

# Protecting theatres for everyone



Our Ref.: RA/680

21 December 2016

Mr David Glasgow  
Planning Services, Development Management  
London Borough of Camden  
Town Hall  
Argyll Street  
London WC1H 8ND

Dear Mr Glasgow,

**Ambassadors Theatre, West Street, London WC2H 9HD**

Application Ref: 2016/4869/P and 2016/5032/L

I write regarding the planning and listed building applications for significant alterations and additions to the Ambassadors Theatre to transform it into a new theatre venue to be named The Sondheim. The Theatres Trust supports the application. Please see our advice below.

**Remit:** Established by The Theatres Trust Act 1976, the Trust delivers statutory planning advice on theatre buildings and theatre use in England through The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015 (DMPO), requiring the Trust to be consulted on planning applications 'involving any land on which there is a theatre'.

**Background:** The Ambassadors Theatre is Grade II listed. It opened in 1913 and was designed by prominent theatre architect W G R Sprague, who also designed the adjacent St Martin's Theatre on the opposite side of Tower Court. With 375 seats, it is one of the smallest playhouses in the West End. It sits on a particularly small site for a theatre with the stage and stalls located entirely below ground level due to a right to light restriction at the time, which is no longer applicable. However, this compact design meant that only limited front and back of house facilities could be provided.

The theatre's front elevation features a low, three storey ashlar-faced elevation, curving into Tower Court in a restrained classical style with channelled pilasters carrying segmental pediments and a crowning parapet and balustrade with ball ornaments. Internally, it has a compact but elegant auditorium, described in reports as being in Louis XVI style with ambassadorial crests and a colour scheme of Parma violet, ivory and gold. It has a circular plaster ceiling with central chandelier; panelled border and a deep cove penetrated by arches springing from fluted Ionic pilasters. The proscenium is flanked by single tall boxes and it has a single horse-shoe curved balcony. Apart from redecoration, the auditorium has remained reasonably intact. The theatre was listed Grade II by English Heritage in March 1973.

**Comments:** The Trust acknowledges the Ambassadors Theatre has many operational constraints as a result of its compact site and layout and would inevitably require substantial alterations in the foreseeable future to sustain it as a viable performance venue.

**Theatres Trust**

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**Chair** Tim Eyles **Interim Director** Rebecca Morland

**Trustees** Nick Allott OBE, Richard Baldwin, Dara Ó Briain, Paddy Dillon, Ruth Eastwood, Oliver Goodwin, Prof Gavin Henderson CBE, Jerry Katzman, Dame Penelope Keith DL, Judith Mellor OBE, Peter Roberts, Simon Ruddick, Ann Skippers, Anna Stapleton

The National Advisory Public Body for Theatres

The Theatres Trust Charitable Fund co-operates with the Theatres Trust, has the same Trustees and is registered as a charity under number 274697

The theatre has very little front of house or bar space for audiences to assemble and wait and the single staircase restricts circulation creating pinch points at key times immediately before and after a show and during the interval. There are limited WCs and there is no access for less mobile performers or audience members. The rear section of the stalls under the balcony has extremely poor sight lines to the stage, meaning a large portion of seats can't be sold for certain shows. The back of house facilities are very tight and there is no direct access between the front and back of house areas, making it difficult to operate the building. The theatre is also hampered by its limited wing space and the 'get in' doors being located several metres above the stage level.

These limitations have a direct impact on the programming and management of the theatre and therefore its viability and it is unlikely the theatre would be able to continue operating commercially in the long term without subsidy or some form of physical intervention.

Due to the compact layout, it would be impossible to address these issues without significant internal and external alterations to bring it up to modern building, access and safety standards. Whilst a difficult decision needs to be made in terms of the theatre's historic fabric, the theatre does need to be in a position where it can attract the types of shows and audiences needed to sustain it.

From our understanding of the plans, the proposal is for substantial internal and external alterations to the Ambassadors Theatre to reorganise the layout and create a specialised adaptable theatre capable of staging theatre productions created in a range of thrust, end on, and in the round formats. This is to be achieved by removal of the existing auditorium, proscenium arch, stage house and support facilities whilst retaining the main elevation, rear external walls and the existing optical ground floor entrance foyer.

