



The 7 Most Endangered 2014

Programme run by **Europa Nostra**,
the Voice of Cultural Heritage in Europe,
in partnership with the **European Investment Bank Institute**

Historic Stage Machinery of the Bourla Theatre, Antwerp, Belgium

Report

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1. Summary

The identified project has a range of potential outcomes. For the review group, the optimal result would be the return of the historic stage machinery as installed in the Bourla theatre, Antwerp, Belgium, to full operating condition and for it to be used in stage productions for its original purpose. As a worst case scenario, the machinery would be removed from its functional home and presented as a piece of theatrical archaeology in a museum setting. The machinery is a listed historical artefact, so the possibility of simple destruction has not been considered as an outcome.

The machinery was installed during the construction of the theatre: 1827 – 1834 and restored as part of a general restoration of the theatre between 1991 and 1993. While the main stage support structure which forms part of the machinery system is intact, much of the machinery itself has either been relocated for storage or is only loosely in position. This, combined with a permanent, unbroken stage surface laid over the support structure, means that none of the historic machinery can currently be operated, although the machinery itself appears to be in good condition. The machinery has never been used by the current resident company: *Toneelhuis*. As well as the stage machinery, the whole theatre building itself is listed as an historic monument. Looking at the theatre from a purely heritage perspective, therefore, there is a clear case for the reinstatement option.

There are two risks to the machinery. Firstly, the City of Antwerp, which owns and is responsible for the theatre, recently commissioned a study to consider future development options. The purpose was to look at ways in which a list of *Toneelhuis* aspirations could be met within the existing building. Of three options considered, the city's preference, as of November 2014, was for one which would require the demolition of the machinery's stage structure and the removal of the machinery itself. It should be noted that this option would also mean substantive structural changes to the building and to all services within the structure. The works have been costed at some EUR 18 million and would mean closing the theatre for two years.

The second risk is that the theatre's in-house company: *Toneelhuis* does not use any of the historic equipment and regards it as a hindrance to the development of modern stage technology systems within the theatre, and a constraint on the company's artistic development. Its stated position at the time of the review was that it could accept the retention of the machinery, provided it did not interfere with their current and planned stage practices.

From the Europa Nostra perspective, it should be noted that neither the City nor *Toneelhuis* was party to the "Seven Most Endangered" nomination.

A group of interested individuals and organisations: the "Review Group"* attended a meeting on 30 and 31 October 2014 (See Appendix 1 for delegates list). However, while a meeting had been arranged with the political and executive functions of the City with the City, in the event the meeting was cancelled at the last minute. A short meeting with the City and the *Toneelhuis* Technical Director was subsequently held on 09 December 2014 with most members of the Review Group present.

The objective of this report is therefore limited to identifying a potential plan of action for the Review Group and assessing the conditions necessary to allow this to be put into effect. The report will not comment on the options presented under the City's feasibility study. To use that study would automatically place restrictions on the set of possible solutions. A more appropriate route would be to identify the activities and actions needed to achieve the objectives of the four parties: the Nominator –



Perspektiv, Europa Nostra, *Toneelhuis*, and the City, and generate a candidate set of options to be used to initiate discussions between these groups.

2. Purpose, location

The objective is to restore and renovate the stage and stage machinery with four potential outcomes:

a “target outcome” of returning the stage, structure and machinery to full operation, with a team of technicians trained in the operating and maintenance practices needed to ensure the long-term operational security of the theatre, and to present a combination of period and contemporary theatrical productions using the machinery.

a “minimum outcome” of ensuring that no redevelopment of the theatre involves actions which would prevent the structure and machinery being re-established at some point in the future.

a “compromise outcome” of maintaining the integrity of the stage, structure and machinery without putting it into regular use, but available for use as and when required, and without placing excessive constraints on the productions of *Toneelhuis*.

a “worst case outcome” where the stage structure and machinery is removed from the theatre and re-assembled in a remote location in working but non-functional order. This option is in complete contradiction with the uniqueness of the machinery and the historic value of having the machinery in situ in the original building.

Permanent loss of the stage structure and machinery, or even the recycling of components to other historic theatres should not be included as an option. This is a listed/classified artefact, and as such should be protected.

3. Context

Plans for the creation of a new, modern theatre in Antwerp were outlined as early as 1801, when the city was under French occupation, although it was 1827 before the project started to take physical shape, by which time the city was under Dutch control. The project was led by the French architect Pierre Bruno Bourla who was a product of the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris, and who had been appointed to the new post of City Architect in 1819.

