

# We'll save

Legendary entertainers Johnny Beattie and The Alexander Brothers are determined Ayr's historic theatre - due to be shut down by the council in January - won't go with a whimper

**T**HE refrain from legendary entertainer Johnny Beattie is familiar. "It ain't over until the Fat Lady sings." Tragically, unless she receives a last-minute reprieve, the famous lady is fated to belt out her last number at Ayr's Gaiety Theatre on January 25.

Forever the trouper, Beattie, among the last of the great music hall stalwarts, goes even further. "They'll close it over my dead body," he says. A sprightly 81, Beattie is adamant that neither he, nor the theatre in which he has performed annually since 1962, will have their names carved on graveyard tombstones any time soon.

*Turned for headlining 'The City' time soon.*

Famed for headlining The Gaiety Whirl, the star indicates his disgust at the impending closure by theatre's owners South Ayrshire Council.

He says: "It's not an obituary. We'll fight all the way to save it. We might go for an encore yet - just wait and see."

As singer, comic and all-round entertainer for two generations of theatre-goers, Johnny has no equal. That's because most of the others perform now under the great proscenium arch in the sky.

If the Gaiety had a hall of fame, it would be adorned with legendary comics, singers and icons such as Sir Harry Lauder, jazz violinist Stephane Grappelli, Jimmy Logan, Andy Stewart, Lex McLean and Rikki Fulton and Stanley Baxter.

When it comes to amusing anecdotes about the Gaiety, Beattie is happy to walk down memory lane. He has played when the snow was three feet deep outside. Yet the audience came in droves. And Johnny brought his all-weather sporrans to keep him warm.

At a public meeting on January 14, being held in Holy Trinity Church hall in Ayr, to try to persuade the council to pursue other options, Beattie guarantees that, no matter the weather, the turn-out will be reminiscent of the old days of The Gaiety Whirl.

"There will be standing room only and people outside," he predicts, while drumming up support from surviving fellow performers such as The Alexander Brothers.

Concern is not so much for themselves as for performing artists. Beattie is a regular member of BBC Scotland drama River City. Tom and Jack Alexander are popular as ever with expatriate crowds.

Yet both acts admit that, without the Gaiety, up-and-coming performers - the stars of tomorrow - will lose a major showcase for their talents.

"The town will be a cultural desert," Beattie predicts. "There also used to be in Ayr a theatre which was a converted church

By Gavin Docherty

and they had a professional rep company, the Victor Graham Players, who changed their play every week.

"If you pull the theatre down where do the operatic society and amateur dramas go? Church halls? Not the same.

"There's nothing to beat an



Singer Andy Stewart was one of the favourites at the Gaiety



An old billboard and, below, the Alexander Brothers backstage



atmosphere like the Gaiety, with just under 600 seats. It is a traditional theatre with wonderful architecture and an intimacy I've never known in any theatre.

Following the great Jack Milroy, Johnny did five Gaiety Whirls in a row from 1960 to 1964. "If you did that it was like finishing school and you moved on to the big stuff. It happened to me. I went straight into pantos with Howard and Wyncham." He

recalls his debut eight years previously, in 1962, with the great Robert Wilson, the Voice of Scotland, whose rendition of The Day We Went to Rothersay-O was greeted by the audience every time as if the bells had chimed midnight on Hogmanay.

Johnny said: "For me it was an instant love affair. I thought, 'This will do me.' I was only 25. What's happening now makes me depressed. It's all about money - they say it costs too much.

"But the library costs money, the swimming pool costs money. Will they close them too?"

"We'll fight all the way. It's worth fighting for."

They say a Gaiety Whirl without The Alexander Brothers is like Bonfire Night without the

bang. Tom and Jack, who have appeared at Carnegie Hall in New York and Sydney Opera House, cannot imagine what Scottish entertainment will be like without the Gaiety.

**T**OM says: "The Gaiety is such a big draw. Close it and you can close half the guest houses in Ayr because it would have a domino effect. It's sad. I've so many happy memories. We had three sell-out nights there with Johnny and Arnie Fields.

"Jack and I have been forced into looking for different venues over the years. Most of the clubs have gone to the wall now too.

"It's sad to think that young and up-and-coming acts won't get the chance to perform at the Gaiety. Where do they play?"

"It's sad for the people who come over from Ireland in their droves during the summer.

"Its intimacy makes it special." Ironically, the theatre's demise is happening as Tom and Jack, who received MBAs in the 2005 New Year Honours List, celebrate their 50th year in showbusiness.

"It's sad that up-and-coming acts won't get the chance to perform at the Gaiety," says Tom.

"But we're available to parade up and down to make sure they don't close it, if that will make any difference."

Final curtain at the theatre, which opened in 1902, will be for I Robert Burns, a production for the Year of Homecoming, starring Jamie Michie, nephew of Tappart star John Michie. It will be staged on January 24 and 25.

Jamie says: "It's a shame. Community theatre is why I got into acting. I did a community play in Edinburgh, loved it, and applied to drama school."

With TV credits including The Bill, Rebus, The IT Crowd, Rockface and Holly City, Jamie feels conflict about starring in The Gaiety's final show.

He says: "It makes me both sad and proud. It's a pressure I didn't need, to be honest."