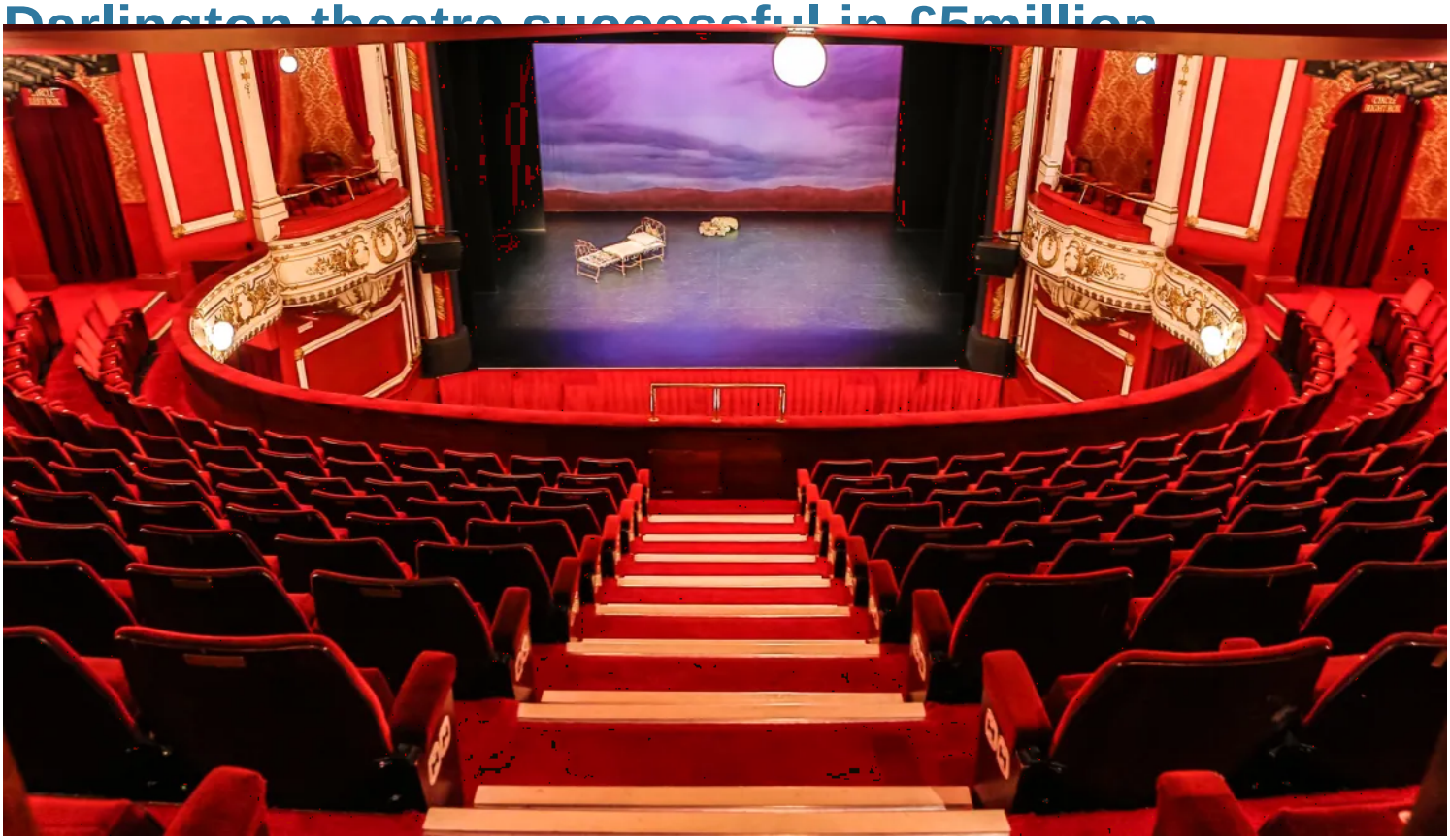
Darlington theatre successful in £5million



Interior of Darlington Civic Theatre

The stage is set for a show stopping future for Darlington's Civic Theatre which has received initial support for a £5million bid from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

It's planned that the £5m funding will be used as part of an £8m project to transform and restore the Grade II listed building to its former Edwardian glory. This includes the restoration of the front exterior of the theatre, the creation of a stunning vaulted bar in the former water tower, improved seating and better disabled access including a lift.

