

Streatham Hill's Sleeping Beauty: Friends seek to revive unique 1920s theatre

There is a 'sleeping beauty' waiting to be awoken in Streatham, South London. A unique gem, a lavish Grade 2 listed theatre, designed and built in the late 1920's for an audience of over 2500 with a stage large enough to take the very biggest shows. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity – and maybe the very last chance – to revive the Streatham Hill Theatre.

Opened in 1929 as Streatham Hill Playhouse, the theatre attracted big name stars (including John Gielgud and the newly discovered Vivian Leigh) and big shows either prior to their West End runs, or as transfers from the West End. It survived major bomb damage in 1944, being rebuilt and reopened in 1950. By 1962 the theatre succumbed to the downturn in theatre-going, closing briefly to be reopened by Mecca as Britain's biggest bingo venue. The building was left largely untouched by its switch to bingo, preserving the theatre in suspended animation. A number of recent events have allowed visitors to admire the interior and explore normally closed areas behind the scenes.

Bingo ceased in January 2017 and since then Praesepe plc, the owners of Beacon Bingo, have been seeking a new cultural use for the historic building. The local community is also keen to see such a use for the theatre, to provide a centre for Streatham's significant and growing arts and cultural activities. They are also concerned for the future of the beautiful and much-loved building, with the risk of it falling into disuse and deterioration, or being lost to redevelopment, or split up making cultural use unsustainable.

To this end the 'Friends of Streatham Hill Theatre' has been formed to focus the campaign to save the building for future generations, and bring it back into cultural use for the benefit of the local community. This could, for example, be in partnership with a commercial organisation or a community-led initiative.

A multi-purpose cultural centre based in a renewed Streatham Hill Theatre could be a key part of London Borough of Lambeth's bid for Mayor of London Sadiq Khan's 'London Borough of Culture' initiative, providing a counter-balance in the south of the borough to the cultural centre on the South Bank.

Founding 'friend' David Harvey said, *"I know this lovely building well, having helped stage theatre and run tours there, with great support from Beacon Bingo. Everyone who sees the theatre is in awe of this hidden gem and wants it to be brought back to life. The Friends plan to hold a public meeting in the New Year – perhaps in the theatre – to give everyone a chance to get involved."*

"To join the Friends, please like us on Facebook at facebook.com/StreathamHillTheatre, follow us on Twitter twitter.com/StreathamHillT or join our email list via eepurl.com/db65hP."

The Friends already have support of local residents, businesses and community organisations, as well as working with theatre heritage organisations such as the Association of British Theatre Technicians (ABTT) and the Theatres Trust. They would love to hear from others able to support their aims in any way.

What's that?! Can it be the sound of a sleeping beauty stirring from her deep sleep?

[ENDS]

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EDITORS NOTES:

Streatham has a long history in theatre and entertainment and was known as “the West End of south London” - and due to the wealth of talent living in the area - as “The Beverly Hills of London”. Arts and cultural activity of all kinds continues in modern day Streatham.

Streatham Hill Theatre (SHT) was opened in 1929 as the Streatham Hill Playhouse. It was bombed in WW2 but was rebuilt and reopened in 1950. It closed to theatre in 1962, becoming a bingo hall. Much of the original theatre and its equipment remain. Small scale theatre returned via Streatham Theatre Company from 2013 to 2016. Bingo ceased in 2017.

The theatre was granted a Grade 2 listing in 1994 as “an unusually lavish example of a theatre built in the short-lived revival of building in 1929-30; as a suburban example of this date the building may be unique”.

It is located at 110 Streatham Hill, SW2 4RD.

More can be found at www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/Streatham.htm#hilltheatre

The Streatham Society has published a book about the theatre, written by John Cresswell www.streathamsociety.org.uk

Theatre returned to Streatham Hill in 2013 when the newly formed **Streatham Theatre Company** performed “Then and Now: The Glamour Days of Streatham” for that year’s Streatham Festival. The company has since produced a number of plays, a series of promenade-style site-specific shows, and guided tours in the theatre. See www.streathamtheatre.org.uk and also for more information about SHT see www.streathamtheatre.org.uk/sht

Streatham Festival is an accessible arts festival celebrating local talent, presenting a mix of emerging and well-established artists and encouraging the imaginative use of the different venues across Streatham that characterise the area. www.streathamfestival.com