

# PHOENIX THEATRE



## Heritage Impact Statement Orchestra Pit Enclosure

John Earl  
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# THE PHOENIX THEATRE

## Works to orchestra pit enclosure

The author of this document is John Earl FSA MRICS FRSA IHBC, a building conservation consultant, now working exclusively on historic theatres and places of public entertainment. I have been commissioned to produce a heritage impact statement in respect of works proposed by ATG to the Phoenix Theatre, in preparation for a new production.

1.1 The Phoenix is an active West End playhouse and musical house of special architectural or historic interest, listed at Grade II but, in my opinion, worthy of upgrading to II\*. It was designed by an architectural team effectively led by Cecil Masey, with art decorations by Theodore Komisarjevsky. Completed in 1930, it is owned today by a company whose whole business is concerned with the running of theatres and whose commitment to theatre activity and the care of theatre buildings is demonstrated in the West End of London and across the country.

1.2 The cultural significance of the building centres on its architectural and historic character as a well-preserved example of a mid-twentieth century addition to the world's densest concentration of active theatres, known as West End Theatreland. Its interior is of outstanding quality and, so far as West End theatres are concerned, unique.

1.3 1930 was the peak year of the extraordinary 'little boom' in theatre building that gave London's West End eleven new theatres in barely seven years, starting with the Fortune in 1924 and ending with Saville, now a cinema, in 1931 (the 1937 Prince of Wales was a late rebuild). Sidney L Bernstein, for whom it was built, said that it had been designed 'with historical traditions in mind .... emphasising those elements of luxury and comfort peculiar to the architecture of the Italian Renaissance princes'.

1.4 The multiple authorship of the Phoenix (Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, Bertie Crewe, Cecil Masey and Theodore Komisarjevsky) reads dangerously like a recipe for architectural disaster but, in fact, the division of labour was clear cut and perfectly workable.

1.5 Theodore Komisarjevsky's was the creative mind for the interior as it was for the great Bernstein Granada cinemas that were to follow. The Phoenix was one of his first such works and here, as with the best of his Granadas, he worked with the painter Vladimir Polunin.

1.6 The Phoenix is a delightful theatre. Komisarjevsky's free Renaissance decorative schemes, using plaster modelling, rich colours, and mirror-reflected views have a unifying effect throughout. It continues to serve modern audiences, remaining firmly in the use it was designed for and it has demonstrated in the thirteen year run of 'Blood Brothers' that it is highly suitable for modern musical theatre productions. Continuation of that use is the most effective way of ensuring its proper preservation.

## 2. The Proposal

2.1 In March 2013 the theatre is scheduled to receive 'Once - the musical', which has enjoyed considerable success in the USA. This production calls for an alteration to be made to the orchestra pit enclosure.

2.2 It is already possible to cover the pit to produce a forestage when required, but this is not needed for 'Once'. This is an intimate show with audience involvement at times, requiring a straight front to the stage with the audience close to the fore edge. It is proposed to remove the enclosure of the orchestra pit, as a temporary measure, for the length of the show's run.

## 3. Impact Assessment

3.1 The pit enclosure is part of the original interior design and its permanent removal would certainly be resisted. However, theatres, of their nature, must regularly adapt to accommodate specific production needs. Modern production fashions have made temporary, visible alterations within theatre auditoriums quite frequent.

3.2 The London Coliseum, as early as 1931/2, had scenic constructions within the auditorium and spilling out over the stage boxes for 'White Horse Inn' and 'Casanova'. The theatre at that time was, of course, unlisted and unprotected. An elaborate bridge over the proscenium, installed for the short run of 'Casanova', remained in situ for nearly twenty years. More recently, and more to the point, a similar temporary auditorium structure, coupled with displacements to Victorian substage machinery, for 'The Phantom of the Opera' have remained in the Grade II\* listed Her Majesty's Theatre for more than 25 years. The listed building consent in this and other similar cases, was subject to conditions requiring careful recording and safe storage of any removed original

fabric, with enforceable undertakings that all would be restored to its original condition at the end of the show's run.<sup>1</sup>

3.3 Mention of temporary works remaining for 25 years may seem cautionary, but the occurrence of occasional very long runs is a fact that has to be accommodated in the West End. Theatre is a notoriously uncertain business, even in this world-famous centre. Backers rarely make more than modest profits and many shows are fortunate to cut even or incur less than disastrous losses. The big 'blockbusters', involving huge initial investment, are the most risky of all, but they are also the ones that, when successful, have been crucial in energising Theatreland as a whole. Official discretion in the exercise of listed building controls has been, and will continue to be, important in securing this success.

