

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/2004

07 June 2021

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Pending Applications
Development Planning
City of Westminster
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By e-mail: southplanningteam@westminster.gov.uk

Applications: 21/03108/FULL & 21/03110/LBC

Site: Playhouse Theatre Northumberland Avenue London WC2N 5DE

Proposal: Introduction of new level access in location of former opening, external new flue, replacement plant and associated internal works; and

Works to convert the auditorium to a stage in the round layout (reversible), minor alterations at basement level and to dress and upper circle bar areas, introduction of new level access in location of former opening, internal redecoration, external new flue, replacement plant and associated works.

Remit:

The Theatres Trust is the national advisory public body for theatres. 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 in England 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'.

Comment:

Thank you for consulting Theatres Trust on these applications for planning permission and listed building consent at the Playhouse Theatre, which are seeking a number of internal and some external alterations to provide a new layout and additional audience facilities in order to handle a forthcoming production. The Trust has been engaged on these plans by the applicant from an early stage.

The Playhouse is a Grade II listed heritage asset. It was originally constructed in 1882 but a collapse of part of Charing Cross station in 1905 resulted in substantial damage and the theatre was remodelled using the compensation received. This included providing extensive basement

Theatres Trust

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Chair Tim Eyles **Director** Jon Morgan

Trustees Richard Baldwin, Paul Cartwright, Paddy Dillon, Annie Hampson, Richard Johnston, Gary Kemp, Jane Spiers, Truda Spruyt, Katie Town

The National Advisory Public Body for Theatres

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space by raising the auditorium around 1.5m. The auditorium is decorated in a Franco-Venetian style with flowing curve and fine plasterwork and painting with a dome above. It retains stage machinery of great significance and rarity. Between 1951 and 1976 it served as a studio for the BBC but fell vacant for ten years before being redecorated and returned to use. Although part of the West End the theatre is on its fringe and detached from other venues and is one of the smaller of the West End theatres. Whilst well suited to certain types of production, a number of which have been highly acclaimed and successful, we understand its constraints can make it more challenging to programme.

In the immediate term these proposals will enable the theatre to host a major production which requires an in-the-round layout and for the audience to take an experiential and immersive role. Broadly these changes are reversible thus the original layout can be reinstated easily for future productions. Some of the proposed alterations are intended to be permanent thus affording a longer-term benefit for the theatre and its users due to their nature, such as improved accessibility into the building and additional front of house facilities. We have been supportive of pre-application plans shared with us, and these applications are little changed from our positive early discussions.

Foyer

A new accessible entrance will be created into the foyer through the existing bar. We welcome this and it is to be supported as it ensures all users can use the primary means of entry and exit. This will be retained into the future. Historic photos show there was previously a doorway around that location thus this aspect constitutes a reinstatement. As well as enabling accessible entry, it will also reduce pressure on the existing doorways which can become quite congested. This has great merit in alleviating pressures from social distancing should restrictions continue or be required again. The entrance will correspond with existing openings so we do not consider this to detrimentally impact the building's historic character. Alongside this the existing bar which is a later modern addition will be replaced. There will also be some minor alterations to provide internal ramped access, which again can be supported as this will generate public benefit.

Basement

There will be alterations to access and layout at this level as two existing dressing rooms and other back of house spaces will be given over to enlarged front of house bar and hospitality provision facilitated by removal of partitions. This will consist of an enclosed lounge bar and further bar area. These areas are again later additions from the 1980s refurbishment works. In the short term this will support the forthcoming production and be part of the show's experience. In the longer term it can be retained and repurposed to diversify the theatre's offer. This will increase opportunities to generate income in turn supporting the ongoing sustainability and viability of the theatre.

Auditorium/Stage

The stalls seating will be removed, as will the seats within the upper parts of the Dress Circle and Upper Circle. The stage will be utilised for seating and gallery above with a new stage within the

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stalls to create an in-the-round set up with cabaret seating around. The new central stage could either be retained or removed depending on the demands of future productions; there are few theatres with such a set-up so this could prove attractive to producers. Within the Dress Circle the bar will be expanded to provide further experience space. On the Upper Circle new dressing rooms and back of house space will be added. A store will be utilised as a small bar area. Alongside this will be re-raking to optimise sightlines to the new stage position. Although a marked departure from the auditorium's existing layout these alterations will be fully reversible; we would the run of *The Jungle* in 2018 also saw the layout alter temporarily. Therefore we are able to support these proposals. There will also be redecoration which will also be reversed at the end of the run.

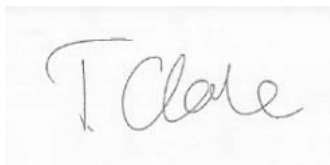
Ventilation

During these works the opportunity will be taken to upgrade the theatre's ventilation. A Noise Impact Assessment has been provided which we note sets out compliance with relevant standards.

We are supportive of these proposals. The need and rationale for the works have been clearly set out within the applicant's cover letter and supporting documentation. We are seeing an emerging trend towards cabaret-type provision of the nature proposed. It is important that theatres are able to respond to changes in audience and producer demands so they remain valued cultural assets and contribute to London and the West End's attractiveness as a global destination. The production coming to the Playhouse requires an in-the-round layout and involvement of the audience and this is achieved through the alterations proposed. This is an exciting prospect for the theatre as it seeks to recover from the devastating impacts of the pandemic. We consider these proposals will conserve the building's historic character and provide public benefit by improving its accessibility permanently.

Therefore we are supportive of the granting of planning permission and listed building consent.

Please contact us if we may be of further assistance or should you wish to discuss these comments further.



Tom Clarke MRTPI
National Planning Adviser

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