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Grand Opera House to undergo major restoration programme to mark 125th anniversary

Work to restore the Grand Opera House, one of Northern Ireland's most iconic buildings, will begin in the New Year as the Theatre announces support from The National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Rescued from demolition in the mid-1970s, restored and reopened in 1980, the Grand Opera House was the first building in Belfast to attain Grade A listed status, and is the only remaining Victorian Theatre in Northern Ireland. Its historic and opulent auditorium is regarded as amongst the architecturally most important theatre interiors in the UK and Ireland.

Starting in January 2020 the ten-month project will focus on the restoration of the auditorium designed by the most prolific theatre architect of the Victorian era, Frank Matcham.

"There's no doubt that Frank Matcham bestowed on Belfast one of his most imaginative and splendid creations," says Ian Wilson, Chief Executive of the Grand Opera House. "The support of The National Lottery Heritage Fund and the project's other funders will protect this unique heritage asset and will secure a thriving theatre for future generations."

"As well as the restoration work the project will install, for the first time, an exhibition telling the Grand Opera House's colourful history. Over 300,000 people attended shows last year. The addition of the historical exhibition will enable the Theatre to open its doors outside performances. This will further affirm the Grand Opera House's place on the world stage as a centre for theatregoing and as a Belfast visitor and tourist attraction."

The project will see the auditorium returned to its former grandeur, confirm the Theatre's unique and significant heritage, and will include:

- The restoration of the auditorium's plasterwork, including the famous and unique elephant heads that support the ornate auditorium boxes, front-of-balcony designs, ceiling décor, paintings and the intricate decorative finishes.
- The repair and restoration of the 1980 glass extension to the Great Victoria Street façade. This area, an important part of the Theatre's history which is currently closed off from the public, will be reopened to allow theatregoers and visitors to enjoy more of the 1895 building.

- Upgrade of the now outdated technical infrastructure including lighting and stage equipment to make them appropriate for modern standards of stage presentation and audience expectation.
- Replacement of the seats throughout the auditorium and of the stage curtains.
- Installation of much-needed modern air handling.
- Upgrading of theatregoer facilities including increased wheelchair spaces, improving access into the auditorium and increasing the number of toilets.
- Reimagining and remodeling the Act II front of house space so that it further supports access to the Theatre and brings alive its heritage and history through the first-ever permanent exhibition celebrating the many famous people who have appeared on its stage. These have included Laurel and Hardy, Luciano Pavarotti, Darcey Bussell, Roger Moore and, of course, May McFettridge, to name but a few!

Each week National Lottery players raise around £30 million for good causes. Thanks to them, The National Lottery Heritage Fund will contribute £4.8 million towards the project costs of £12.2 million with the Grand Opera House Trust committing £4.2 million of its own reserves, carefully garnered over a number of years for this purpose. A further £0.5 million has been secured from a number of charitable trusts and foundations, and the balance will be sought from other sources including a public appeal.

During the ten months of closure the Grand Opera House Trust will present its biggest ever outreach and engagement programme which will include talks, tours, workshops and events across Northern Ireland. The restoration and development work will be completed ahead of the Theatre's 125th anniversary in December 2020 which will start a year-long celebration of the Grand Opera House featuring an unparalleled season of shows plus outreach and community engagement activities.

Over the last 25 years The National Lottery Heritage Fund, formerly the Heritage Lottery Fund, has invested a huge £244 million in over 1,400 projects across Northern Ireland. Historic buildings and monuments, like the Grand Opera House, have benefited from £119 million to help restore, regenerate and safeguard them for the future.

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