

Our Ref.:206

19 October 2017

Julia Asghar
Development Planning
City of Westminster
City Hall
London SW1E 6QP

Dear Ms Asghar,

Theatre Royal Drury Lane, Catherine Street, London

Application Ref: 17/08082/FULL and 17/08085/LBC

I write regarding the above planning and listed building applications for the change of use, alterations and refurbishment of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, Vinegar Yard and No. 6 Catherine Street. The Theatres Trust supports the applications. Please see our advice below.

Remit: The Theatres Trust is the national advisory public body for theatres. We champion the past, present and future of live theatre, by protecting the buildings and what goes on inside. We were established through the Theatres Trust Act 1976 'to promote the better protection of theatres' and provide statutory planning advice on theatre buildings and theatre use through The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015, requiring the Trust to be consulted by local authorities on planning applications which include 'development involving any land on which there is a theatre'.

Advice: The Trust actively encourages theatre owners and operators to invest in their buildings to ensure they meet current building, access and safety standards and the needs and expectations of modern audiences, staff, performers and producers. We therefore support this scheme to restore, refurbish and alter the stage, auditorium and front of house facilities at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane to sustain and support the ongoing vitality and viability of this important Grade I listed theatre into the future.

The current theatre building was designed by Benjamin Wyatt and was completed in 1812. It has been extended and altered on a number of occasions, most notably in 1922 when the auditorium was rebuilt in a cinematic, rather than theatrical form, the foyer was truncated, and access to the stalls was rerouted via the basement. Despite being one of the largest and most historically important theatres in the UK, the building has many shortcomings, including poor sightlines and audience comfort, lack of accessibility and connectivity, and difficulties staging productions with its raked stage and limited sub-stage capabilities.

The Trust has been closely involved in the development of this scheme, having attended a

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Chair Tim Eyles **Director** Jon Morgan

Trustees Richard Baldwin, David Blyth, Pam Bone, Paul Cartwright, Paddy Dillon, Ruth Eastwood, David Ian, Richard Johnston, Gary Kemp, Dara Ó Briain, Simon Ricketts, Peter Roberts, Ann Skippers, Anna Stapleton

The National Advisory Public Body for Theatres

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

number of pre-application meetings with Westminster Council, Historic England and the National Amenity Societies. The Trust also facilitated an independent peer-based Advisory Review of the proposal together with the Association of British Theatre Technicians and a panel of theatre design and operation experts in January 2017. The purpose of the Advisory Review was to consider the way the building functions as a theatre and how to make it fit for purpose while respecting and promoting its significant heritage qualities. The Trust is therefore fully supportive of the proposals, and are pleased the feedback provided by our Advisory Review Panel has largely been considered and incorporated into the submitted plans.

The Trust and the panel understand the need to reconfigure some existing historic building fabric within the theatre in order to secure its future as a competitive, sustainable and live theatre, which is offset by the restoration of the features of highest architectural and historic significance within the complex.

Restoring the Grand Stairs and reopening the full foyer area back to its Georgian layout, including reinstating the connection to Russel Street and the extension into Vinegar Yard and No. 6 Catherine Street, creates a vastly improved sense of arrival with full accessibility to the theatre and new bars and restaurant all clearly and easily located at ground level. Creating direct access to the stalls from the foyer greatly improves circulation and wayfinding, and also allows for the repurposing of the current stalls bar, an area with low ceiling height and lower significance, as much needed additional WCs in a central and convenient location.

More radical changes are proposed in the auditorium and stage house in order to address the issues of comfort, views, intimacy and staging. Extensive modelling has been undertaken to determine the most effective layout needed to operate the theatre and to justify the extent of alterations required. Within the auditorium, we welcome the re-raking of the stalls and balconies to maximise the number of seats with clear sightlines to the new level stage and support the decision to remove the back rows of the stalls, whose views are hindered by the balcony overhang, to create a cross over corridor at the rear and a streamlined technical area. This also includes introducing a modular and level the stage which is now needed to meet current staging requirements for large scale musicals.

The proposal will also reshape the lines of the Royal and Grand Circles to form a curve that extends forward and steps down toward the stage to engulf the first boxes. The line of the boxes closest to the proscenium arch are usually used to house sound and lighting equipment, so they will be removed to create a dedicated and more accessible and flexible technical zone. The boxes above the Royal Box on each side will be lowered and new half-height boxes will be created and set back to ensure the scheme creates the desired connection to the stage and ensure the boxes do not look isolated. A closer physical relationship between stage and the circles will improve the connection between actors and the audience and help achieve a more intimate feel within what is a large auditorium. Given the modelling that has been undertaken to demonstrate the benefits of the physical and visual changes, the Trust agrees the overall benefits of these changes to the long term operation of the theatre outweighs the impact on the historic fabric within the auditorium.

While we agree removal of the sub stage machinery and installation of a new level and demountable stage is vital the success of the overall project, we do have hesitations about the

future of the historic sub-stage machinery. We certainly welcome the proposed recording, including photographic and film recording and the proposed scale model, as outlined in the document entitled Theatre *Royal Drury Lane: Historic Stage Machinery – Recording Approach & Approach* and would expect this to be included as a condition of consent. But to ensure the machinery is not lost or forgotten, we would also recommend a condition such as:

Condition: Proposals for the storage of the two salvaged items of sub stage machinery shall be submitted and approved by Council. This is to include details of regular monitoring to ensure they are kept in safe and appropriate conditions, and regular reporting on the ongoing efforts being made to secure a permanent home for the salvaged machinery.

We also seek assurances that the construction work involved will not affect the operation of the adjacent Fortune Theatre and other theatres in the area. The theatre is noise sensitive and the building was not built to modern acoustic standards. Being in such close proximity to the proposed construction site, it will be extremely vulnerable to noise penetration from vehicle and construction activity, particularly as Russel Street will be used to service the construction site. Construction noise can disrupt performances, as has occurred at other theatres in the West End. We therefore request the following condition is applied to any planning permission issued:

Condition: A construction management plan is to be prepared in consultation with the Ambassador Theatre Group (operators of the Fortune Theatre) and other nearby theatre operators. The plan will ensure no demolition, noisy construction works, movement of machinery, or deliveries are undertaken during performance times at the Fortune Theatre (including evening shows and matinees) and immediately before and after when the audience are arriving to, and leaving the theatre. Construction, deliveries, and vehicle movements should also be coordinated with existing regular deliveries to the theatre and any future performance change over periods that would require clear access to the theatre delivery dock and stage doors.

Purpose: To minimise the impact of construction on the operation of nearby theatres.

In our opinion, the proposal greatly improves the theatre's technical and operational capabilities, access around the theatre, and addresses audience comfort and connectivity without compromising the heritage or architectural significance of the heritage asset. While there is loss of some historic building fabric, the overall benefit to the theatre as a whole clearly outweighs the harm caused and we would recommend granting planning and listed building consent.

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance.

Yours sincerely,



Ross Anthony
Planning Consultant

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