3.4 It is impossible to predict how long the new show will run at the Phoenix, but, in this case, the temporary removal of the orchestra enclosure will, in my opinion, be a comparatively minor and easily accommodated change.<sup>2</sup> If the stage riser is given an appropriate, low key treatment, few observers will be aware that there has been any alteration. It is suggested that conditions applied to the consent should include the following three requirements:

(i) that the enclosure should be recorded in its present state with accurate scale drawings and photographs.

(ii) that every part be systematically labelled and put into safe storage on the premises.

(iii) that on completion of the run of 'Once' the enclosure be restored to its original condition and position and any damage be made good to the satisfaction of the authority. At the same time the stalls seating is to be restored to its original configuration.

END

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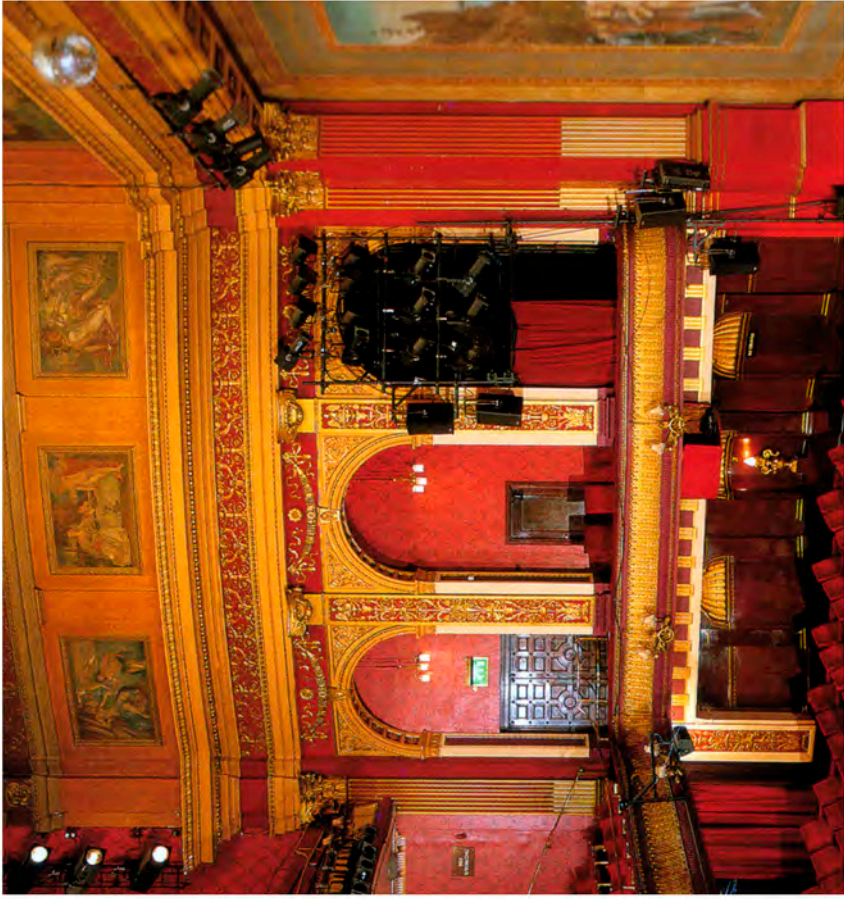
<sup>1</sup> Official enforcement aside, it is normal practice in the theatre world for theatre proprietors to require production companies to remove any intrusive works and completely make good any physical disturbances on vacating the theatre.

<sup>2</sup> It will be necessary to investigate how the old enclosure divides into separable components. This may call for a degree of disturbance which cannot be undertaken while the stage is in use, but the practicalities of the dismantling process and subsequent storage, will be discussed with the controlling authorities at every stage.

illustrations follow



Two views of the orchestra pit enclosure. The panel filling may not be original.



Komisarjevsky and his Phoenix interior