

Future secure as council takes centre stage

Historic theatre set for a long run

A HAPPY ending is in the air for a historic theatre after years of uncertainty over its long-term future.

A package of proposals has been drawn up which would see Newcastle City Council buy the Grade I-listed Journal Tyne Theatre in Westgate Road and transfer ownership to the Tyne Theatre and Opera House Preservation Trust.

Around £500,000 would be needed for urgent repair work to the roof timbers, walls and parapet, with the trust then aiming to raise up to £7m over five years to preserve, develop and restore the 1867 theatre to its Victorian glory.

A year ago *The Journal* reported the launch of a drive by the trust to raise £5m to restore the 1,100-capacity building and ensure its future as not only a working theatre, but also as a visitor attraction, exhibition, educational and training resource.

The national Theatres Trust gives the building its highest star rating and describes it as "a very fine theatre of the highest theatrical and architectural quality," with an auditorium which is "undoubtedly one of the finest of its date in Britain."

But the building is currently on English

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Heritage's At Risk list. Now the city council's executive will be asked next month to approve steps to secure the long-term future of the theatre.

The funds to acquire the building will be raised by the sale of the council-owned Charlton Bonds building in adjacent Thornton Street - formerly the Newcastle Lighting Centre.

The theatre is currently owned by the Adderstone Group, which has developed 42 flats for sale adjoining the building, operated by SMG Europe.

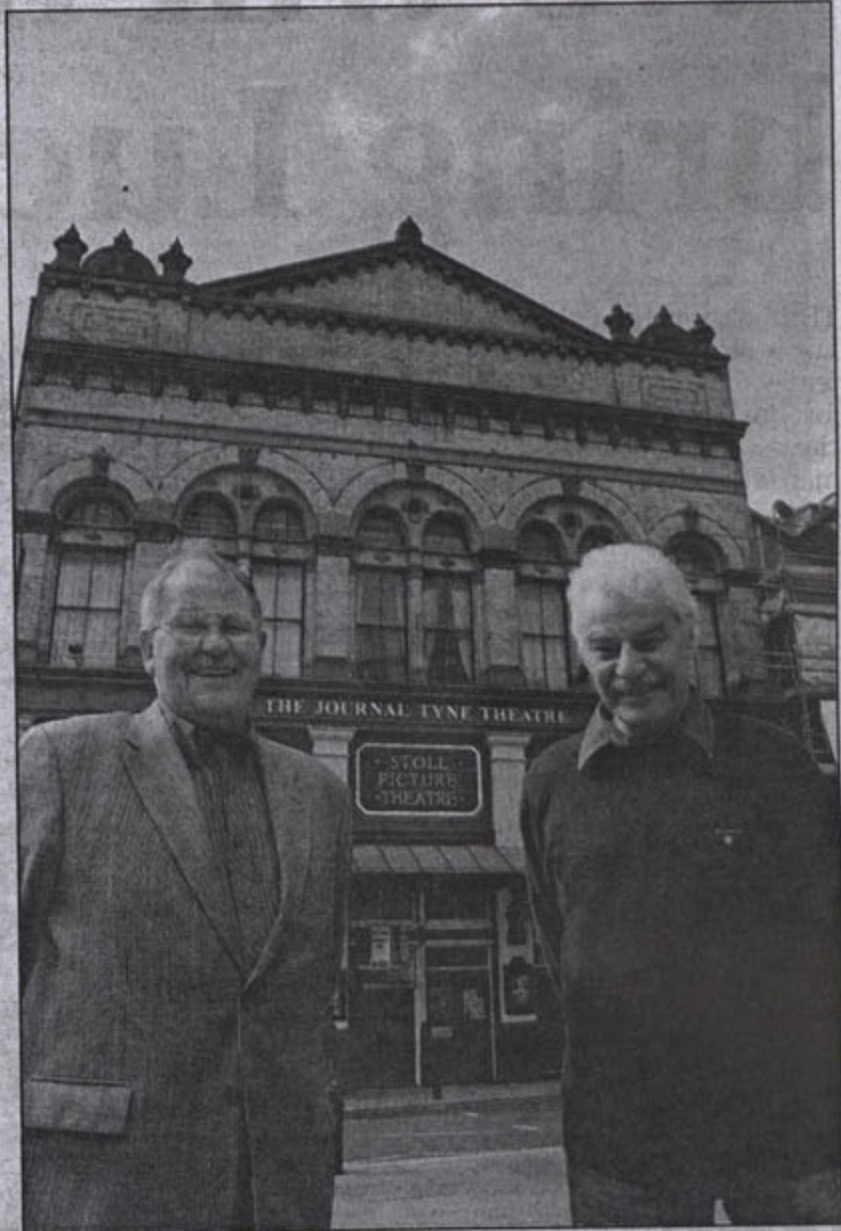
If approval is given by the executive, it is hoped the trust will take over ownership in September.

"This is a major breakthrough," said trust secretary Mike Summersby.

"The main thing is that we are working with the city, and they are on board and making it happen, and recognise the importance of what is such a valuable asset to Newcastle.

"We have really moved forward and we are pretty confident that we can create a real future for the theatre.

"The first step was always acquisition and



SHOW GOES ON: Malcolm Dix and Mike Summersby at The Journal Tyne Theatre.

then it is about securing the fabric of the building so that the jewel which it can sparkle again."

Trust chairman Malcolm Dix said: "At the end of the tunnel the vision is that the building will be restored as a magnificent theatre which people from all over the country and hopefully even the world will come to see.

"The city has been absolutely superb and is very much behind us."

Deputy city council leader David Faulkner said: "There has been a lot of uncertainty in the past but we are confident we now have a route forward for protecting and upgrading

the building. It is a highly significant building of which I am personally very fond, as are a lot of people.

"It has a great history but now it is not just about that history. We have to look to its more certain future and the critical thing is to secure the fabric of the building."

John Miller, city council head of sustainable development, said: "The national Theatres Trust wax lyrical about the building and say it is one of the really important theatres in the whole country."

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'It's what we had hoped for all along'

THE boss of the owners of the theatre, the Adderstone Group, yesterday welcomed the plans.

"It is what we have hoped for all along. We have acted as temporary guardians for the building but we would not have been able to raise the funds required to regenerate the building," said Ian Baggett, managing director of the Jesmond-based developers.

"We are happy to see the theatre restored, and that we have played a part in the latest chapter of its history."

Mr Baggett said that the

THEATRE FACTS

- The theatre was designed by William Parnell and had the backing of prominent Tyneside politician and businessman Joseph Cowen.
- It is the oldest working Victorian theatre in the country.
- It has the most complete set of complex stage machinery of the period.
- In 1892-93 improvements were carried out including the opening of the Winter Gardens Tea Rooms.
- In 1919 specialist architect Frank Matcham converted the building into the Stoll cinema.
- It stayed a cinema until 1974 and re-opened as a theatre three years later.

conversion of adjoining buildings into apartments had enabled the sale of the theatre at a more favourable price to secure its future.

Adderstone also converted the listed Bewick House, the

former port of Tyne HQ in Newcastle, into apartments and is about to begin work on an £18m business park containing 42 office buildings at the former Austen and Pickersgill shipyard site in Sunderland.