

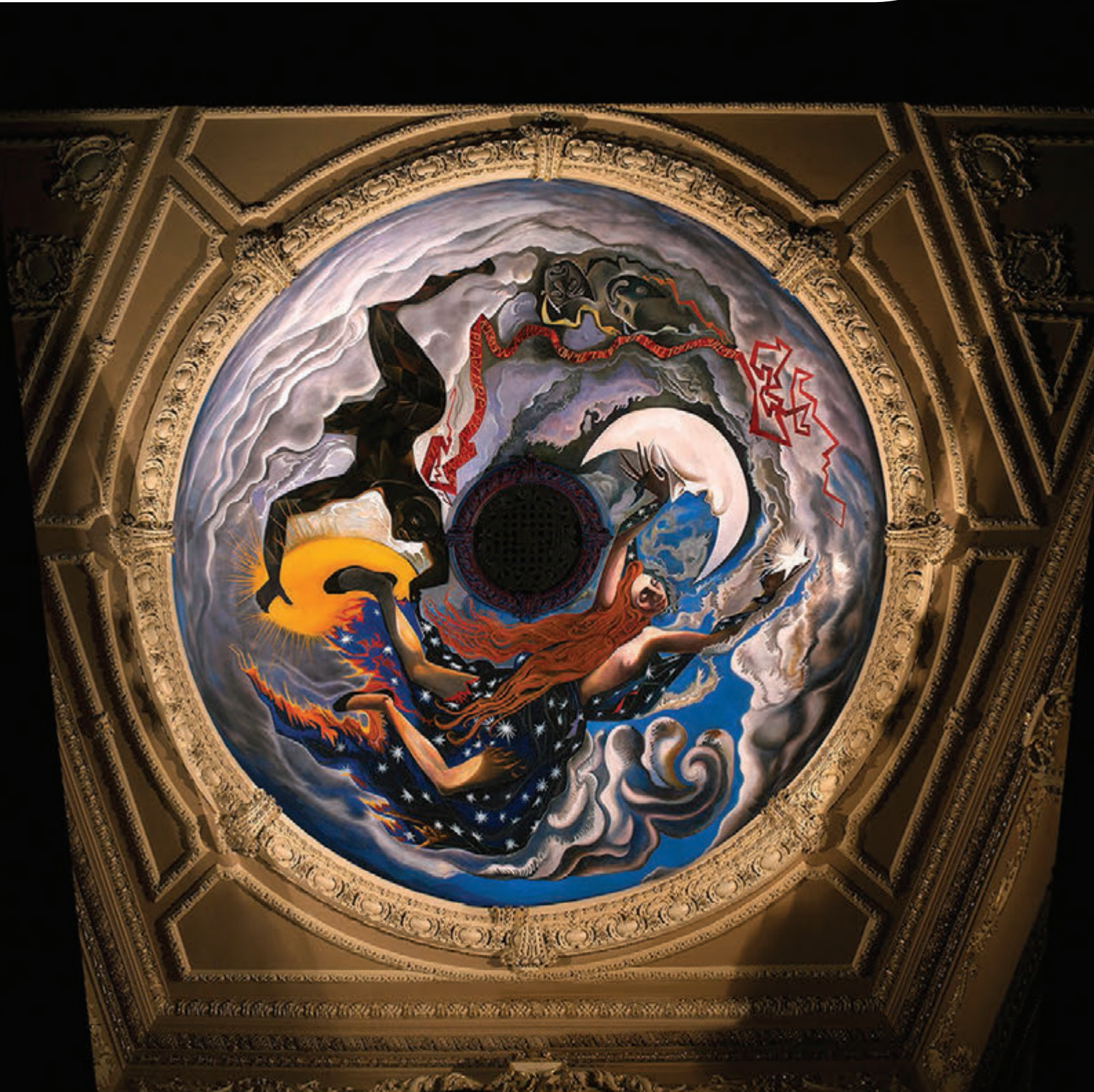


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# The King's Theatre, Edinburgh



In this article **Rachel Simmonds** reflects on the King's Theatre refurbishment project. Rachel acted as a Consultant for Smith Scott Mullan Associates. She has an RIAS Accreditation in Conservation Architecture and also teaches at Edinburgh College of Art.

In 1906 a fabulous new theatre opened on Leven Street, in the Tollcross area of Edinburgh. Part of the well known Howard and Wyndham chain, it was a variety theatre with 2,500 seats over four levels. It was designed by two architects, James Davidson, who was responsible for the red sandstone exterior, and J.D.Swanston, who designed the more elaborate interior. This was the only theatre they collaborated on, which gives it a uniqueness compared to the more prevalent Matcham theatres of this time.