The new theatre, which stands on the plot of a previous structure dating from the city’s heyday as a centre of tapestry production, was completed in 1834 and opened under the name of Le Théâtre Royal Français. The basic structure of the building follows a neo-classical style, with a semi-circular elevation to the front. The interior is highly decorated with artwork, mosaics and a painted ceiling.

In its early life, as its name suggests, its performances were primarily in French, while around it Flemish influence was becoming more important, and the theatre became increasingly unprofitable. In 1865 the building's interior was substantially restructured to increase capacity from circa 1200 to 2000 seats in an attempt to make the theatre profitable again. However, finally, in 1932 the *Théâtre Royal Français* was disbanded and replaced by the *Koninklijke Nederlandse Schouwburg*.



Although the building was declared an historic monument in 1938, the building continued to decline until effectively being abandoned around 1980 when the City completed a new civic theatre close by. There were plans for the theatre to be demolished. However, instead, the City decided to renovate the structure and the stage machinery with a re-opening in 1993 to coincide with Antwerp's reign as European Capital of Culture. The renovation, which took two years, restored some of the features which had been lost in the 1860's redevelopment, while sympathetically introducing modern building services to the historic structure, including heating and ventilation.

The Bourla Theatre (*Bourlaschouwburg*), as it is now known, is one of several theatres in the City of Antwerp, all of which receive financial support from the City and/or the Region and Province.

Toneelhuis is the city's repertory company which has a strong national and international reputation and occupies the stage for most of the year. Its focus is on modern theatre in a diverse range of styles and it takes many of its productions on tour. The company's artistic director believes that the presence of the historic machinery is a significant constraint on the design of sets and on styles of staging. It also creates a barrier to taking their own productions on tour and on the possibility of inviting other productions to perform in the theatre. This view is probably justified, based on the current above-stage level organisation of the historic machinery and the rake of the stage. The technical director also suggests that the absence of suitable skills, the physical layout of the systems, and the physical effort involved, would make it difficult to incorporate the historic equipment into modern productions. Again, based on the theatre as currently organised, this position may be justified.

The auditorium was extended in the 1860's with a substantial increase in seating capacity through the creation of additional balcony seating and higher ranks of seating in the upper balcony tiers. There is some doubt as to the stability of the new balcony, which currently has shoring in the form of temporary props supporting it, although these are believed to be purely precautionary. What is certain is that the theatre has very awkward seating arrangements and poor sightlines from the side balcony areas.

4. Description

When the theatre was constructed, the stage and associated machinery were designed to allow it to present *théâtre à l'italienne*. The main feature of this carriage-and-frame system is that the stage decorations move primarily in and out sideways (horizontally). Additionally, the backcloth and the borders fly up/down and occasionally props and people arrive from below. This contrasts with the current practice of the theatre which primarily relies on top hung scenery and curtains which are moved vertically, with some lateral movement possible.

The historic machinery was designed to allow a high degree of flexibility in scenery and stage devices, but is wholly manual and the closest analogy for the technology involved is a three-masted, square-rigged sailing ship. The theatre is unique in Belgium in its operating systems, and in Europe it is one of the few remaining examples of early 19th century theatre technology. As such it is listed as an historical monument.

The stage and its machinery comprise three sets of components. Firstly, there is the stage structure. The supporting framework for the stage is modular and adjustable to allow holes and channels to be formed in the stage surface to create a range of special effects. Within the under stage structure should be a number of windlass mechanisms which can be used to move scenery and props either during scene changes or as



part of the performance. These items are present but are not located in their working positions and are not rigged for use. Secondly, the stage surface should be flexible, to allow scenery and props to be moved on- and off-stage by the stage machinery. At present, a fixed stage surface has been installed on top of the original stage floor, acting as a barrier between the working area of the stage and the machinery beneath. Finally there is the above stage machinery which can perform the same tasks as the more modern equipment installed during the '91 – '93 modernisation. The manual nature of the historic operations means that there are a number of high level walkways, or bridges, across the stage to allow for the handling of scenery, curtains, etc. These currently block the increased use of modern equipment and lighting, and cannot be used to provide access to the existing modern lighting and stage equipment because of the lack of physical security.

5. Technical aspects

In terms of reinstating the equipment, this could be achieved at limited cost, with only the new stage surface acting as a significant physical impediment. However, reinstatement of the machinery would require the introduction of expertise to re-establish the systems and rigging, and to operate the systems once established. This expertise is available within Europe, but not locally.