A new 'black box' auditorium with an open stage will be constructed at ground level and a small side extension into Tower Court will incorporate a lift to access each level. The relocated auditorium provides much needed additional foyer, bar and improves circulation space around the building. Greatly improved and modern back of house facilities and dressing rooms will be provided in the basement area currently occupied by the stage/ sub stage. A new bar and function room will be created under the new auditorium on the lower ground level where the stalls are currently located. The circular plaster ceiling from the existing auditorium will be carefully removed and relocated to this room. An additional floor will be added at roof level to house rehearsal rooms. The proposal will also generally retain and enhance the appearance and setting of the theatre in the streetscape.

The Trust is pleased that the proposed layout has been refined since the pre application consultation in 2015. In particular we welcome the rearrangement of the various stairs which creates more foyer and circulation space, while in the basement, allows for more of the relocated plaster work to be utilised. The introduction of a sound lobby to the entry of the auditorium at ground level is supported, and recommend one also be considered for the entry to the second gallery. We also support the additional WC provision.

Without doubt, the scheme will have a significant impact on the interior of the Grade II listed building, and whilst the Trust would normally regret the loss of interior historic building fabric to this extent, significant alterations are required and the proposals provide a real opportunity to remodel the theatre to provide a new type of theatre venue in the West End to meet the demands of modern producers and contemporary audiences and secure its future as a live performance venue.

As The National Advisory Public Body for Theatres, the Trust is responsible for promoting and safeguarding theatre use or the potential for such use. The Trust actively encourages theatre owners

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and operators to invest and upgrade, modernise, improve and adapt their buildings so that theatres can continue to thrive. West End theatres in particular operate in a highly commercial market and have to keep pace with the public's expectations, and those of performers and producers, in order to maintain their position and reputation. This investment ensures the West End's 'Theatreland' retains its position as the leading and largest theatre district in the world contributing significantly to the UK's economy.

Theatres are unique building structures and are not easily adapted to other uses. It is therefore better to undertake improvements to existing theatres to ensure they continue to provide live theatre and remain fit-for-purpose and viable. However, it is important that the special architectural and historic qualities of theatre buildings are appreciated and embraced as part of this modernisation, and that any changes are introduced with full consideration of the special aesthetic associated with theatre buildings. The quality of their design makes theatre buildings special and is part of what the public enjoy when they attend a West End theatre.

In addition to the Trust's role, the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) also provides guidance on the need to safeguard, support and promote cultural venues. The importance of cultural facilities and cultural well-being is highlighted as one of the 12 core planning principles (paragraph 17) and paragraph 70 states that in 'promoting healthy communities', planning decisions should 'plan positively for cultural buildings' and 'guard against the loss of cultural facilities and services.'

The Trust agrees there is a gap in theatre provision within the West End catering for the type of productions to be presented in the Sondheim and there is a strong need for a theatre building of this nature. All of the existing commercial theatres in the West End are of the conventional end-on production format with the stage located behind a proscenium arch and there is a real need for a large 'black box' style flexible theatre space to enable leading subsidised theatres such as the Dorfmann, Young Vic, Almeida, Hampstead Theatres and others from across the country to transfer to the West End and access the wider audiences and market available.

The flexible stage and theatre layout proposed in The Sondheim will enable productions to transfer quickly and cost effectively as the theatre can be arranged to support a range of different staging configurations and the types of theatre production currently not able to be staged in the West End. This is because it will not be necessary to re-design the scenery and staging when it transfers to this theatre, as productions do now when they have to adapt to a conventional proscenium arch format. The Sondheim will be able to match the layout of the original production, including end-on, thrust stage and in-the-round formats and with 450 seats, the auditorium will retain an intimate feel and the relationship between the audience and the stage that these productions experience in the spaces they were created.

Investment in the provision of a more flexible theatrical space is greatly needed to enable wider audiences to see work in its original staging, diversify the West End's theatrical offer, and support the West End's contribution to the creative economy.

**Summary:** Within this context, the Trust accepts that the vision for the Ambassadors / Sondheim Theatre will be beneficial for the theatre sector. Whilst the proposals will have a major impact on the existing historic fabric of the Ambassadors Theatre, significant consideration has been given to retaining key elements of the building, its external appearance is respected and its redesign is sensitive to the qualities of its original interior. This theatre needs significant intervention to make it fit-for-purpose, and with the need for a theatre of this nature, together with the wider benefits to subsidised theatre, theatre provision and the West End as a whole, the Trust considers that the benefits of this proposal do outweigh the harm.

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Please do not hesitate to contact us if we may be of further assistance.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ross Anthony', with a horizontal line extending from the end of the signature.

Ross Anthony  
Planning Adviser