

THEATRE ROYAL BURY ST. EDMUNDS

PRESS PACK



"I don't think there is a more beautiful theatre in Great Britain, and I don't think there is a more worthwhile appeal either."

The Hon Nigel Havers

"I have very fond memories of the Theatre Royal, it's a very beautiful theatre, all good luck with the appeal."

Sir Derek Jacobi CBE

"The Georgian theatre was one of the vital periods of our artistic history; and these buildings, with their intimacy and their sense of human proportion are masterpieces. Bury's Theatre Royal is perhaps even more precious than we think."

Sir Peter Hall CBE

"My enthusiasm for the restoration of the Theatre Royal at Bury St Edmunds knows no bounds. The sole surviving example of an English Regency playhouse needs nurturing and supporting both now and in the future. It is a vital piece of our theatrical heritage and I am absolutely thrilled by the proposals to rediscover a repertoire of plays which has too long been absent from English stages."

Stephen Fry

"The Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds holds a unique place in the history of theatre in this country as well as a special place in my heart. The restoration of one of the last Georgian theatres in the country will ensure a vital part of our theatrical heritage will survive for future generations."

Dame Judi Dench CBE

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THEATRE ROYAL RESTORED

The Unique Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds is set to re-open following a restoration and development project worth over £5 million.

The UK's only fully operational surviving Regency theatre has for the last two years been closed for a massive restoration programme. The Theatre Royal will reopen on 11 September 2007 with a production of the classic Georgian nautical melodrama *Black Eyed Susan* by Douglas Jerrold.

Following an extensive research period, architects Levitt Bernstein, in collaboration with Theatre staff and the National Trust, drew up plans to restore the historic building to as close to its original design as possible. In order to accommodate the needs of a modern audience, a separate new wing was also designed to house bars, toilets and other facilities.



In tandem, over the past two years the Theatre's artistic team have been researching the Georgian theatrical canon. Hundreds of plays from the era have survived, and the best of these rediscovered theatrical gems will be performed in the restored venue. This program entitled *Restoring the Repertoire* artistically unifies the building with the work that it produces.

The Theatre will also be running a varied programme of performances in the unique venue. An international co-production with the Goethe Theater, Bad Lauchstädt, near Halle in Germany of Purcell's *King Arthur* will feature in the opening season alongside work from Hull Truck, Northern Broadsides and Ballet Ireland amongst others.

The Georgian repertoire and the theatres for which it was written have largely disappeared from the theatrical landscape. This makes the Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds an extraordinary resource for the cultural community. After its renovation, it will be an accurate physical example of the theatre buildings of the time – one of very few surviving examples, and perhaps more importantly, as a working theatre it will be able to breathe life into a history of plays that has been largely forgotten. It also exists simply as a uniquely intimate playing space – with the decorative grandeur of the Royal Academy, combined with the delicacy of a Georgian drawing room.

The Theatre's ambition is to do for Georgian Theatre what London's Globe Theatre has done for Elizabethan theatre.

The project has been made possible through grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund which provided £1.95 million, the National Trust, Arts Council England, St Edmundsbury Borough Council and Suffolk County Council complemented by massive local support which has seen the project reach its conclusion both on time and on budget.

Robyn Llewellyn, Heritage Lottery Fund Manager in the East of England comments: *"The Theatre Royal is an absolute gem, it has become one of our landmark projects in the East. The extensive restoration will secure the future of the building for decades to come and will give visitors a chance to experience theatre exactly as would have been enjoyed by Georgian audiences when it was first built."*

Judith Shallow, Chair of the Board of Directors: *"Our belief in the importance of this extraordinary building has been completely vindicated by the massive and overwhelming support for the restoration and development of new facilities at the Theatre Royal. The fact that what some would consider to be a 'small, regional theatre' can command this level of support and enthusiasm speaks volumes for its significance historically, artistically and in so many people's hearts and minds."*



NAUTICAL MELODRAMA REVIVED FOR RE-OPENING

To mark the reopening of the newly restored Theatre Royal, a neglected gem of the Georgian theatrical repertoire is revived.



Black Eyed Susan was one of the most enduringly popular plays of the nineteenth century. Hugely entertaining, its reputation as a crowd pleaser full of music, dance, spectacle and humour, belies a more satirical side – dealing, as it does, with how decadent society treats its homecoming war heroes.

Set at the end of the Napoleonic wars it tells the story of Susan whose husband is away at sea, and who falls on hard times. It depicts the increasingly fervent attempts of her crooked landlord to woo her, and her increasingly desperate attempts to keep him at arms length.

The play is the type of work that would have been familiar to everyone of its time; full of bravura, bravado and barnstorming but at the same time a play which begs a significant degree of questioning around sexual mores, female exploitation and crime. For those who want joy and laughter, it delivers in bucket loads with a host of nautical puns to boot.

