

First glimpses of new-look Citizens Theatre revealed as Glasgow venue announces reopening plans

Audiences expect to return to Glasgow's new-look Citizens Theatre for next year's Christmas show

By **Brian Ferguson**

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It was a fixture of Glasgow's landscape and a cornerstone of the cultural life in Glasgow for 140 years.

When the Citizens Theatre closed its doors in the summer of 2018, it marked the beginning of a painstaking rebirth for one of Scotland's best-known arts venues.

A 12-month countdown is now underway to the reopening of the venue, where Rupert Everett, Alan Rickman, Celia Imrie, Helen Blaxendale, Pierce Brosnan, Gary Oldman, Robbie Coltrane, Tim Roth, Bill Paterson, Sam Heughan, David Hayman and Glenda Jackson have all appeared.



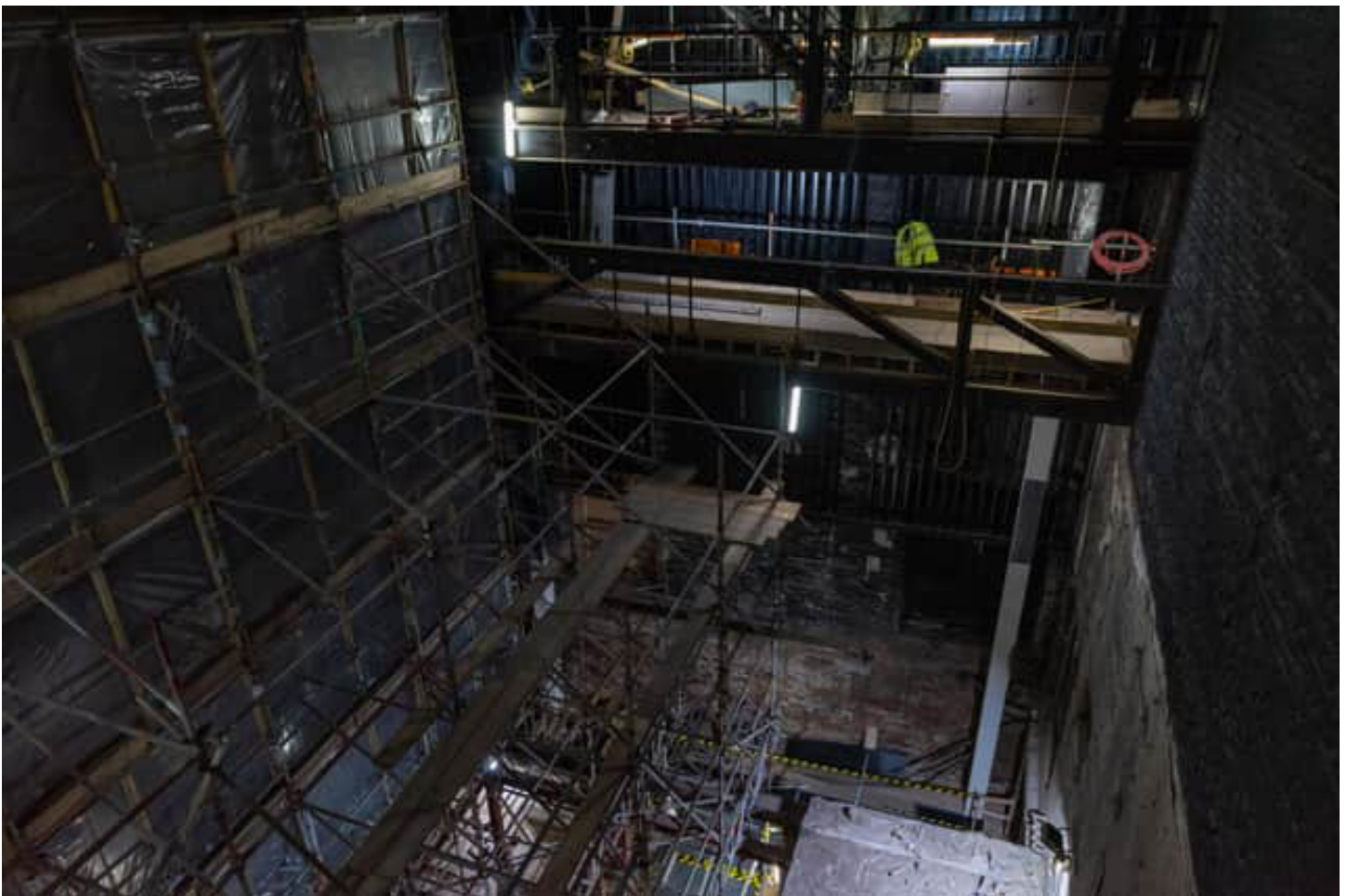
The biggest redevelopment of the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow in its 145-year history is expected to be completed by the end of 2024. Picture: Alex Brady