6. Implementation

There are at least three barriers to implementation:

1. There is no advocate for the reinstatement within any of the decision making bodies. At least one of the bodies needs to be persuaded to adopt a reinstatement plan as departmental policy, and for the policy to be attractive to the controlling party or coalition within the City Council.
2. There is currently no willingness on the part of Toneelhuis to integrate the historic machinery into the company's productions or to cede theatre time and space to its redevelopment. As a grant dependent organisation it has no powers, but it almost certainly has influence. While the artistic director's stated position is neutrality, in practice reinstatement, even partial reinstatement (see §12) would change the company's modus operandi. It would need to change its processes and programmes and develop new skills. Its cost and revenue structures would change. Accepting the reinstatement would only be rational if they could see a net benefit to the organisation. It may be that potential benefits could be identified, but they would need to be quantified before any proposal could be made.
3. Although reinstatement costs might be small relative to redevelopment costs of EUR 18 million, it would appear from the December meeting with the City that, at least in the short term, the city does not currently have the resources for the larger works, nor the will to make significant short term capital investments in the Bourla Theatre.

This suggests that a two stage approach is needed. Firstly, the city needs to be persuaded that the principle is sound and that there may be an argument in favour of reinstatement. The Review Group needs to have at least tacit consent to carry out its cultural, technical and economic analysis so that it can have access to the data needed to build a case for the reinstatement. Most of this data will be confidential and held by the City and by the theatre. Extrapolating data from other sources in other countries would



be too speculative to be able to build a business case or to reach a sound decision. Once the argumentation is completed, then phase two negotiations can be started with the City and *Toneelhuis* to persuade them of the net benefits that reinstatement would bring.

As a first stage, the December meeting with the City produced three encouraging outcomes. Firstly, the *Toneelhuis* Technical Director accepted an invitation to see an existing theatre where historical machinery was restored and is being put to use. At the time of writing, arrangements for such an educational trip were being finalised. Secondly, there seemed to be an acceptance by the City management that the existing feasibility study was flawed and that additional work would be required before any major funding decisions could be made, with 2018 being seen as an earliest start date for any redevelopment. Finally, a recognition that the Baroque Festival planned for 2018 might benefit from the availability of a facility such as the Bourla with reactivated historic stage machinery.

7. Procurement

N/A at this stage

8. Environment, sustainability, social

A reinstatement might have positive impacts in the areas of energy consumption, resource utilisation, employment, etc. However, while the cumulative effect might be significant, a focus on impacts in these areas at this stage might tend to confuse the fundamental arguments which have to be won, with success possibly being dependent on cultural and artistic relevance rather than physical attributes or financial and economic argumentation.

9. Use, market, demand

It is not possible to create either a financial or economic model of the existing theatre without hard data in the form of numbers of productions, seats sold, origin of attendees, box office and other revenues, operating costs and levels of subsidy. These data are not in the public domain and would be almost impossible to synthesise from the outside. Also, such a model could only act as a baseline. If, say, the theatre were to be redeveloped along the lines of any of the feasibility scenarios then the model would have to be adjusted. While a scenario might improve sightlines, which might increase average seat revenues, it would be at the cost of total capacity: reducing revenues.

The city should be asking for a full business case for any proposal, and the Review Group will need to be prepared to provide inputs. At this stage, however, any projections would be purely speculative. It will therefore be proposed that a full development plan and business case be established only after the design principles of a revisited theatre and theatre company have been established.

In the meantime, it should be understood that the theatre appears to have a relatively high utilisation rate and there will be a natural limit to ticket pricing. Assuming that the current pricing is optimal, and there is no evidence either way at this stage, then any move to a mixed use, i.e. combining current and historic models, will almost certainly reduce the utilisation rate and it may be difficult to recoup this loss through higher average ticket prices. Reinstatement may therefore require higher subsidy levels than before, and



proposals will need to be backed by sound economic and financial arguments to justify the additional funding. The European importance of such an approach could also be an opportunity to apply for support at a European level.

Alternatively, as part of the negotiations with City, and bearing in mind the financial implications of a re-ordered use of the theatre - a “mixed use”, with minimised intrusion into the *Toneelhuis* season, may be possible by limiting use of the Bourla and its historic stage machinery, to a summer festival-type productions when *Toneelhuis* is on holiday. This would not necessarily impose a financial burden on the City. Interested parties who would like to take advantage of the theatre’s unique facilities should be able to cover the marginal costs. While there would be some up front capital expenditure needed to have the machinery researched and put back into operating condition, the theatre could still be optimised for *Toneelhuis* while satisfying the heritage preservation needs of both the machinery and the theatre.

10. Investment cost

Setting aside the redevelopments budgets for the various options, it is not clear what the cost of reinstatement would be. This would need to come out of a preliminary phase of the redevelopment process, once the basic principle has been accepted by the city.