Consistent with Georgian theatre routine, some performances of *Black Eyed Susan* will be accompanied by a partner piece,

the farce *Box and Cox*, the dramatic inspiration for Gilbert's later operetta *Cox and Box*.

A developing contention is that the best playwrights of the late Georgian period were either women or social reformers who identified that the male-dominated decadent society was not all that the self satisfied men who were writing at the time cracked it up to be.

The excesses of the Regency society by the time of the writing of this play had begun to become intolerable to some and for the first time certain Victorian values were beginning to appear. *Black Eyed Susan* comes right at the cusp of that change and therefore it provides a fascinating look at the society of the time as depicted on its stages.

The Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds has been at great pains not to create a museum piece from this text. Director Colin Blumenau has worked with a group of performers for two years to find a style of performance that allows the Georgian text to come to life for a 21st Century audience. The style combines great spectacle with intense intimacy: it is the newly restored theatre that will show this style to its best advantage.

Notes:

1. A Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds Production, directed by Colin Blumenau and designed by Kit Surrey.
2. *Black Eyed Susan* was written by Douglas Jerrold, and first performed in 1829.
3. Run: September 10th – 22nd 2007, with press night on 11th September at 7.30pm.
4. *Box and Cox* ran as the Theatre Royal's community tour this year, touring to Village Halls and Community Centres across Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire. It met with great success, selling out in many locations.
5. As part of the exploration into the style of performance, a workshop was held in 2006 with professional actors and players from the local community. This proved so successful that the idea was continued forward to the final production, involving six community players (four adults and two children) from the area as part of the chorus.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE THEATRE ROYAL BURY ST. EDMUNDS:



Colin Blumenau Artistic Director

If there are only eight Grade 1 listed theatres in England, then the fabulous Regency playhouse in Bury St Edmunds, which is among that number, must, by definition, be very important indeed. The question that always comes to my mind when contemplating the significance of the building is a simple one: What makes it so important?

It is, in architectural terms, a beautiful but minor work of nationally renowned architect William Wilkins. It is not a building associated with significant national or international events. It is not even a theatre which, with the exception of the world première of *Charley's Aunt*, has been notable for important theatrical milestones.

It is a high quality example of a type of theatre which, to a greater or lesser degree, existed in most market towns in most counties in England during the early part of the nineteenth century. Indeed Wilkins himself built theatres in Ipswich and Norwich as well as in Bury St Edmunds whilst his father built an earlier version in Cambridge. Throughout most of its early life, then, the Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds was a fairly unremarkable building.

But then time passed. And the passage of time can have a remarkable effect on things. As the early nineteenth century gave way to the Victorian era, theatres were knocked down, destroyed by fire and abandoned in favour of the grandiose more spectacular constructions of those latter years. And with the destruction of the Georgian and Regency theatres this country lost far more than bricks and mortar.

The disappearance of the buildings heralded the demise of the whole English dramatic repertoire of the early nineteenth century. Plays which had been crowd pleasers and a staple part of the repertoire for many years and which were dependent for their success on the physical elements which existed in the earlier theatres, disappeared from view. And with them went a whole style of acting and theatrical presentation.

The Georgian period really is the black hole of dramatic history in this country. It is not difficult to trace drama's timeline from Ancient Greece right through to the English Restoration. Thereafter there is a sizeable gap until we discover the work of Wilde and his contemporaries which leads on to the proliferation of twentieth century drama.

It is the existence of this black hole which makes our building so special. **The Theatre Royal is the only Regency theatre left standing in this country.** It is the only Regency theatre capable of being restored to a position where, at last, it will be possible to investigate the repertoire, style of acting and theatrical presentation used by the practitioners of the early nineteenth century. Our hope is that the restoration of the building will facilitate the restoration of the repertoire.

And what will it be like? Currently, when an actor stands on the stage of the Theatre Royal, he or she will undergo an experience which is unlike any other on any stage in this country. One is pulled inexorably from behind the proscenium towards the auditorium. It feels almost like the auditorium itself demands that the actor step out from the security of the stage and join the audience in the truly shared and democratic space which is the forestage. It is this sharing of the experience of theatre which makes the Georgian theatre so unique.

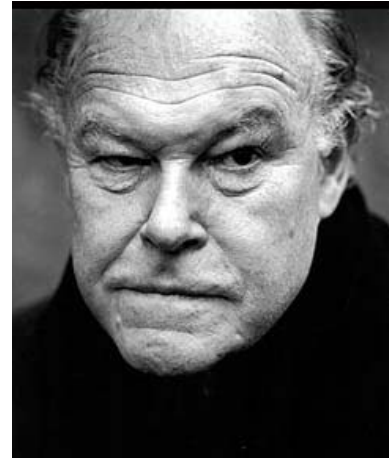
Once the building is restored we will at last be able to present the repertoire of the period in a way it was always intended to be presented. This is what is so important about the Theatre Royal.

