

Pictures reveal unsung heroes of

◆ Unique portraits capture some of the backstage workers in favourite spots at the historic venue in Edinburgh as refurbishment continues

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A visit there is usually one of the focal points of the festive season in Edinburgh for thousands of families.

But "The Grand Old Lady of Leven Street" is very much the city's sleeping beauty at the moment.

The King's Theatre, which is usually packed out for its annual Christmas panto for weeks on end, is out of the picture for the second successive festive season while a long-awaited overhaul is being carried out.

However a new light has been cast upon the historic venue which has played host to the likes of Sir Laurence Olivier, Dame Margot

Fonteyn, Maria Callas, Sir Ian McKellen, Juliette Binoche and Dame Maggie Smith since it opened its doors in 1906.

The lid has been lifted on a major photography project created to explore the "flamboyant character" of the King's at a key turning-point in her history, as well as honour the "huge supporting cast" of backstage and behind-the-scenes staff who were working in the venue in the run-up to its revamp getting underway – and those involved in the biggest refurbishment in its history.

Previously unseen images by Edinburgh-based photographer Anneleen Lindsay, who has been given special access to the King's for the last two years, have

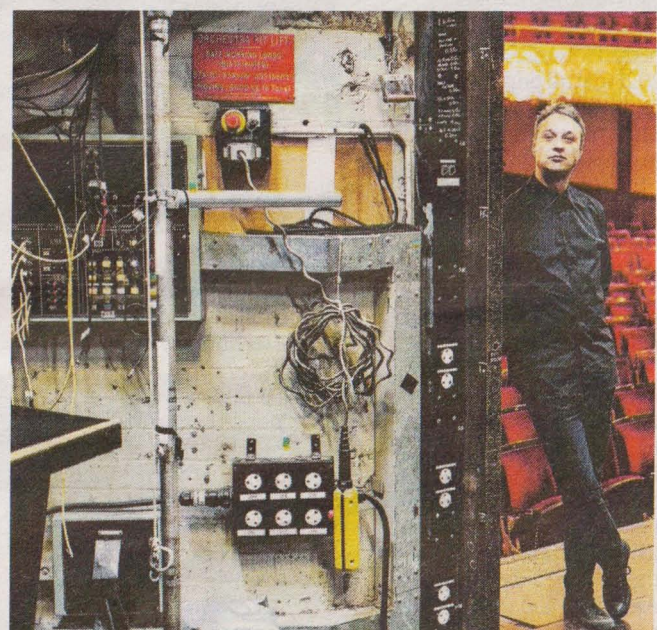
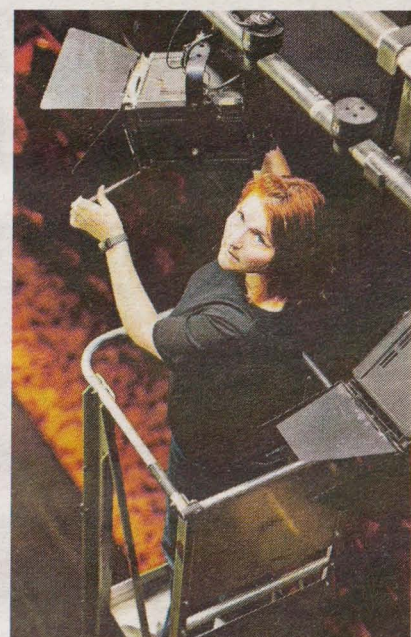
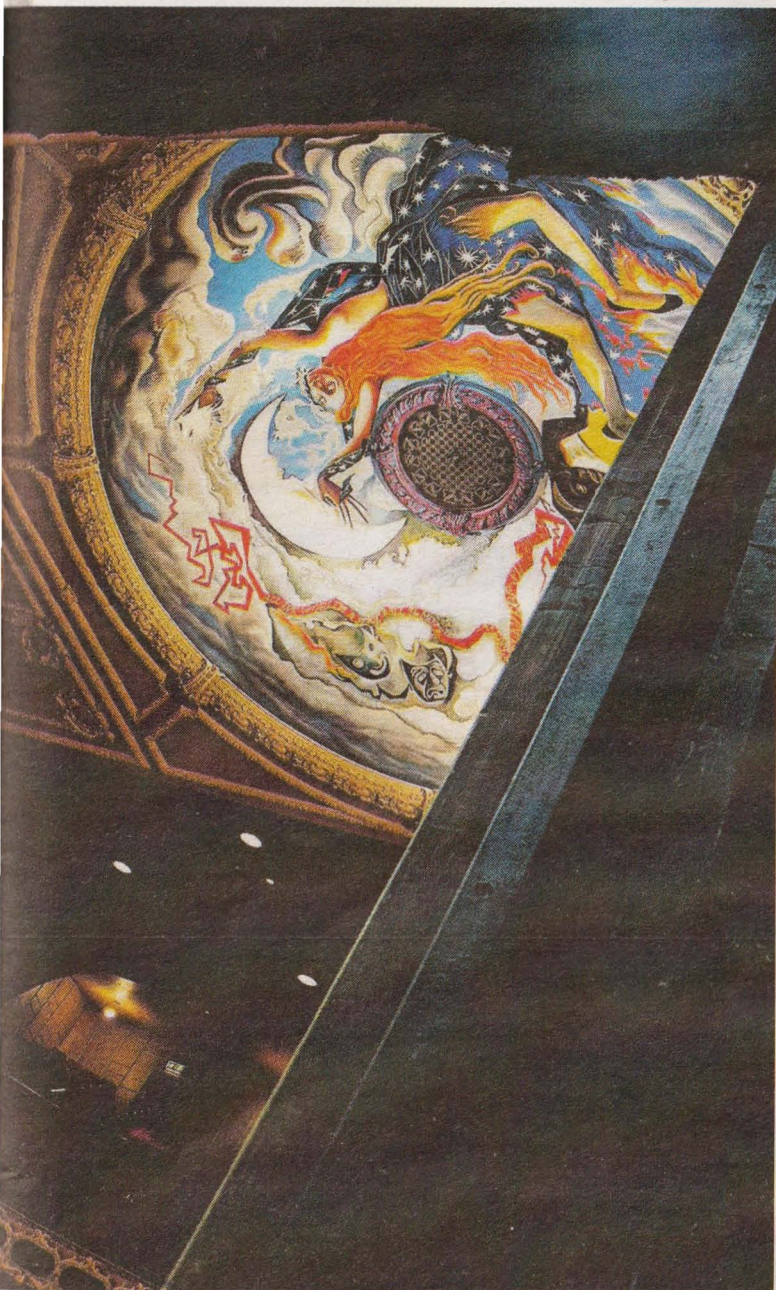
been released. Ms Lindsay said: "My husband Chris has worked on the stage door at the King's over the years, so I had been backstage before and knew that it had a lot of character."