The ambitious plans also include a new education centre and a gallery offering a changing programme of theatre related exhibitions.

There will also be major improvements to backstage areas which will bring the theatre up to modern standards and allow it to accommodate larger touring companies and bigger shows. The remaining money needed for the project will be raised through the restoration ticket levy and through a continued programme of fundraising.

The theatre enjoyed further good news earlier in the year when it received £1.5million from Arts Council England in a joint bid with young people's theatre company, Theatre Hullabaloo, to build a children's theatre next door. This will see a total arts investment in this part of Darlington of £11million.

Councillor Nick Wallis, Darlington Bough Council's Cabinet Member for Leisure and Local Environment, says: "The investment is the biggest in the theatre's history since it opened its doors in 1907. We're committed to making Darlington a place where the arts matter and where arts and creativity play an important part in the town's economic success, through this HLF grant we're well on the way to delivering this."

Lynda Winstanley, Darlington Civic Theatre Director, says: "This is incredible news and will help us to ensure this well-loved venue can meet the expectations of modern audiences and touring theatre companies. The theatre stands on the threshold of a new era; coupled with the development of Theatre Hullaballoo next door, this is a unique opportunity for supporters old and new, to join with us to take the theatre forward into the next chapter of its incredible history."

Ivor Crowther, Head of HLF North East, says: "For over a century people have flocked to the historic Darlington Civic Theatre to enjoy memorable evenings of entertainment. We thought this was an impressive project and have given the initial go-ahead for restoration plans to be progressed. It will also be a great opportunity to share stories of the many colourful characters who walked the boards here and brought a little bit of magic into people's everyday lives."

Work is expected to start in Summer 2016.

Notes to editors

The history of Darlington's Civic Theatre
Darlington Civic Theatre is a much loved, iconic landmark for the town, at the heart of the Darlington's cultural offer and its sense of community. It is a Grade II listed Edwardian Theatre, the most complete surviving example of theatre specialists Owen and Ward of Birmingham, who developed a unique architectural style which the Civic Theatre epitomises, where the external elevations incorporate imposing double flanking towers of brick dressed with superb decorative terracotta.

The story of the Civic Theatre captures the imagination of everyone who visits and is peopled by unforgettable characters and extraordinary events both on and off stage. The theatre opened in 1907 as The New Hippodrome & Palace Theatre of Varieties. The founding managing director, Signor Rino Pepi was a Florentine born, former protean (quick change artist), who had performed for Queen Victoria, but gave up his career at the height of his success to create an empire of theatres across the North of England. Pepi's career reflected the trajectory of theatre in that era, one of boom and bust. By 1927 his once successful empire of theatres had dwindled to just one venue, his beloved 'Hip' in Darlington. Sadly the glamorous and enigmatic Pepi, passed away on 27 November 1927, on the day of his greatest triumph, the appearance at the theatre of the ballerina Anna Pavlova for a flying matinee. The Civic Theatre is the sole surviving working theatre of his empire.

The British Isles once boasted a profusion of music halls and theatres, however by the 1950s 840 of the 1,000 theatres operating before WWI had closed down. The Civic Theatre is one of the brave and beautiful survivors, having fought off competition from first cinema and then television and having navigated its way through the inevitable ups and downs of the theatre industry.

It is the only traditional working proscenium theatre between Leeds and York in the South, Sunderland in the East, Newcastle in the North and Lancaster in the West.

Further information

Contact Kirsty McNaught, Darlington Borough Council's Communications Unit on 01325 406 058 or communications@darlington.gov.uk.