TIMOTHY WEST CBE

Patron of the Restoration Appeal

It is not often, in one's lifetime, that one is fortunate enough to be associated with a project of real significance. During my career I have worked in many fine theatres across the country, indeed the world. Yet the Theatre Royal in Bury St Edmunds holds an unrivalled place in my thoughts.

It is true that it is the sole Regency Theatre left. It is also true that it is the only theatre left which was built by National Gallery architect William Wilkins. It is arguable that it represents a point in time when the prosaic architecture of the early English theatre tradition succumbed to the influential grace, beauty and elegance of the Renaissance-inspired continental theatres.



The combination of these elements has resulted in the creation of a playhouse of perfect classical dimension and proportion. It is a place where the actor and the audience have an extraordinarily intimate relationship.

This building, however, is far more than an important piece of architecture. Once restored this fabulous theatre will be able to achieve something of real significance. For the last two years the Theatre Royal's Restoring the Repertoire project has been running alongside the building restoration project.

What has traditionally become the 'missing link' of British drama is beginning to yield up some of its best kept secrets. Works by hitherto scarcely known Georgian writers such as Elisabeth Inchbald [herself born in Bury St Edmunds] Hannah Cowley, Thomas Holcroft and Douglas Jerrold have met with enormous enthusiasm when presented to the public in the form of rehearsed readings.

The success of this research project will see the Georgian repertoire return to its rightful stage. Its rightful stage being the theatre that was built at the same time this repertoire was being written.

And what better place to learn about a previous era and how it contributes to our understanding of the present time than through its Theatre in all its glory; architectural, artistic and downright good fun!

Timothy West CBE

KEY FACTS

- The Theatre Royal was built in 1819 by William Wilkins (architect of National Gallery)
- The Theatre Royal is the sole, surviving working theatre from the Regency period in the UK
- The Theatre Royal is one of only eight Grade 1 listed theatres in England
- The Theatre Royal is the only working theatre in the National Trust's portfolio of properties
- Ever since its early days, the Theatre Royal has premièred ground breaking work, ranging from *Charley's Aunt* in 1892 through to, more recently, a number of productions by Out of Joint Theatre Company.
- Originally room for audiences of up to 800, the Theatre Royal now has a capacity of 360.
- Prior to restoration the Theatre Royal was attracting annual audiences of 80,000 (representing 76% capacity across the year)
- The restoration of the Theatre Royal began in October 2005.
- The Theatre Royal is due to re-open in September 2007
- The total amount raised for the project is anticipated to be £5.3 million.
- The project remains on schedule and to budget.

TIMELINE

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| September 2004 | Project green lighted |
| September 2005 | Theatre Royal closes with world première performances of <i>Sherlock Holmes: the Athenaeum Ghoul</i> |
| October 2005 | Builders move in |
| December 2005 | Medieval well discovered in the auditorium |
| January 2006 | First stone of new building is laid |
| April 2006 | New auditorium floor laid |
| August 2006 | New barrel vaulted foyer roof is raised |
| September 2006 | Decorative scheme agreed |
| October 2006 | Seating approved |
| November 2006 | Ceiling painted |
| January 2007 | £5million target reached |
| 8 January 2007 | Opening date announced |
| 16 April 2007 | Repossession of building |
| 8 May 2007 | Launch of reopening season programme and tickets on sale |
| June 2007 | Installation of seating |
| End of June 2007 | Installation of heritage display/interpretation scheme |
| July 2007 | Commissioning of building systems |
| August 2007 | Trial runs |
| 11 September 2007 | First night of <i>Black Ey'd Susan</i> |

NEW AT THE THEATRE ROYAL

Restoring the Repertoire – Combining the historic building with contemporary practice

Currently a large proportion of the Georgian repertoire remains forgotten, having disappeared along with the venues it was meant to be performed in. The project will research and preserve the Georgian repertoire for future generations.

Alongside a contemporary programme, the Theatre Royal will feature occasional productions from the Georgian repertoire, selecting the best works from the hundreds which have survived.

The Theatre Royal will be the only theatre in the world recreating this lost dramatic repertoire. **The aspiration is to be the Regency Theatre which can do for the Georgian repertoire what The Globe has done for Elizabethan theatre.** This will incorporate productions of hitherto neglected texts accompanied by a range of educational and explanatory activity.

In addition, the Theatre is developing new European partnerships as a member of PERSPECTIV, an association of historic theatres in Europe. A fruitful artistic partnership with the German Goethe Theater in Bad Lauchstädt has already been established and there are plans to host the international PERSPECTIV congress in September 2007.