From its opening, the theatre has been in near constant use, hosting a variety of different performances. Many famous faces have graced its stage over the years, including Katherine Hepburn, Sir Harry Lauder, Sir Lawrence Olivier and Anna Pavlova. By the 1950s it was in need of upgrading, and in 1951 the first major programme of refurbishment works was undertaken. This included the replacement of the entrance canopy with the cantilevered one that we see today, and the

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**Pictured from left:** main facade following restoration; new seats and carpet; restored foyer ceiling; restored ornate plasterwork on boxes. Images © M. Wolchover

removal of the upper balcony area. This allowed the upper circle to be extended back and its rake altered to form an enlarged upper circle. The intention was to improve the sight lines, which although partly successful, has resulted in the rear section of this area feeling somewhat detached from the rest of the auditorium.

In 1969 the building was bought by the City of Edinburgh Council. They continued to run it as a theatre, but by the 1980s the building was again in need of further work. In 1985 it underwent an eight month refurbishment programme. This included replacing all the seats with new tip-up seats in a cinema or 'Pullman' style. Sight lines were further adjusted, and the central aisle in the stalls was removed and replaced with two side aisles. The orchestra pit was enlarged, and the Viennese baroque auditorium was restored to its original colour scheme. The dome in the centre was repainted with a new design based on the

four seasons, and externally some stonework repairs were carried out.

The King's continued to be well used, especially during the pantomime season, when upwards of 80,000 visitors came to performances. This extensive patronage began to take its toll on the building and by the turn of this century it was evident that a further major refurbishment was required. In 2010, the City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) appointed Smith Scott Mullan Associates to undertake a £2million refurbishment of the building. This was joint funded by CEC, Historic Scotland and The Nancie Massey Trust. Their brief was based on undertaking essential fabric repairs, along with improving access and general visitor experience. The running of the theatre is undertaken by Festival City Theatres Trust (FCTT), who has a lease agreement with the council. Their input was vital in relation to prioritising works within the relatively small budget.

There had been a number of previous proposed projects prepared on the building, none of which had been realised. We reviewed these and proposed a scope of works that would address all the main issues. These included a full roof replacement with insulation, extensive stonework repairs, refurbishment of windows and doors, formation of a new box office with level access to the foyer; installation of a platform lift to the rear of the stalls, redecoration of the foyer; and installation of new seats to the stalls and dress circle.

The works had to be completed by the end of July

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2012, in time for the Edinburgh Festival in August of that year, for which shows were already booked. The theatre closes for a short period in the summer each year, known as a 'dark period'. The initial plan was to undertake the works in two phases, making use of these quiet times. However, for various reasons, the works ended up being carried out in one phase starting on site in September 2011. The plan was to undertake the external fabric repair works first and then move into the theatre after the pantomime, when there would be an extended 'dark period' from March 2012. This meant that the entire building has its roof, and over 400 stones replaced during the time of year with the most unpredictable weather and largest audiences. A full height scaffold was erected around the building, and the contractors worked out with performance times to ensure the works did not disturb the audiences. One of the strangest requirements during

this period was that the layout of scaffolding should have space by the stage door to accommodate show ponies that were performing in the pantomime!

When access to all levels of the façade was available, it was obvious that further stonework repairs were needed and these were undertaken. This included indenting and replacing stone, along with the removal of previous repairs. The quarry that provided the original stone was no longer open so a suitable alternative was sourced. Petrographical tests were undertaken on a sample of the existing stone to determine its composition. This allowed a close match to be sourced from the Corsehill quarry.

Internally the first area refurbished was the box office. The existing box office formed a barrier between the street and the theatre. By re-orientating the layout by 90 degrees, it was possible to create a more open plan arrangement, drawing people from the street through into



the foyer. Although the design is contemporary, the quality of materials used ensures that it complements the existing ornate foyer. A large scale graphic of the auditorium on the rear wall links what is happening in the auditorium with the busy street outside. Well considered detailing, such as a sliding walnut panel wall, now makes the space flexible for various functions. Its clean lines and use of a few key colours ensures that it does not compete with the richness of the original interior.

Moving into the auditorium, the biggest change was the new seats. The seats installed in the 1980s were not practical in terms of comfort or sight lines. Working with theatre consultants Carr and Angier, we re-planned the stalls and dress circle, to improve sight lines and install more wheelchair accessible seats. Using a variety of seat widths it was possible to straighten the aisles in the stalls. The new seats were designed by Kirwin and Simpson, and

are based on a lyric style seat from the period when the theatre was first built. These are higher than the previous ones and have longer backs, set at the correct angle for optimum sight lines. Their style is also much more in keeping with the design of the auditorium and the dark timber and cast iron frames, along with the red velvet upholstery, create a more elegant atmosphere. This was complemented by a new carpet that was specially designed for the theatre. Based on historic patterns from the Brintons archive, we altered the scale and chose colours to match the proscenium drapes around the stage. This rich red and gold carpet was also reinstated in the main stairs, upper foyer and dress circle.