But artists, audiences and backstage workers are highly likely to notice a mix of the familiar and the new when the biggest ever makeover in the history of the "Citz" is unveiled.

The project was instigated well over a decade ago amid growing concern about the condition of one of Scotland's theatres, which was originally known as Her Majesty's Theatre when it opened in 1878. The ongoing work is due for completion next autumn, in time to bring back audiences to the Gorbals venue for its Christmas show.

A year ahead of the planned reopening, The Scotsman went on a hard-hat tour of the venue, including the celebrated **Victorian** auditorium, where the original sandstone structure can now be seen.

The original sandstone auditorium has been "wrapped" in a brand new three-storey building that will feature a new 150-seater studio theatre, a hugely expanded foyer, a new cafe-bar, improved backstage areas and new spaces for set-building, costume-making and rehearsing.



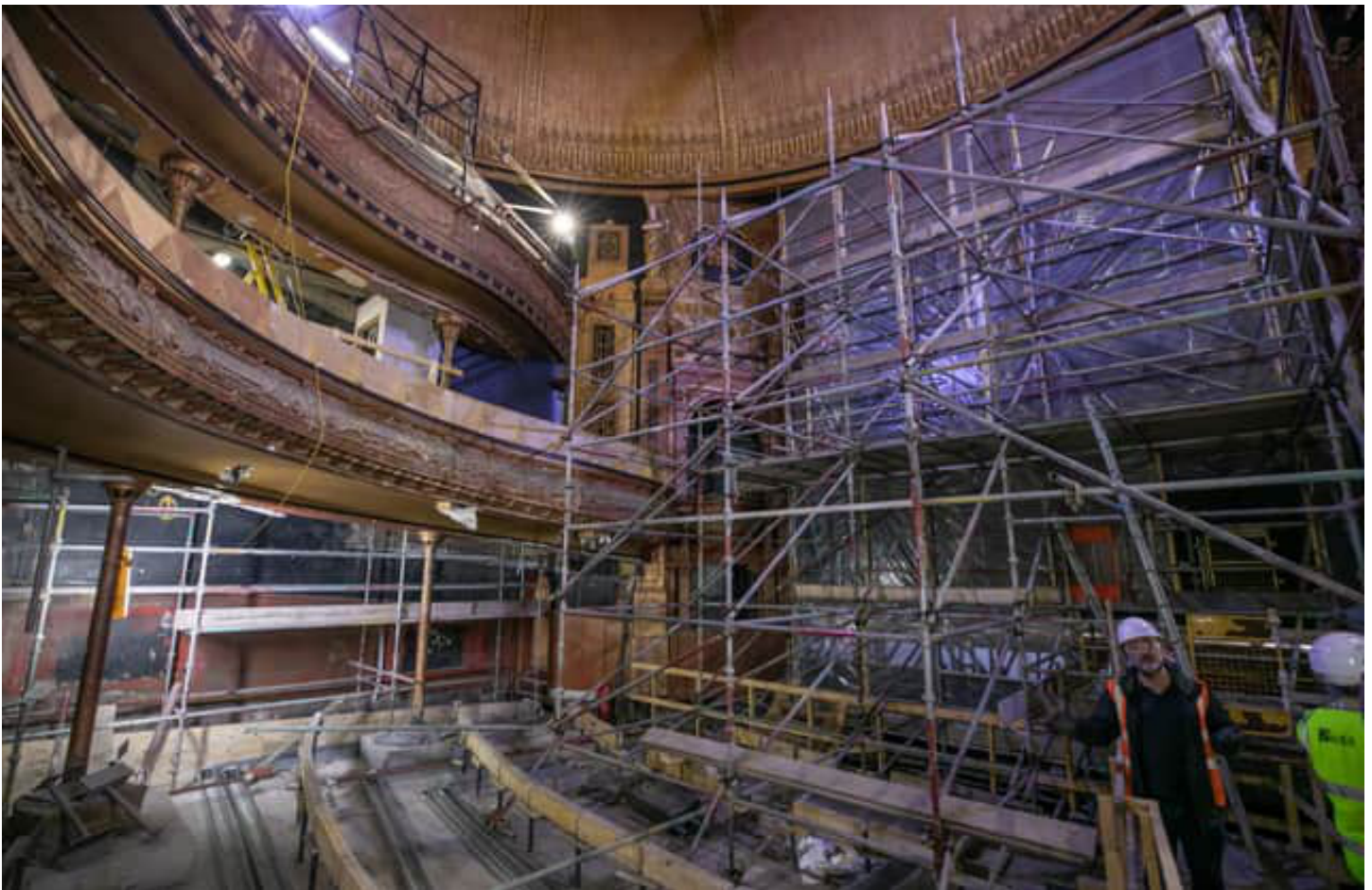
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The project will significantly improve access around the venue, while the revamp will include the installation of "viewing windows" to allow visitors to see inside the most complete working Victorian theatre machinery anywhere in the UK.

