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06-year-old theatre falls dark for investigation into long-term viability

# Ayr Gaiety to dim the lights despite offer of a takeover

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One of Scotland's oldest and most historic theatres is about to close its doors in the new year.

The Gaiety Theatre in Ayr, 106 years old and the former home of comedians, singers, variety acts and icons such as Harry Lauder, the jazz pianist Stephanie Grappelli, Jimmy Logan and a host of other stars, is to close in January.

The management of the Gaiety Theatre in Glasgow offered to take over the running of the theatre, famous for its century-long heritage of performance and shows such as the Gaiety Whirl, but this offer has been rebuffed by the owners of the theatre, the Ayrshire Council.

Deputy leader Hugh Hunter, leader of South Ayrshire Council, confirmed that at the end of next month, the theatre will close so that the council can "examine the long-term viability and maintenance and safety of the theatre".

The final two shows at the theatre, which opened its doors in 1902, will be its Christmas pantomime, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which ends on December 31, and *Robert Burns*, a production for the Year of Homecoming, which will star Jamie MacRae and is to be staged on January 24 and 25.

John Gordon, general manager of the Pavilion Theatre, said: "It seems that for the next 18 months they have been trying to close it. There is support apparently that says it needs £4.5m to keep open. I don't think it would take that long to close. It is still much loved by the town and community and I think it would be a big loss."

We had a meeting with the council in July and I thought it was a shame that the

## Famous faces



ALEXANDER BROTHERS: Favourites at the theatre.

The Gaiety Theatre hosted stars such as Charles Coburn in 1906, Leslie Crowther and Bernie Winters in 1902, and in 1931, the original Bill Kenwright production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.

It has staged opera from



RIKKI FULTON: Famous guest at the Gaiety.

the JW Turner Grand English Opera Company in 1904 to modern day Scottish Opera.

Other well-known faces are The Alexander Brothers, Andy Stewart, Lex McLean, Jimmy Logan, Johnny Beattie, Rikki Fulton and Stanley Baxter, and Helen Shapiro.

"Experts have been asked to consider the theatre's fitness for purpose in line with the requirements of health and safety and disability legislation as well as examining the ongoing maintenance, repairs and upgrading of theatrical equipment which would be needed for the theatre to remain operational in the long term."

"Council officers are presently considering the technical report in conjunction with further information on the provision of cultural services across the council's area and a paper is expected to be presented for consideration by the council members in January."

South Ayrshire Council has previously commissioned CRPG, a company in specialising in updating and renovating theatres, to carry out an examination of the theatre. A previous report is understood to have said that it would cost around £4m to carry out essential repairs.

The Gaiety is only one of a number of old theatres in Scotland. In recent years there have been moves to save another, the Troil Theatre in Aberdeen, and last year it was awarded money from the Heritage Lottery Fund to help restore the building, which opened as Her Majesty's Opera house in 1872.

Scotland's oldest theatre is the Theatre Royal in Dumfries, which was opened in 1792.

The three-level auditorium of the Gaiety Theatre has a total of 584 seats and shares its name with a number of other Gaiety theatres built around the same time, including one in Dublin and one in the west end of London.

It has survived two large fires, in 1905 and 1955, as well as a threat of demolition in 1972 and has staged variety, pantomime, drama, opera, musicals, ballet and orchestras in its long history.



TREADING THE BOARDS: Johnny Beattie gets his glad rags on in *Mother Goose* at the Ayr Gaiety in 1989.

Chris Fremantle of the Ayrshire Arts Network, which has organised a public meeting in Holy Trinity Church hall in Ayr on January 14 to discuss the matter and try to persuade the council to consider other options, said: "The council will tell you there are other spaces, but if this closes, there is no theatre in Ayr. The big fear everyone has that if they close it, it will never re-open. We need to find out if the council has a coherent plan at all."

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LONG HISTORY: The Gaiety Theatre in Ayr.

A sad day for once flourishing chocolate box theatre

## COMMENT

UNA McLEAN

THE first time I walked into the Gaiety Theatre was when I was in a play, *Walker in London*, back in 1959.

It was this wonderful little place with an atmosphere that was so intimate you could almost reach out with your hands from the stage and touch the faces of the people in the audience.

I always remember it being like a tiny chocolate box filled with theatregoers.

In its day it used to flourish as a hive of activity and all the actors from that era passed through its doors.

I remember the comedian Lex McLean saying he only went there for spite because the people didn't like him. He used to have the audience in absolute fits, even though the people running the theatre weren't laughing.

It was the kind of place that generations of families passed through, from the people who worked in the wardrobe department right down to the fathers and sons who worked in the ticket booths.

I remember playing the wicked Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and one of the songs I had to sing was *Don't I Look Gorgeous in This?*

A group of kiddies came to the morning performance and gave me the thumbs down when I sang it, and so it was decided I shouldn't sing it any more.

Having spent time performing in the wonderful place that was the Ayr Gaiety, I am shocked and saddened to hear of its closure.

It is heartbreaking to know that such a special theatre will no longer provide entertainment for generations of audiences and I am sure many people will feel the same sadness.