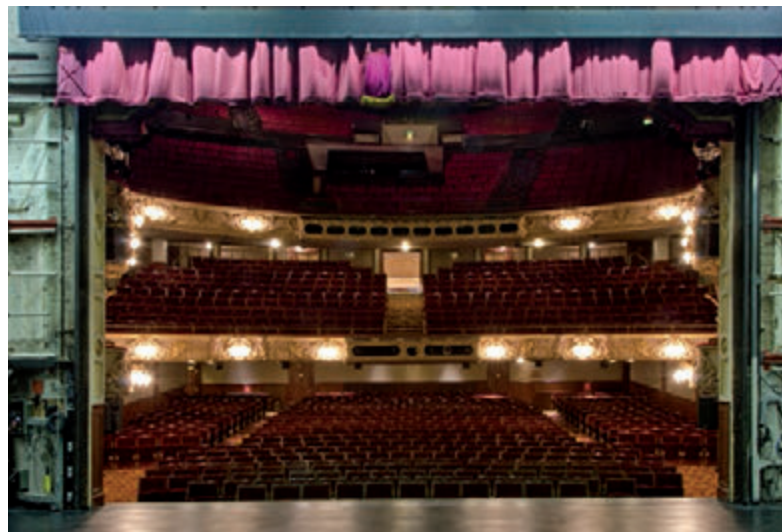
Other works undertaken included essential repairs to the ornate plasterwork on the boxes. A platform lift, installed in a former cupboard at the rear of the stalls, now means that wheelchair users can enter in through the front

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of the building and arrive at the rear of the stalls. Previously they had to enter via the side lane, which was far from ideal. The main foyer was also repainted, which has enriched the space and drawn attention to the ornate cream and gold plasterwork. As with many restoration projects much of the work is unseen to the visitor, such as wiring upgrades and improved ventilation. This has, however, made a great difference to audiences' experience of performances at the King's.

One area that was not included in the main refurbishment works was the decoration of the auditorium. However, during the works, it was necessary to repair an extensive area of plasterwork on the auditorium dome. The requirement to let this repair dry properly before it was repainted meant that the auditorium decoration required to be reviewed during the 2013 dark period. Research showed that the decoration to the dome

had been applied as part of the 1980s refurbishment, and contained some areas of the 1950s scheme. It was a rather bland trompe l'oeil that gave little impact to the auditorium. Following discussions with Historic Scotland, it was agreed that a new scheme could be undertaken, given that there was a history of different dome schemes in the theatre. The works also had to include the complete redecoration of the original auditorium. Having undertaken a number of art commissioning projects in the past, I suggested that this was the perfect opportunity to collaborate with a prominent Scottish artist to produce a bespoke art work for the King's. This would add to not only the audience experience of the theatre, but draw it to the attention of the general public. There really was only one person to approach, both in terms of being at the top of their game in Scottish art and also in understanding theatres – John Byrne. He said yes immediately to the idea,



and within three weeks had drawn a dramatic and inspiring design that the client approved without change.

Timescales were restricted to five weeks for the painting and, in June 2013, work began on redecorating the entire auditorium. A free standing bird cage scaffold was erected and two teams of specialist painters and decorators began the works. This included cleaning all the plasterwork and repainting every inch of the auditorium. John Byrne's work was gridded into two metre sections and projected onto the dome, where computer software allowed it to be manipulated so that it aligned with the profile of the dome. From these projections the outlines were lightly marked and then the design was painted by a team of specialists, with John undertaking some of the works himself. The end result is an auditorium that once more

**Pictured from left:** new Box Office; Auditorium on completion; refurbished Foyer with specially designed carpet; Auditorium from stage on completion of new seats to stalls and dress circle. Images © M. Wolchover

shows off its splendid Viennese Baroque plasterwork to its full advantage. The dome is a triumph of contemporary Scottish art and it captures the drama and atmosphere of the theatre exactly.

This has been an exciting and challenging project to work on. It is impossible not to be drawn to the rich history of the building and the stories of the shows and people who have stood on its stage and performed to millions over the last 100 years. Further phases of restoration are planned for the upper circle, along with improvements to back of stage areas and the external lighting and canopy to the building. These works will ensure that the 'Old Lady of Leven Street', as the theatre is affectionately known, continues to provide a venue for shows that inspire and delight people of all ages.