"I knew there was a plan for the King's to be renovated so I asked if I could have access to the backstage areas. They realised it would work well for the King's to have it documented prior to the work getting underway. I wanted to approach the project as if the building was a character itself and to try to get a real sense of the atmosphere of the place, but also document all the people backstage who are not normally seen."

"I did a series of 29 portraits and asked each person to choose a particular spot that



Scenic artist and technician Jim Cursiter sits behind the paint frame on the fly floor at the back of the theatre



King's Theatre as it is revamped

either meant something to them or was a favourite. They all chose different places, which was amazing.

"I got to spend a bit of time with each of them. They were full of anecdotes – some of them had literally worked there for decades."

Ms Lindsay's images show staff working at the venue as it emerged from pandemic restrictions and staged its final run of shows before the start of work on the long-awaited revamp, which was delayed for several months during an eleventh-hour campaign to bridge an £8.9 million funding gap caused by the rising cost of the revamp.

She said: "I started doing photos in January 2022 and was in several times when the final shows were there, until

the Edinburgh International Festival show in August, and came in to do some of the final portraits after the theatre had closed to the public, when there were fewer and fewer people working there. The project was initially just about the lead up to the work starting on the renovation, but it wasn't actually certain that the King's would be reopening.

"It was only a couple of days before the keys were due to be handed over to the council that they got the final funding. It was such a relief. There was definitely a sense when I was taking some of the photos that it could all have been lost forever. They started the work quite quickly after that and I was able to watch things being gradually dismantled."

The stage and backstage

From left: Stage door supervisor Stephen Hood; maintenance officer Ali McInnes; lighting technician Heather McLuskey; a view of the King's; stage door receptionist Ross Howie with a discarded crow prop; head of stage Iain 'Puggy' Gillespie; Moira McInnes; head of stage Tony King

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areas at the King's have been completely removed to make way for new facilities which will allow the venue to attract and stage more shows in future.

Behind its facade, the upper level of the venue is being completely revamped, with the back of the upper circle removed to create a new space for school groups, activities, workshops and events.

Elsewhere, historic fire exits are being replaced with new stairwells and lifts, which will open up access to every level of the King's, which is expected to open to the public every day for the first time with the addition of an extension for a new cafe-bar.

Ms Lindsay added: "It's felt like a real privilege to get the opportunity to work on

the project because I've had time to really explore and get under the skin of the King's. But it's very strange for taking photographs now, as every time I go in something has changed.

"I'm very conscious of the fact that a lot of the staff I took photographs of, who had worked there for years, aren't getting to see it at the moment. Everything is obviously very tightly-controlled and safety conscious.

"The first few times I went in after the work started I was a bit sad. Although the backstage areas were in dire need of being updated, they had so much character. But, having been back a few more times, I have not really felt as emotional about it in that way because the changes are

so interesting. I think when people first come in off the street they might not notice many changes, but they will make an amazing difference in how the King's can be used in future."

The annual panto at the King's is in a temporary home at the Festival Theatre for the second of three years away. Its last full run at the King's was in 2019-20 due to the impact of Covid restrictions, which brought an early halt to the comeback run of the show.

Ms Lindsay said: "I was a bit gutted as I had hoped to get backstage during the last panto before the King's shut, but I didn't manage to, as the show was shut down early. I hope to keep going in over the next couple of years and would love to get backstage when the panto is back in there again."