More information is available at www.perspectiv.eu.

Education

Education and Outreach work has always been important at the Theatre Royal. Previously combined under one banner, Artistic, Heritage and Community Education programmes will now have individual departments. This will increase the offer of outreach work we can provide.

We will also be developing our work with and for the elderly and those experiencing high levels of social deprivation through our relationship with the County Council's Social Services.

Heritage tourism

As well as attracting new audiences for the performance activity which takes place on its stage, the restoration project presents an exciting opportunity for the Theatre Royal to develop its role as a heritage attraction.

Regular guided tours of the building will be offered throughout the main theatre season. The Theatre Royal is also currently working with many other local tourist attractions to raise the profile of the town's rich Georgian heritage. Using the Theatre's reopening in September as a focus, there will be an on-going programme of Georgian themed events in the town during 2007.

Visit www.georgiangem.com for more information.

New facilities

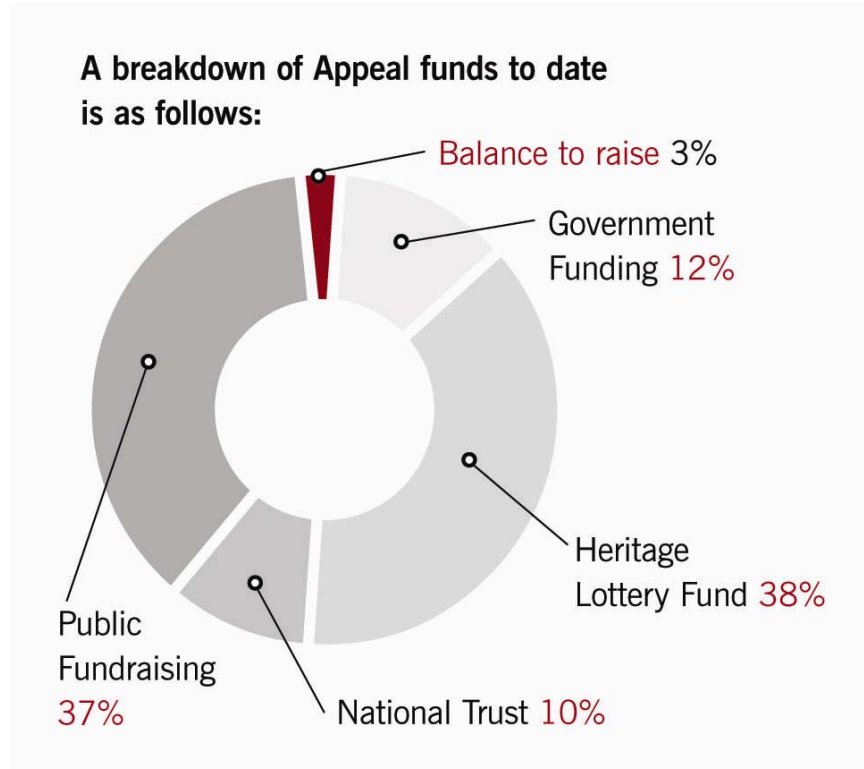
- A new foyer development adjacent to the existing site will provide greater circulation space as well as extra bar and new catering facilities.
- The foyer development will also house elements of the Theatre's heritage displays.
- The installation of new air-conditioning and heating systems will greatly improve the comfort of audiences in the Theatre's auditorium.
- The existing bar in the Upper Circle will be re-configured and re-decorated
- The Theatre will also be equipped to cater for corporate events.
- There will be a greater number of toilet facilities for audiences.

The new facilities will also allow the Theatre to expand its current commercial activities; new ventures will include using the venue as a top class conferencing facility.

FUNDING FOR THE RESTORATION APPEAL

The Theatre Royal is owned by Greene King PLC and leased to The National Trust.

It is operated by The Theatre Royal Management Board Ltd (charity no. 242977).
The Theatre Royal, Westgate Street, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk IP33 1QR



Funding for the Restoration Appeal has come from the Heritage Lottery Fund (38%). Local government (12%) and The National Trust (10%).

Of the remaining 40% of matched public funds to be found, substantial contributions have been made by charitable trusts including The Theatre Royal Foundation (£200,000) and The Friends of the Theatre Royal (two separately constituted charities associated with the theatre).

The balance of the public money has been raised through initiatives including 'The Royal Million', a membership scheme of 1000 members each giving £1000 (£400,000 to date); fundraising events, celebrity galas and dinners co-ordinated by a Development Committee chaired by Sir David Rowland.

Under £100,000 remains to be raised and it is anticipated that a Restoration Appeal total of £5.3 million will be reached and celebrated at a Gala Dinner in the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition on 9 July 2007.