people went to Berlin and got all the plans and tried to copy the hall just the same. Well, just a little larger. And it was a total bomb, a failure."

The biggest problem in copying the great older halls, says Nicholas, is that modern building standards demand steel and concrete, rather than wood frames. And seats have to be farther apart to allow for safety and handicapped regulations. The cramped, intimate halls of Europe can no longer be built—and with size come acoustic nightmares.

"You can build a hall with only 1700 or 2000 seats and good sound fairly easily. If you have to have 2500 seats, you get problems."

"We had heard that the new halls in



The original Philharmonic Auditorium, which used to front on Pershing Square, was torn down in 1985. The new design will not be a 'shoebox.'

Japan were very good, and when we got back from Europe, we made the trip." Nicholas has been back from Japan only a couple of weeks. "The Suntory in Tokyo was just finished a year ago, with about 2200 seats, and we were very eager to see it."

The Suntory is part of a shopping center and office development in Tokyo. Next door is a chamber music hall with about 500 seats.

"The Suntory had all the latest technical stuff, and was a gorgeous hall... but

we were disappointed. We had been told it was better than Berlin, and it wasn't. Good, but not that good.

"And then we heard that the hall in Osaka was going to be great. It's a copy of the great hall in Vienna, supposedly the best in the world, but only 1700 seats and built of wood. They copied that hall, and, well, it didn't turn out so well. Again, good, but not that good.

"It's hard to use wood in modern times. First of all, you have to start with concrete or steel for the frame,

and merely clad it in wood. It's just not the same. Most of the great halls of the world, by the way, are finished either in stucco or wood," he notes, and then adds again:

"It's an art."

When New York went to redo Carnegie Hall, for example, which was considered to be one of the best acoustic halls in the world, it discovered a secret hole in the roof. At some point, during construction of the original Carnegie, someone had cut a hole in the roof to move

4 Architects Will Vie for Chance to Design Disney Concert Hall

The Architecture Subcommittee of the Walt Disney Concert Hall Committee has selected four architects from a field of six candidates to compete for designing the future home of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. The architects under consideration are: **Gottfried Boehm**, Cologne, West Germany (Pritzker Architecture Prize 1986; Church of the Pilgrimage, Neviges, West Germany; Zublin Corporate Headquarters, Stuttgart); **Frank O. Gehry**, Frank O. Gehry and Associates, Inc., Venice, California (Frances Goldwyn Hollywood Regional Branch Library; Madison Square Garden Site Redevelopment and South Tower); **Hans Hollein**, Vienna, Austria (Pritzker Architecture Prize 1985; Museum of Modern Art, Moenchengladbach, West Germany; Museum of Modern Art, Frankfurt); and **James Stirling**, James Stirling Michael Wilford and Associates, London and Berlin (Pritzker Architecture Prize 1981; State Gallery and Chamber Theatre, Stuttgart; Clore Gallery, London).

up some equipment, and had covered it with a painted cloth.

After the renovation, and the closing of the hole, things were never quite the same. Had the sound been pushing up through the hole and reverberating back down? Maybe. Of course, they had also replaced the wooden supports of the stage with wood-clad steel.

In any case, things were never quite the same.

Do people agree on which are and which are not acoustically-sound

halls?

Yes, says Nicholas, pretty much—although they don't always agree with the musicians.

"I rarely take what musicians say verbatim, however," he notes. "The musician sits on the stage and if he can hear the music, all the other instruments, he says it's a great hall. He doesn't know what it sounds like up in the seats.

"But people take a musician's word for what is and is not a great hall. It gets its reputation that way, some-

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Disney Odyssey

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times undeservedly."

But enough about acoustics, you say, what is the Disney Hall going to look like? Well, Nicholas' idea is to narrow his four architects to one world-class fellow, let him choose from a small field of acousticians (carefully interviewed by the committee), and then turn him loose.

This architect will *not* have to rhyme his design with the present Music Center, although it will have to connect with the Music Center by bridge or whatnot. "We told the competitors that chances are the Music Center will have to be refitted eventually anyway. If you have a beautiful new building across the street, the Music Center is going to look terrible."

Not only that, but the architect will have the opportunity to master plan upper Grand Avenue (which Nicholas says will soon be the cultural center of Los

Angeles), and the other county parcels along upper First Street. There is also talk of a major hotel on the Disney site, if the concert hall doesn't take up all the space.

The Disney Committee is getting all this straightened out with the CRA and the County, as far as jurisdiction and so forth, but things look good.

The big lesson Nicholas says he learned from the MOCA adventure was to get a great architect and then "give him his head."

The four contestants will submit their concepts sometime in September, and the Disney Committee will make its choice. Mrs. Disney reserves a veto, but she seems amenable to the powers of the committee (which, after all, includes her daughter and her attorney). If the money runs out, she has said that she does not want the committee to look elsewhere for cash, but to come back to her. This will be the *Disney* Concert Hall.
