

THE GRANADA REBORN

A WORLD-CLASS ENTERTAINMENT VENUE FOR WALTHAMSTOW, LONDON AND BEYOND...

Waltham Forest Council's purchase of the **Granada/EMD cinema** during its 2019 **London Borough of Culture** year secures a legacy at Walthamstow's most cherished venue. An estimated £17m three-year restoration will see **Soho Theatre** managing the building. *Richard Ashman* meets their Executive Director, Mark Godfrey.

Tell me about Soho Theatre and what you do? From our roots as a small but influential fringe theatre we built our West End venue nearly twenty years ago. Soho operate as a charity and social enterprise and are now one of London's busiest theatres showing award-winning theatre, comedy and cabaret. We have three performance spaces, a buzzing bar and annual audiences of over 180,000. Our work includes the Edinburgh Festival fringe and identifying and nurturing new talent plus working with big names. We also run education, participation and talent development for people of all ages.

You live locally, as does your Creative Director David Luff. What other connections does Soho Theatre have with the borough? We supported the Council on the previous planning issues around the Granada and with the Council's support have worked within schools and colleges, with a local 'Soho Young Company' of performers, and in community projects across the borough's parks.

With the Council owning the Granada, what will your role be? We will operate it under a long-term agreement with them and deliver a year-round programme, making special discounts and priority

booking available to local residents. Education and community participation programmes will be provided and we'll work with local schools and other groups.

Although live entertainment featured regularly in the past, the building was predominantly a cinema? It will primarily present the finest comedy from the UK and internationally. A whole range of other performance will be presented, including theatre, panto, music, community events, circus or screenings. It would be a brilliant space to see a big film too, or share an experience such as the opening ceremony of the Olympics. We would be very open to

hearing from others interested in putting on special interest screenings or any other areas for the programme to consider.

What else will people be able to do there? Take part in workshops, talks or take a heritage tour. Eat or drink. Families and young people will be welcome. People may want to use the foyer area during the day to meet for a coffee, chat with friends or get some work done.

Will any lost features be restored? For example the large parapet outside and amazing decorative details in the foyer? The Council's architects and heritage advisers will look carefully at this. Soho work with the Theatre's Trust who will be knowledgeable and supportive and we would welcome thoughts from anyone who has any further information or background on the building.

Many campaigned to save the building, particularly local people. A feeling of 'emotional ownership' prevails. How will Soho reflect the local connection? This is really important. We want the building to become a 'local theatre with a national profile'. We won't get full access to it for at least three years but we're keen to talk to local groups and residents as we start planning and to work with other cultural organisations and groups without replicating anything. If anyone has any thoughts, ideas, memories or suggestions we're keen to hear them – please email Laura@sohotheatre.com in the first instance.

Much of the Granada is currently unused. It originally had 2,700 seats but once restored will seat 1,000 people. What's the rationale behind that? In architectural and heritage terms, that capacity means the auditorium will be able to offer good seats to all, and provide the accessible facilities a 21st century audience requires. A 1,000-seat venue dedicated to comedy will sit between the intimate spaces at Soho Theatre and the bigger arenas and be a unique addition to London's cultural landscape.

What might a typical day there look like in the future? It could include parents and children popping in to the foyer in the morning and staying for a daytime comedy show. There could be afternoon creative writing workshops led by people from Waltham Forest. Early evening an event of local work in the studio and young people coming to the regular Soho

Young Company. Audiences having an early drink and bite to eat. A crowd of 1,000 to see the main comedy show. Maybe late-night cabaret and music.

The Granada has an incredible history and many famous names performed there. Alfred Hitchcock probably visited too. How will visitors get to know about this? We will work with local people, heritage bodies and museums to capture it and keep the stories and legacy alive in an immediate and accessible way. As well as archives and digital information, there could be guided tours for local schools and visitors. We'll do our best reflecting the rich heritage of the borough and past performers at the Granada such as the Rolling Stones, Duke Ellington and Johnny Cash.

How far do you expect visitors will travel? Alongside local people, we hope that it will attract people from all over London and beyond. It will host some of the biggest international comedy stars and Walthamstow's transport links are excellent.

What about restoring the building's unique Christie theatre organ for concerts? That's something for the specialists working with the Council on the development of the building to answer but we would be delighted if this is possible.

2019 is Waltham Forest's tenure as the first London Borough of Culture. What will Soho Theatre do to build on this accolade? It was a brilliant achievement for the Council, and everyone who supported them, to win this. We hope the Granada will a big part of that legacy, not just as a physical venue but building on the whole spirit of inclusivity and engagement that has been so successful to date with LBoC.

The council envisages that restoring the whole building will have a transformative effect on the borough. Yes, it will be one of the largest capacity public buildings in Waltham Forest. As well as becoming an open-to-all hub for local people and artists, it will bring big name comedy performers attracting audiences, press and profile. We will directly create jobs at the venue and audiences will give a boost to the local evening economy.

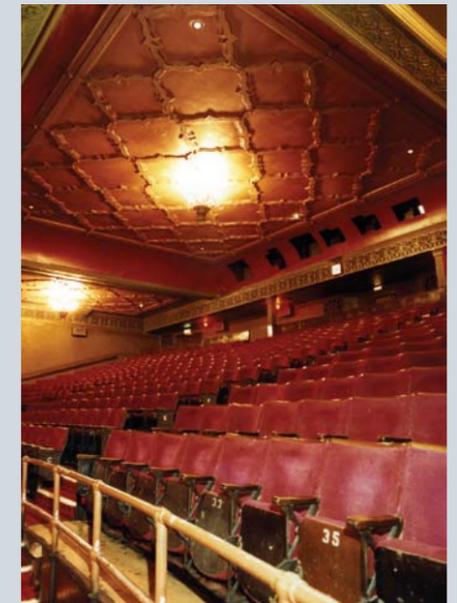
What sort of acts and names can we expect to see at the Granada in the future? The comedy will borrow and cherry pick from Soho's programme. Too early to say right now but recently we've worked with Hannah Gadsby, Stewart

Lee, Nish Kumar, James Acaster, Guilty Feminist, Shappi Khorsandi, Frank Skinner, Romesh Ranganathan, Shazia Mirza, Sarah Pascoe, Harry Hill, Bridget Christie, Michael McIntyre, Jimmy Carr, Nina Conti, David Baddiel and many, many more.

Finally, we keep referring to it as the Granada, it's original name. Is that what it'll be called in the future? Not sure at this stage. We like the reference to the Granada but also think it will be important to include 'Walthamstow' in the title as that will help locate it and signpost the nearest tube for visitors beyond the borough.

Thank you, Mark.

This is the ninetieth year of the Granada, where the curtain looks set to rise to an incredible future.



Comedian and Soho Theatre Trustee Shappi Khorsandi