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Jenny Mackenzie:

Stage set for old dame's revival

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By Jenny Mackenzie

THERE's a lady waiting in the wings, just about bursting to get back on centre stage and do her thing. Well used to the limelight, she knows that she can cope with all the attention and fuss. Not only could she cope, she would love every minute of it and thrive.

With her friends doing everything they can to help make the dream happen, a trust was formed in 2004 to support her, and all are working hard to bring the lady in question, Leith Theatre, back to life.

Just lately there's a tingle in the air and

ADVERTISEMENT

a sense of pre-performance excitement that can't be ignored

This re-birthing idea for the building which was once known as Leith Town Hall has been around a long time, but lately it's gaining a more dramatic momentum. Has it reached its tipping point yet? Perhaps not quite, but it's teetering on the edge, and could move towards the point of no return very soon. There are a number of factors involved . . .

Hoping that it can help to tip the balance is the Cockburn Conservation Trust (CCT), a charity dedicated to the conservation and promotion of Scotland's architectural heritage. With more than 30 years of experience in restoration projects, and one of a larger group of conservation trusts with an impressive list of achievements, CCT is pulling out the stops to make this work.

The biggest recent step is an application that has just been submitted to the Arts Fund Prize for Edinburgh, a much-coveted £3 million donation made anonymously to the city for a chosen arts project. With the stage one application safely submitted, CCT hopes it will be successful in this first-round bid. A decision on this first stage will be announced later this month. There are fingers crossed all round, and a sense of anticipation.

At the same time CCT is working with Leith Theatre Trust to explore options for other funding sources. Altogether, a total of £8m would be needed to undertake the capital scheme presented for the Arts Fund Prize. Officer Catherine Kidd says that CCT is talking now to potential users of the site. "Both The Fringe and Edinburgh International Festival are interested," she says, "as well as Leith Festival, Leith FM and Leith School of Art."

A £35,000 options appraisal will provide the owner of the building, Edinburgh City Council, with information on the best way of making use of the site. Though money is still being raised to fund this part of the project, so far CCT is on target to complete the options appraisal by the end of the year.

Adding fuel to the fire is the artistic community of Leith, growing too big for the current facilities in the area

and needing a place that they can at last call home. This year Leith Festival was bursting at the seams with 150 events held in 50 venues, a vibrant Gala day, despite a downpour, and a sense that this festival is really coming of age.

Since artistic director John-Paul McGroarty became involved in 2001 the festival has included a much fuller programme of events, creating what he calls "a critical mass of artists and musicians with audiences".

The community radio station Leith FM, which came into being in 2002 to support the festival, has since also taken on a life of its own. With another three years of its licence to be completed, it has performers and community groups lining up to take part and raise their profile. Leith FM would love to broadcast from the Leith Theatre site.

Speaking on Radio Scotland last week, architect, Theatre Trust member and secretary to Leith Central Community Council Roland Reid provided further insight into why Edinburgh needs to get behind this project.

"In 1920, the Town Hall complex, including the theatre, was gifted by the people of Edinburgh to Leith by an act of Parliament," he said.

"It would be good to see that same sense of city-wide commitment to this unique building revived today." Roland hopes that the Category B-listed building, with its rare and beautiful art deco style, will recapture the imagination and hearts of theatre lovers everywhere.

The 1,500 capacity theatre, which has hosted the Kinks and the Rolling Stones in the past, could be converted into a number of smaller performance spaces more suited to the diverse range of performers interested in the space today.

Legendary music manager Bruce Findlay, once interested in the site as a recording studio, thinks that Leith has earned the right to have a theatre of its own once more. "This is such a multicultural and vibrant area," he says. "It should have a creative space of its own."

The building was damaged in the Second World War and only reopened in 1961. It was used until the 1980s for a cultural events, but closed in 1983.

In 2004 the city council considered selling the theatre to generate funds for existing operating theatres in other parts of the city, such as the King's. But activists insisted "this theatre belongs to the people of Leith", the newly formed Trust conducted a feasibility study and the council agreed to hold fire for a while. Initial ambitious plans for an iconic tower, hotels and apartments nearby have been scaled back to a more modest focus on the current site. Supporters are growing in number all the time. The smelling salts are out, the lady is ready and waiting to be revived.

Break a leg Leith Theatre, you can do it.

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