



Stars raise alarm over King's Theatre as £7m revamp funding gap is revealed

Stage and screen stars Brian Cox, Alan Cumming and Gabriel Byrne are joining forces to help save a multi-pound revamp of one of Edinburgh's most historic festival venues after it emerged the theatre is facing a huge funding gap in the face of soaring costs.

The £25 million project to overhaul the King's Theatre has been thrown into doubt after its operator admitted the final bill may be up to 30 per cent higher, due to soaring inflation and the war in Ukraine.

The UK and Scottish governments, as well as the city council, are all expected to be asked to help bail out the project, amid fears the theatre "could close forever" unless more than £7m is secured within the next few months.

International Festival director Fergus Linehan has warned the city could miss out on theatre, dance and opera productions without the venue.

The soaring costs of the King's overhaul, which are said to have put the future of the building "in peril", are the latest blow to the project, work on which was supposed to begin last year before being put off for 12 months by the Covid pandemic.

Capital Theatres, which runs the venue on behalf of the city council, said it could not afford to take the financial risk of starting work on the project unless the new funding gap was bridged.

The King's would be opened to the public every day for the first time under its proposed overhaul, which is proposed to include a brand new stage to help the venue attract world-class opera, theatre and drama productions which currently bypass the venue.

Cramped and run-down dressing rooms, wardrobe and "green room" areas are also due to be transformed under the project, which was instigated to try to ensure the King's does not close as a result of "a sudden failure of infrastructure or through a more gradual reduction in attendances".

The project also includes a "learning studio" for schools and community groups, a new box office, two new bars, a street level cafe/bar, and the venue's first lifts to improve access to every level of the building.

Work was finally due to start within weeks on the project, which has been pursued for more than a decade, with the 106-year-old theatre due to close for nearly two years at the end of this month's summer festivals.

The Scottish Government confirmed £6.5m for the King's overhaul in 2021, while a £4m pledge from the city council has been in place for several years. It is hoped that extra funding for the King's could be secured through Edinburgh's latest bid for up to £50m in "levelling up" funding from the UK Government.

Fiona Gibson, chief executive of Capital Theatres, said: "We were due to start work in September, but in June it became clear that the costs of construction had increased by 20-30 per cent for the same project with the same scope.

"We had raised just under the £25m we had originally budgeted for and had launched a campaign to raise the final £300,000. It is a shovel-ready project."

Cox has been an honorary patron of the campaign to secure the future of the Kings for the past five years, while Cumming launched his new Robert Burns-inspired dance theatre show Burn at the venue earlier this month.

Byrne, one of Ireland's leading actors, is starring this week at the King's in Walking With Ghosts, the final show booked into the theatre before its planned revamp.

Cox said: "It's really unfortunate that this has happened as it has put us in a very difficult position.

"The King's is the people's theatre in Edinburgh and is a beautiful building, but it really needs work. It has been systematically ignored over the years.

"We want this place functioning, but it is not safe for performers at the moment. There is a big problem with the infrastructure backstage, which is what's important for the artists.

"We really need to save the King's for future generations. It would be a major loss and disgraceful if it had to close.

“It is tragic that Covid hit when it did. Everything was in place, we were all ready to go and if it hadn't been for Covid we would have been there by now.

“The Scottish Government has already given the project incredible support.



“We really do need the UK Government to step in now, it's as simple as that. We cannot afford to lose the time and energy. I can see real risks in the current climate.

“We need to get going on the project ASAP. We can't hang around. If we do we are in danger of closing this place. It's a very serious situation at the moment.”

Cumming said: “The King's is integral to the cultural health and wellbeing of the people of Edinburgh, and indeed Scotland.

"It brings us together in the winter via the annual pantomime and it welcomes citizens of the world every August.

“This year, I was back at the King's with Burn and it reminded me how much I love this old beauty. “But she could do with a facelift and a pretty thorough makeover. Please, urgent funding is needed to help preserve the magic of the King's.”

Byrne said: “I've always thought of a theatre as being somewhat like a church. It has a spiritual connotation and there's energy trapped inside it of all the people who've sat here and laughed and have been touched and have been changed by what they've seen on the stage.

“That's why a theatre is incredibly important to a city. In fact, it's the spiritual lifeblood of the city. Anything that can be done to preserve the King's and give it new life has to be done. For it to not survive would be a tragedy for the audiences and for the city itself.”