11. Financing Possibilities

There are three distinct sets of capital costs to be fully defined, quantified and funded.

1. The cost of redeveloping the theatre, possibly based on one of the lines already proposed by the City. The likely candidate option has been provisionally costed at EUR 18 million, although the source of the costings is not clear and, at this stage, and the number is for budgetary purposes only.
2. The marginal costs of reinstatement. This will not be a simple number to calculate. The direct reinstatement costs should be relatively easy to identify, but the marginal costs will depend on what other work is done at the same time. If reinstatement were to be combined with the preferred redevelopment model, then the marginal cost could even be negative¹ – but it would mean that the planned under stage redevelopment would have to be abandoned.
3. The combined costs of a revised business plan and full feasibility study to establish a) the optimal compromise between modern and historic theatrical operations taking into account the local needs and aspirations of the City and the Company, b) the design changes needed to be able to realise the compromise and c) total costs for the project, including full or partial reinstatement, depending on the outcome of negotiations with the City and *Toneelhuis* to integrate the reinstatement with the existing redevelopment options.

¹ The City’s preferred option would involve creating a number of functional spaces beneath stage. This will almost certainly require substantial structural works which, within the heart of the building, will be expensive and time consuming. Dropping these changes from the plans would save money – possibly more money than the restitution of the stage machinery would cost - i.e. restitution would be a cheaper option. It is not clear what the under stage spaces are to be used for, but it is unlikely that a location in the city centre is critical – in which case the same accommodation could be realised at much lower cost on the outskirts.



However, the feasibility study also needs to establish the financial sustainability of a compromise theatre against the city's base case. This will require the development of a comparative Business Plan. At an emotional level, and looking at the theatre from a purely heritage perspective, there is a clear case for reinstatement. However, that is probably an inadequate argument for the City, which will need to fund not only the capital works, but also any continuing shortfall between revenues and operating costs.

The principal question at this stage is therefore how much the initial feasibility study and business plan would cost and how it can be funded. The actions needed are:

1. A survey of the existing structures, to locate all major components and whether additional work will be required to the structure before the machinery elements can be (re)installed;
2. A survey of all machinery components to identify any remedial work which might be required, and also the condition (and indeed existence) of all ropework and rigging;
3. A redevelopment plan which would allow the principle machinery components to be reinstated and rigged for use, without excessive intrusion into the “modern” workspaces;
4. Develop operational and safety procedures for the machinery, including the planning and costings of training technicians and the marginal costs of having a larger team of bi-functional technicians available;
5. Cost of developing and implementing a stage structure which meets both the functional needs of the historic machinery and the needs of modern drama and other staged productions. This may involve changes to seating levels within the auditorium;
6. The costing of replacement storage space or other functional facilities planned for the space which will be lost under the stage and which was due to be redeveloped;
7. A comparative economic and financial analysis of the current and future operations of a bi-functional theatre, and specifically including a market study for the potential demand – and supply – of productions built around the historic machinery;
8. Development of a ten year business plan for both the “with and without” reinstatement cases, to be used as a decision tool by the city.

It should be possible for members of the Review Group to make estimates of the person days required for each of these points, and they might be able to contribute their expertise to the process. However, if the findings are to have any credibility, they should be managed by a party which, even if connected by expertise and track record to the Nomination, can be perceived as being neutral as to the outcome.

As the output of the study would be of substantial benefit to the City in its own decision processes, there is strong case that the City should make a substantial financial contribution: possibly equally split between the Departments of Culture and Heritage. Other sources which might be approached would include:

- ❖ National Heritage and Cultural budgets – in view of the national importance of the machinery;



- ❖ Private patronage: Internationally there are wealthy individuals, trusts and commercial companies with Corporate Social Responsibility objectives which can be approached for backing. The City's administration may be financially constrained, but Antwerp has a high level of inherent wealth.
- ❖ Public collections: Might form part of a wider fund raising programme, but may not be the most efficient or effective way of raising funds.
- ❖ Depending upon the option, European funds may be mobilised.

12. Conclusion: Proposed Action Programme and recommendations

From a review of the Nomination Form and previous studies and reports, there are four issues which need to be addressed before any serious attempt can be made to save this piece of European cultural heritage:

Firstly, the owners: the city and population of Antwerp, must not only accept, but also be committed to the preservation of this piece of heritage. They must recognise it not only as an important piece of European theatrical heritage, but also as an important piece of the city's heritage. Clearly, the support of the city administration is essential, but this will be complicated by the split of administrative and budgetary responsibilities. While the theatre and the *Toneelhuis* Company are the responsibility of the Department of Culture, physical heritage, including planning consent involving historical buildings, is the responsibility of the Heritage Department. This creates a potential conflict within the administration which the Review Group and the Project Lead, will have to manage. At the time of the Review site visit, there was no willingness to discuss the situation with the Europa Nostra Review team at either the political or administrative level. This softened slightly with the December meeting, but the importance of the theatre and the stage machinery is such that the debate may have to be expanded to include regional and national bodies.

