

'No expense spared' for York's Grand Opera opening

By JOE HOULIHAN

A NEW theatre opening in York later this year is hoping to attract both big productions and big audiences through a combination of old-fashioned charm and state-of-the-art facilities.

The Grand Opera House, which is being restored at a cost of four million pounds after years of neglect, aims to woo top notch shows and stars with sophisticated staging equipment, luxury dressing rooms and a high profile marketing onslaught.

Developers India Pru, based in Oxfordshire, have turned the decaying shell of a theatre into a period copy of the original, with art deco furnishings including carpets, wallpaper and plasterwork based on records of original designs.

The Grand Opera House - which was known as the SS Empire for a number of years before India Pru reverted to the original name - is due to open in late September with Christopher Newell, a close associate of Sir Peter Hall, as artistic director.

The venue has attracted no grant support or promises of subsidy despite being a Grade II listed building, but it is intended to be self-financing through box office success and a range of enterprising commercial ventures.

These include using the theatre for conferences and keeping a shop, bars and restaurant open during the day. India Pru boss David Holland said it was intended to keep the building in active commercial use for 18 hours a day, every day.

With four bars, air conditioning, a paging system and a music system for the foyer, the Grand can realistically boast of being one of the best equipped venues in the region.

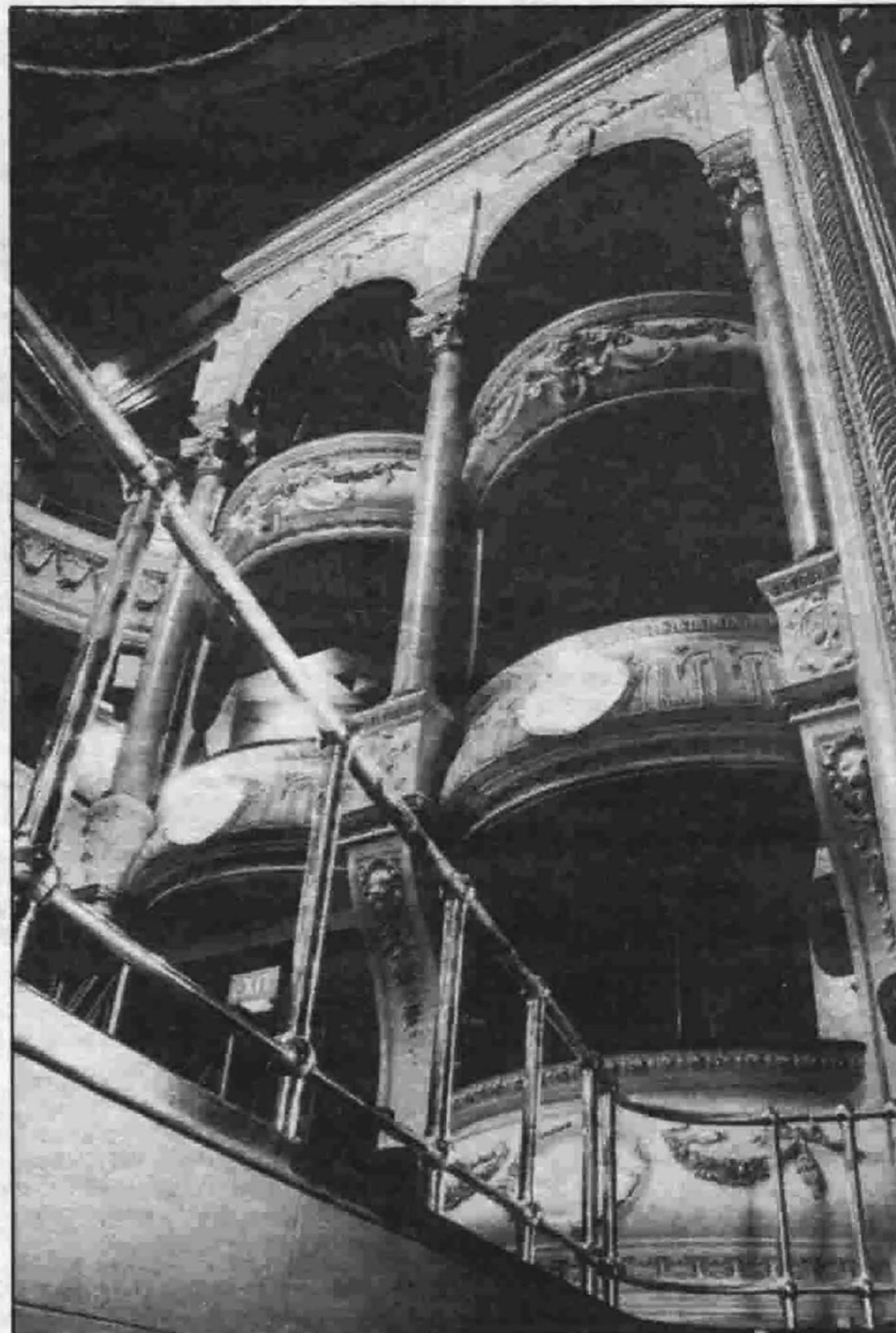
The theatre will seat around 1,100 people including 269 in the dress circle and 323 in the upper circle. The boxes, which offer excellent views of the stage, hold a further 40 and have been completely refitted.

An unusual feature is the paint bridge which still links the two sides of the stage at the rear. Many of the walls and columns have been strengthened to cope with the new demands being made on the building.

For performers there is the attraction of six roomy dressing rooms, each with a shower, offering dressing space for a total of 32. For bigger casts some of the expansive office space will be used as ad hoc changing rooms for a further ten people.

Holland said: "No expense has been spared in making the Grand Opera House into a beautiful, well-equipped theatre. We are at the stage of planning our forthcoming programmes and we now want to hear from production companies who want to be a part of this wonderful story."

The venue will stage only professional shows and acts and for no more than six days at a run. Sundays will be reserved for one-off top name acts including comedy and music.



The restored interior of the former SS Empire