

Ref.: TC/686

1 May 2024

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**Application:** 24/00353/FUL

**Site:** Mayflower Theatre Commercial Road Southampton SO15 1AP

**Proposal:** Application for an extension to the rear of the Mayflower Theatre to create a new rehearsal studio, accessible dressing rooms and new back of house entrance following demolition of 2 staircases and creation of new openings into the back of house block and admin block

### **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 planning permission at Mayflower Theatre which seeks to construct an extension providing enhanced back of house facilities. We have also been notified of the corresponding listed building

#### **Theatres Trust**

22 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0QL

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consent to which we have responded under separate cover. We were engaged at pre-application stage, providing points for further consideration but expressing overall support for the project in February 2023.

The Mayflower Theatre is a Grade II listed heritage asset, designed by W. and T.R. Milburn. It opened in 1928 as the Empire Theatre under the Moss Empire group which operated theatres in major cities around the UK, and is the largest theatre in the south of England outside of London. In 1933 it was adapted to host cinema, and by the early 1940s this was its dominant function after being purchased by the Rank Organisation and being renamed to the Gaumont Theatre. Under their control it also held live music concerts, with several notable acts playing there. By the end of the 1980s with cinema in decline alternative uses for the building were explored; bingo use had already been attempted previously but refused permission. Southampton City Council purchased the building and leased it at a peppercorn rate to a charitable trust which had been set up to run it. Works took place for theatre use to return, and the name change to the Mayflower came about. Over subsequent years the venue became a success, attracting big names and notable touring West End shows. A mixed programme of that nature also including comedy and live music remains. The theatre is an important cultural venue for the city, attracting visitors from a wider catchment into the city as well as helping to meet the cultural needs of local people. Paragraph 97 of the NPPF seeks planning decisions to plan positively for facilities of this nature.

Architecturally the theatre is designed in a Neo-Grecian style with a stone front elevation with six pilasters with lions head masks below and red brick infill, and a half-octagonal stone turret to each side. Above the first floor are lions masks. Internally the foyer has plaques with antique masks and marble to lower levels. The auditorium has a tall and curved proscenium flanked by panels with anthemion motifs. Above is an oval dome with octagonal glass and metal lanterns. Seating is on three levels with curved boxes to the side including rare standing boxes.

The theatre has undergone previous improvement and development. We welcome this further investment in the building and expansion of its facilities and function, further enhancing its cultural role.

This proposed development is to the south-west corner at the rear of the theatre around the back of house and administration block. This end of the building is less architecturally sensitive, being typically utilitarian in form and character and includes previous more recent development with modern insertions. Therefore in heritage

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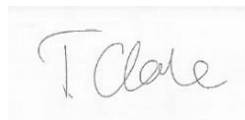
terms this can be considered the best location for further change and alteration as it is less sensitive. We nonetheless consider the external design and massing of this extension to be sensitive to existing character and context, and has been reduced compared to the version commented on at pre-application stage.

The primary function of this extension is to provide a double-height studio space, which is stated to be for touring theatre companies to rehearse and so the theatre can expand its youth education and outreach activities. This is welcomed. Compared to the previous iteration the position of the studio has moved and it is now better-equipped for rehearsals, directly served by a double-height wing and get-in space from the main loading dock and a short distance from the stage of the main auditorium. This will further enhance its capabilities, and would be more conducive to potentially being utilised for small-scale performances if required. The reception area which also serves other and existing back of house functions has similarly been re-located and overall would appear to be better located to serve the wider building and improve accessibility. At upper levels there are new WCs and a Green Room which serve the studio, and also an accessible WC to the reception is retained from the previous plans.

With the scheme being reduced in height and scale, which is understandable given increases in construction costs, there are inevitably compromises and whereas previously there were to be additional general dressing rooms serving the new studio this is no longer the case. However proposals for the creation of new accessible dressing rooms within the existing admin block are being taken forward.

We welcome this further investment into the theatre and its facilities. We therefore support the granting of planning permission.

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



Tom Clarke MRTPI

National Planning Adviser

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