

Protecting theatres for everyone



Ref.: TC/426

20 February 2023

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Pending Applications
Development Planning
City of Westminster
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Application: 23/00168/LBC

Site: Fortune Theatre Russell Street London WC2B 5HH

Proposal: Removal of 8 counterweight cradles and to allow for 11 new double purchase counterweight cradles to be installed with the partial strengthening of the head beams and trimming of the existing grid steelwork (6 RSJs) , replacement of the gallery with a new steel gallery to stage and creation of new doorway, and removal of existing crossover bridge.

Remit:

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 this application for listed building consent at the Fortune Theatre. It is seeking to upgrade the theatre's technical stage equipment. A site visit has been undertaken to view the backstage area and better understand these proposals and the significance of equipment.

The Fortune is a Grade II listed heritage asset. It was built in 1922 and is culturally significant as the first theatre in Britain built after World War I and architecturally significant due to its construction using concrete as an exposed and decorative façade; it was only the second building, following the original Wembley Stadium, constructed in this way. Its interior features extensive marble and metalwork. It has a small capacity by West End standards and for a theatre which has three tiers, seating around 400 people. Since 1989 it has been the home of The Woman in Black but this is coming to an end in late February.

Theatres Trust

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL
T 020 7836 8591 E info@theatrestrust.org.uk W theatrestrust.org.uk

Chair Dave Moutrey **Director** Jon Morgan

Trustees Paul Cartwright, James Dacre, Suba Das, Stephanie Hall, Annie Hampson, Richard Johnston, Gary Kemp, Lucy Osborne, Jane Spiers, Truda Spruyt, Katie Town

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

Whilst the theatre's existing stage infrastructure has been adequate for this production, it does not meet the loading needs of more modern shows and producers which the theatre will need to attract to maintain a sustainable programme which will keep the theatre active. There are also some issues with regards to complying with current standards for safe working conditions. Therefore installation of a new counterweight flying system is required, and the grid above will be altered through removal of some beams to allow for installation of the new system and to deliver the loading required.

The Fortune is not referenced within the Technical Backstage Survey 2009 Survey produced by the Historical Research Committee of the Association of British Theatre Technicians for Theatres Trust. Nonetheless the applicant has identified that triple-purchase sets present are a rarity and will be retained in situ which is to be welcomed, although they will not be operational due to the excessive load required to utilise them and their sub-optimal location. Some elements of the double purchase sets are also of historic interest and the applicant's suggestion is that these will be removed but packaged and retained on site along next to the triple-purchase sets where there is some capacity for storage. Again this is supported, and this might be conditioned upon granting of listed building consent. We recommend properly labelling, and there would also be merit in photographic recording prior to removal. Other parts and counterweight sets are not of historic significance so we raise no objection to their removal. Although these proposals will result in some loss of historic features, it would be to some degree reversible and also mitigated through the public benefits of ensuring the theatre can continue to function and attract new shows.

Additionally the crossover bridge has been condemned due to its poor and unsafe condition. Its position also inhibits effective use of the stage. This is to be removed. It is believed that this was non-original, possibly installed in the 1960s, nevertheless its loss is mitigated through the necessity of ensuring the theatre can function effectively.

A new door opening has also been included with this application although we understand this will not be taken forward at the present time due to time constraints. However again there is demonstrable need for this intervention, should it be undertaken in future, to provide safer working conditions.

These alterations will ensure the theatre can continue to programme the new works necessary to sustain and conserve the theatre into the future and improve standards of safety. The most significant elements will be retained. We are supportive of the granting of 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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