



A Musical Cruise

WHAT ARE TEDDY TAHU RHODES, CHERYL BARKER AND SIMON TEDESCHI ALL DOING ON A CRUISE SHIP? FRANCIS MERSON STOWED AWAY TO FIND OUT

I'm sitting in a theatre listening to Teddy Tahu Rhodes and Cheryl Barker, but the repertoire is anything but operatic – they're doing *Wunderbar* from *Kiss Me Kate*. The stage is pitching from side to side, and I feel slightly nauseous. No, I'm not drunk on pre-concert champagne again... I'm in the Cascade Theatre aboard a Bravo Cruise, a seafaring tour dedicated to the performing arts. With me on the ship are some of the leading lights of classical music in Australia: not only Teddy and Cheryl, but also Simon Tedeschi, David Hobson, Guy Noble, the Seven Sopranos and the entire Metropolitan Orchestra.

This is the maiden voyage of Bravo, one of a growing number of cruises where the focus is on performance, rather than bingo and mini-golf (although they do still have bingo and mini-golf). If you're wondering why the ship, *Radiance of the Seas*, has a 1000-seat theatre, it's because this vessel is bloody enormous. Imagine setting afloat one of the larger Westfield malls, and you're halfway there. The central point of the ship is a 13-storey atrium framed by whooshing glass elevators. There are several restaurants and cafés, a cinema, various boutiques, a library, an art gallery, a gym, a rock-climbing wall, a waterslide, a heliport and even, in an unexpected stroke of luck for me, a basketball court.

For the veterans of sea travel among you this much luxury on a ship may seem par for the cruise, but for the neophyte (me) it is

a surreal and rather wondrous experience. The dreamlike quality is compounded by the rocking of the ship, which puts you in a somnolent trance for the first 48 hours. On the afternoon of Day Two I encountered a bleary-eyed Simon Tedeschi, who was wondering what time it was, where he was supposed to be playing and why he had been asleep for the past nine hours. In one of his witty asides to the audience, Guy Noble likened cruise life to being in the womb. And that's not a bad analogy – a safe, secluded place where your every physical need is wordlessly catered for.

Our fellow passengers are almost exclusively silver-haired retirees. In fact, the absence of younger cruisers was taken so for granted that my girlfriend and I were often congratulated for our work in the orchestra. One nice lady even patted me on the cheek. Cruising is the ultimate form of travelling without moving, and so it's easy to understand why it appeals to the less mobile among us.

What's more, for the 2,000 or so passengers on board *Radiance of the Seas*, one of the Royal Caribbean fleet, there were 1,000 staff – all in uniform and desperately eager to please. So if you're ever lost at sea – and on a ship this size you will be – there's always someone to mix you a mimosa and shove you off in the right direction. Service is personalised in a charmingly old-fashioned way. We had our own personal room attendant, an ever-smiling Filipino man called Arnold who



Elaine Paige



Radiance of the Seas



David Hobson

The Metropolitan Orchestra under Guy Noble



Bravo's artists at play



Teddy Tahu Rhodes and Cheryl Barker

addressed me as 'Sir Francis'. Whenever we returned to our rooms, the towels had been contorted into animal shapes on the bed. An impossibly polite Indian chap named Raja waited on us at dinner and would lessen the burden of choice simply by bringing us all the dishes on the menu he thought we might like. After a few days, and several extra kilos, they all seemed like old friends.

“THE CONCERTS WERE ALL REWARDED WITH STANDING OVATIONS FROM THE CROWD”

We made two ports of call, first on the Isle of Pines, a paradisaical island with Pucci-print tropical fish, then on Noumea, which was disappointingly industrial, and about as Parisian in atmosphere as Tamworth.

But we were really there for the music, and on a Bravo cruise, it's as frothy as the ocean waves. Showtunes and popular arias abound – nothing too highbrow or challenging. Tedeschi delivered what was probably the most traditional classical concert: a dazzling array of Grainger and Gershwin. The vocalists had a tougher time, inevitably stymied by the limitations of the popera canon. We heard the Toreador song from *Carmen* four times, once by

Teddy, once by a singing waiter and twice by the Seven Sopranos.

Interspersing the music with witty banter seems to be *de rigueur* on a cruise ship: even Teddy and Cheryl got into it, but David Hobson proved to be the master. One lady was so besotted she took to yelling “I love you, David” whenever he appeared on stage.

The most exceptional contribution, however, came from The Metropolitan Orchestra. Performing two or three concerts per day with minimal rehearsal, they scarcely faltered, with Boatswain Noble keeping a steady hand on the musical tiller.

The ten-or-so concerts were all rewarded with a standing ovation from the audience – and it was easy to share their enthusiasm. That being said, I did meet a few passengers who were disappointed by the lack of 'serious' music. The *Limelight*-reading Musica Viva-attending types complained of being misguided by the presence of Teddy and Cheryl into believing this was a cruise for opera buffs. They came expecting *The Cunning Little Vixen*, but all they got was *Cats*. My tastes are as eclectic as they come, so I loved hearing all the popular stuff, especially the concert by music theatre legend Elaine Paige. But if you're a classical-only person, choose your cruise carefully.

That being said, many guests of Bravo were not there for the concerts (or even for the chance to see Teddy Tahu in a swimming costume). While on board, I encountered a

few of that mythical breed of the 'permanent cruiser'. These aged, seaworn passengers are freighted (and often wheeled) from ship to ship in perpetuity – and it didn't seem like a bad life. By the end of the cruise I had fallen into a happy rhythm that I too could have sustained indefinitely. Wake, breakfast, read, lunch, nap, show, dinner, sleep – repeat. Cruise ships are the modern equivalent of the island of the lotus-eaters and, once I got a taste for it, I could easily have spent the rest of my days gazing out at the shimmering ocean and grazing languidly at the lunch buffet.

Francis Merson travelled as an invited guest of Bravo Cruise

More Musical Cruises

Bravo is not the only cruise company to offer 'classical' cruises. Melbourne radio station 3MBS is presenting a 13-day cruise to New Zealand version in March 2015 with American pianist Rita Sloan and members of the Queensland Symphony. And if you're willing to start from Europe, the options multiply. In 2012, the Vienna Philharmonic even ran its own cruise from Valletta to Istanbul and back. The next Bravo is in October 2015, headlined by Welsh soprano Katherine Jenkins, with the Grigoryan Brothers also in tow.