

# Protecting theatres for everyone



David Harvey  
Friends of Streatham Hill Theatre

17 January 2020

## By Email

Dear David

### Streatham Hill Theatre – Crowdfund London

Theatres Trust write in support of your bid to Crowdfund London to raise funding to carry out a viability study on the Grade II listed Streatham Hill Theatre. The theatre is undeniably a building of significance and one that we believe offers great opportunity to its community both as a local resource and also positively contributing to the local economy and serving as a catalyst to the regeneration of the area.

**Remit:** The Theatres Trust is the National Advisory Public Body for Theatres, established to 'promote the better protection of theatres' through the Theatres Trust Act 1976 in England through The Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015 (DMPO), Schedule 4, Para (x), that requires the Trust to be consulted by local authorities on planning applications which include 'development involving any land on which there is a theatre.' This applies to all theatre buildings.

Our main objective is to safeguard theatre use, or the potential for such use, but we also seek to provide impartial expert advice to establish the most viable and effective solutions at the earliest possible stages of development. We work extensively with community groups, local authorities and operators whether on plans for new theatres, working with an existing theatre in need of advice or funding, or looking to bring a disused or vacant theatre back to life.

**Theatre Significance:** The Grade II listed Streatham Hill Theatre is one of London's most lavish 'sleeping beauties'. The building is one of 31 theatres included on Theatres Trust's Theatres at Risk Register, a list that highlights those theatre buildings considered most at threat throughout the UK.

Built in 1929, the theatre is the last designed by W G R Sprague, the architect responsible for some of the most beautiful theatres in London. WGR Sprague was articulated to renowned theatre architect Frank Matcham and then later with yet another well-known theatre architect, Walter Emden, before setting up his own practice. He went on to design a large number of theatres throughout the UK. Of the 40 or so that he designed many have been lost – of those that remain the majority are the elegant smaller theatre houses of the West End, including Wyndham's, the Aldwych, the Queen's and Gielgud, Noel Coward, Novello Theatre, St Martin's, and the

#### **Theatres Trust**

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Ambassadors.

Whilst the last theatre designed by Sprague, Streatham Hill is possibly his largest and one of the best-equipped in London outside of the West End. Reported by *The Stage Newspaper* at the time as providing the 'south side suburbs with a playhouse of which they can be justly proud' this was designed to provide the public with facilities akin to those offered by the West End.

The theatre has an imposing, grand facade and remains an important presence on main high street. The foyer is spacious, with tall gilded Ionic columns and arches, terrazzo floor and two round kiosks each side of the grand central stairway. The auditorium is lavish and excellent sightlines. The lavish decorative scheme continues in foyers and public areas which are highly decorative and quite eclectic in style, with friezes of sphinxes, angels and garlands in abundance. The theatre was hit by a V1 flying bomb in 1944 but reconstructed in 1950 close to the original designs. The original wooden stage machinery is also still in situ, together with the counterweight flying and forestage lifts. The theatre was listed Grade II 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.'

The theatre closed for live performance in the 60's, becoming a bingo hall. It remained in bingo use until 2017 when activity was reduced to operation from a 'Cashino' slot-machine lounge out of the rear of the stalls only. This has left the main auditorium vacant and leaves a historically important and sizable building in an important location on the main high street vastly underutilised and lying vulnerable and potentially under threat of future redevelopment. The building was subsequently added to the Theatres at Risk register. However, the building remains in relatively good condition and has great opportunity for return to live performance and community use that would benefit the both the local community and help reinvigorate the area and contribute towards the regeneration of the high street.

**Opportunity:** The Friends of Streatham Hill have been campaigning to save the building for the community. They would like to see the building restored and reopened as a multi-purpose arts centre and home for community and arts organisations. The Friends' vision for the building also includes provision of co-working space for new/small businesses, and artists and bar / café facilities open to all.

Theatres Trust has been supporting the Friends since its formation and providing early stage project advice. We believe that there is an achievable and workable model for Streatham Hill Theatre that could see live performance use return to the building and preserve the historic significance of this beautiful theatre. The range of ancillary spaces lends itself to the building be used as a multi-purpose arts centre to provide a home for community and arts organisations and becoming a building that truly serves its local community. The building's prominent position on Streatham Hill also places this building in a potentially powerful role in the regeneration of the area. The reawakening of this building could serve as an important driver of footfall in the area, positively impacting both day and night time economy, and contributing to a flourishing and vibrant high street.

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We support the Friends' campaign to raise funding to commission a viability study for the building - a vital first stage in the process of saving this historic building. The work will enable the group to explore options for the building and to determine a sustainable and viable future for the theatre, setting out the path that we hope will preserve the theatre and allow it to be enjoyed by generations of local residents to come.

**Summary:** Theatres Trust believe that the Streatham Hill Theatre is not only a building of great social and historic significance but one which offers great opportunity to its community and to the creation of a flourishing high street. We are therefore pleased to provide our support to the Friends of Streatham Hill's bid to Crowdfund London to carry out a viability study for the building, the first step in the path to determining a new and sustainable future for this magnificent theatre.

Yours sincerely,

Claire Appleby  
Architecture Adviser  
Theatres Trust

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