

Some thoughts on the Future of the Friends of Alexandra Palace Theatre

We believe the Friends of Alexandra Palace Theatre (FAPT) has been a very successful organisation. It has kept the knowledge and awareness of the Theatre alive in the public eye, organised events, maintained a strong membership over many years, raised funds, researched the Theatre's fascinating history, helped to make the case for the regeneration funding and most recently made invaluable input to the new design, functionality and artistic direction of the Theatre.

Leading up to the Lottery grant, it has been similar to Friends organisations for many abandoned and derelict sites around the country, keeping the faith, awareness and optimistic that some windfall might come along to renew or reinvigorate the building. The Friends of Copped Hall in Epping come to mind - a derelict and abandoned historic building where a dedicated group of volunteers have struggled to maintain awareness of the building, organising occasional events, fighting off developers and slowly trying to protect and rebuild the structure.

However we have to accept that the Lottery Grant is a game changer. It changes everything. We will never be the same Friends organisation after the Theatre opens. Our role will change. But to what?

When the APT reopens it will be one of the 20 largest Theatres in London and at present there are a number of artistic and programming directions it might take depending on a variety of factors. There is no recent history or culture of Theatre management at the Palace, but there is a successful and well-organised commercial arm and the extent to which the Theatre becomes aligned or integrated with the commercial arm will be relevant.

Theatre Friends schemes are very commonplace. They can be extremely sophisticated such as the Royal Opera House and National Theatre schemes, and in general they are completely controlled by the Theatre. Arts organisations value their Friends organisations as they form a core and supportive audience, easily reached, they act as ambassadors for the venue, sometimes act as voluntary front-of house staff and generate significant income from subscriptions in return for perks such as early booking, discounted tickets, open dress rehearsals etc.

In the coming months, Alexandra Palace will be making important decisions about how they plan to programme and operate the Theatre, alongside the other areas being redeveloped in the East wing and how they will all coexist and integrate. The Friends are heartened that there appears to be a genuine interest in establishing a 'cultural' agenda for these areas. Contact is being made with major cultural organisations and we hope this will lead to an exciting opening season.

If APT becomes a Theatre in the tradition of the major funded theatres, promoting shows, equipped with key lighting and sound, marketing and selling tickets etc, then the logical step would be for the Palace in time to want to introduce its own 'Friends' or membership scheme. In that case, our current membership would probably favour the Palace's membership scheme as they would be offering a range of benefits - priority booking etc. In this situation, FAPT might still play an important role but with a reduced scope, probably focusing on maintaining interest in and access to the historical and heritage side of the Theatre, but still with ability to comment on and influence programming and community usage.

If APT were to become a de facto part of the Commercial arm, an important function

for FAPT would be to monitor and try to influence the programming, work to make the venue available to community groups, try to maintain access to and information about the Victorian stage machinery, help to run historic tours and continue research into the history of the Theatre.

It is too early to predict what role FAPT can play in the future of the Theatre. Much depends on the direction the Palace goes in the early programming, staffing and management decisions they make. Crucial to community use will also be the provision of basic lighting and sound equipment as without this it is unlikely a community group could afford to present their work. Similarly Community use will also depend on a realistic and discounted hiring pricing structure

In the meantime, we still have an important role to play in influencing these decisions. We can continue to push for maintaining awareness and access to the unique historical elements of the building, such as the stage machinery. We can continue to assist the Theatre in its fundraising efforts. We can suggest and recommend appropriate staffing for the Theatre to achieve its artistic objectives. We can stress the importance of community access to the theatre and check that this is not compromised by high hire charges or lack of technical equipment. And of course we can continue our efforts to promote awareness of and interest in the Theatre as its opening draws near.

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