The famous Citz statues, which greeted theatregoers in the venue's foyer, have already been moved outside and onto the venue's new roof.

Artistic director Dominic Hill said: "I remember a 'dilapidation report' being put on my desk in my first few days here at the end of 2011. Right from the very beginning, I knew that this project needed to be done.

"It took a long time to get to the point where we broke ground. We went through many iterations of the project, but you could really feel and see why it was needed. I remember one Christmas show where it literally rained on stage. We had sewage come through under the stage at one point. Anyone with mobility issues would have found it incredibly hard to get around the building.



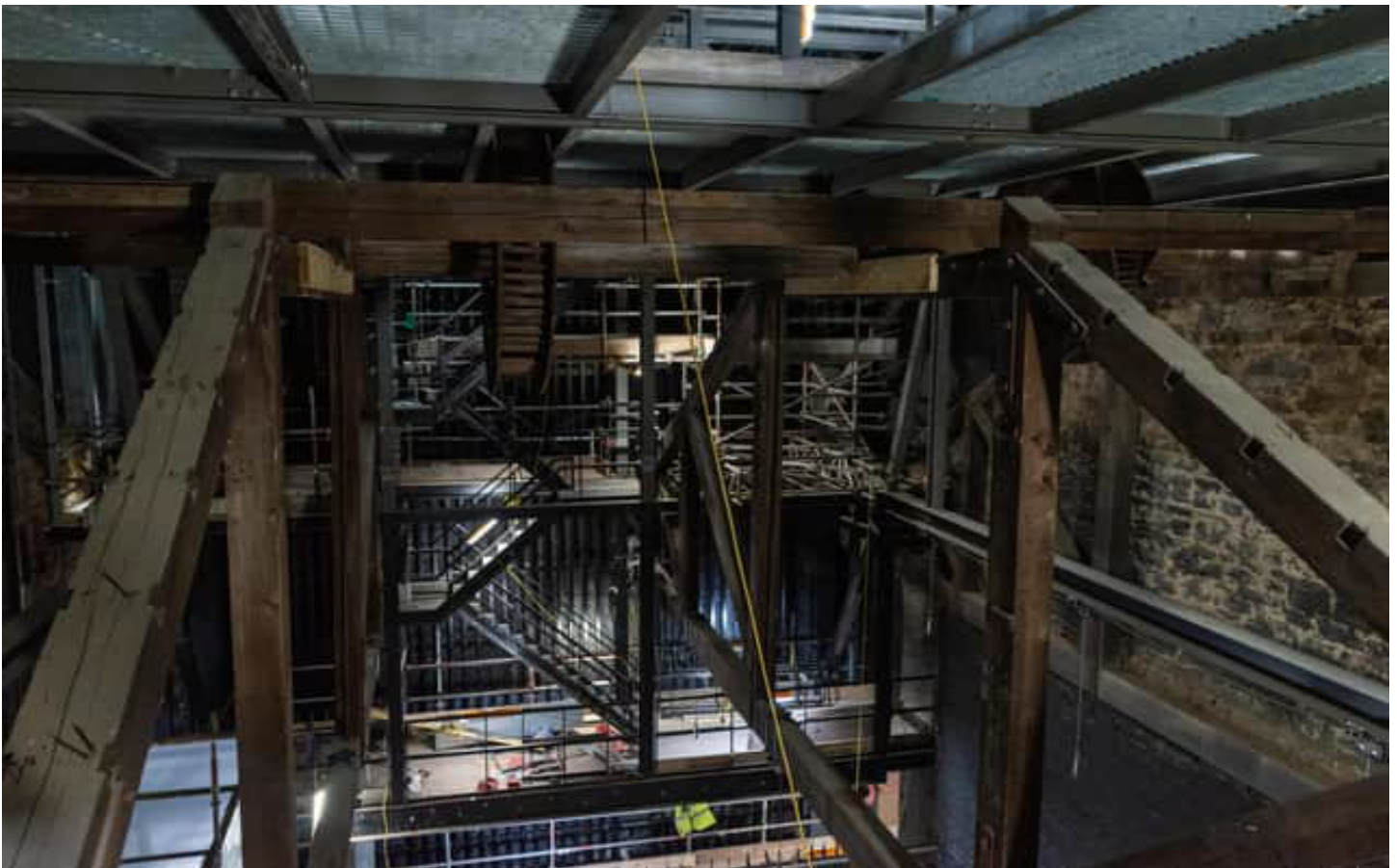
The biggest redevelopment of the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow is expected to be completed by the end of 2024. Picture: Mike Hume