Secondly, *Toneelhuis* does not have exclusive use of the theatre, but does have first call on the theatre as a resource and, as a city subsidised organisation with a good relationship with the Administration, is in a strong position to influence what changes and developments take place within the theatre. The position of the Artistic Director, and hence the *de facto* policy of the company, is that they have no objection to the presence of the historical stage equipment provided it does not interfere with the type of performance the company may wish to put on. However, the current Director feels that the presence of the machinery, at least at above stage level, does hinder the Company.

However, one option which might be acceptable would be limiting the full reinstatement to the sub-stage machinery and the stage itself. This constitutes the key differentiation between the carriage and frame system and current practice. Similarly the functional above-stage activity could be installed without intruding significantly on the modern stage equipment. A key deterrent for *Toneelhuis* appears to be the high level walkways (bridges). Their positions are not fixed – although they appear never to have been moved in recent years - and they are no longer fit for purpose – being classed as unsafe - and could be relocated. This would allow additional modern equipment to be installed which would give the Company more of the flexibility they desire, without significantly affecting the historic functionality of the equipment.

Thirdly, a full, or even partial, reinstatement of the machinery to operating condition would require capital expenditure. The actual costs have not been quantified, because there was no interest on the part of the controlling parties. As noted above, a multi-option plan to redevelop the theatre has been proposed.



However, the preferred option would cost circa EUR 18 million and would mean the theatre closing for two years. While there is qualified support in principle from the relevant parties, it is not clear if the city is prepared to make this level of investment. It is therefore unlikely that the city would support a larger project to restore the theatre to its original condition without significant grant support. Within this context, it should be noted that a revitalised historic dimension to the theatre would allow it to make a substantial contribution to the city's planned 2018 Baroque Festival Year.

Finally, and most critically, there is no clear project champion who could make a reinstatement project a reality. This may be a two stage process. Firstly, someone to lead the case to the City to persuade them to open their minds to the possibility of a redevelopment which would satisfy both the Nominators, and *Toneelhuis*. This Champion would also have the role of persuading either the City or an external group to fund the costs of redevelopment planning and business case development. To be credible, this Champion would have to be respected by the City and either be a member of, or have the fully support of, the Review Group. The second Champion, should have the support of the review group but should also have the professional experience and background to allow either leadership or performance of the tasks outlined in §11. *Stricto sensu*, none of the organisations involved in the nomination have a direct link with either the theatre or the city, and only a very limited number of individuals have that link at a personal level – none of whom are in a position to play the second Champion role. A profile of a suitable candidate, and the degree of commitment required, is presented in Appendix II.



Appendix I

Review Group Members

Name	Attribution
Piet Jaspert	Europa Nostra
Guy Clausse	European Investment Bank – Institute
Campbell Thomson	European Investment Bank (<i>pro tem</i>)/ <i>Euradvisers LLP</i>
Sara van Rompaey	Europa Nostra
Carsten Jung	Nominator – PERSPECTIV
Herman Van Hunsel	Independent Architect
Frans van den Haspel	Independent adviser on theatre technology and training
David Wilmore	Theatre Search Ltd.



Appendix II

Project Champion/Leader for the Business Case and Follow Up

Attributes

- Personal attributes/gravitas in professional dealings such that they would be respected by their counterparts in the Review Group, the City, and *Toneelhuis*
- Strong motivation by, and personal alignment with, the objectives of project
- Professional experience in the management and integration of consultant contributions to feasibility studies, project risk assessments, etc.
- Professional/Technical expertise in at least two of the Action Areas presented in §11.
- Flexibility in availability of personal resources to meet the variable time demands during the development of the studies and business plans
- Understanding of both the Belgian/Flemish administrative and cultural frameworks
- Ability to work in Flemish (preferred for relations with the City and *Toneelhuis*) and a common language with the Review Group which is expected to be a significant provider of the inputs either directly or indirectly
- Ability to draft a final report either in Flemish (preferred), French, or other language acceptable to the City, *Toneelhuis*, and the Review Group



Appendix III

Not available at this stage. To be assessed based on “best estimate” person day requirements from the members of the Review Group in their areas of expertise.