"It was never a vanity project. It was always something that had to be done to protect the future of the building.

"We spent a long time working with our architects and raising the money to make the project happen. It's an amazing feeling to be looking at the finish line 12 years later."

A new "fly tower" has been installed to cater for bigger and heavier stage sets, while other new backstage facilities will make it quicker and easier to set up shows and allow the venue to accommodate many more productions than previously.

Executive director Alex McGowan said: "The most significant areas of work have been in the original theatre itself. The whole stage house – the stage and the technical area above the stage – has been completely stripped out and new facilities put in. We've added almost two storeys onto the building's for the new fly tower.



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“The seating in the auditorium has been stripped back to the bare bones. The old building needed a lot of care and attention to make it safe and sound for another 100 years. We’re improving the sightlines and will increase the capacity by around 200 seats due to structural changes we’re making in the upper circle.”

The redevelopment of the Citz was originally priced at £6.5 million when a search for architects was launched in 2012. But the cost had risen to £16.5m in 2014 when it secured crucial backing from the Heritage Lottery Fund and by a further £5m by the time the then first minister Nicola Sturgeon visited the site to see work get underway in 2019.

Delays caused by Covid lockdowns and restrictions and unexpected challenges with some of the most significant parts of the Victorian auditorium and infrastructure are expected to see the final of the project come in at up to £30m. Talks are said to still be ongoing with key backers, including the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Scottish Government, as part of efforts to secure the “final funds” to ensure the Citz can return next winter.

Mr Hill said: “The world has been turned upside down since we started work on the project. The pandemic kicked in almost immediately after we started work and it really affected us. Although we were able to keep going after a while, the work was much slower as there had to be particular conditions. The other thing was the complexity of the project. The idea of meshing an old building with a new building has brought its own complications and discoveries. All the way through, things have been found that were not anticipated.”

The ongoing work is aimed at ensuring the Citz becomes “the most exciting and adventurous producing theatre in Scotland”.



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Mr Hill added: “I can’t name names yet, but we’re in the process of putting together a really exciting first season. Over the last couple of years, we’ve been able to commission a lot of writers, so there’s plenty of new work. The new resources we have mean there will be more opportunities for us to do things at scale and do more in terms of design.

“I think it will undeniably feel different when you walk through our doors. One of the most exciting things about the project is seeing the original sandstone building, which was covered up before. The experience will be different, but I know it will be greater.

“What’s also important is that all the way through the project we’ve spoken about preserving that feeling, when you go into the auditorium, that there is something extraordinary, special and magical about it. The Citz that everyone knows and loves will be unchanged.”