



**Baroness Jo Valentine – Speech in Lord Lloyd Webber’s debate
7 May 2008**

I’d like to thank Lord Lloyd Webber for drawing our attention to this issue tonight, as well as for his contribution to all of our entertainment. May I just say in passing that I thought Jessie was phenomenal on Saturday night though my other favourite Nancy was Sarah. Indeed, I intend to make “Oliver” something of a strand running through my contribution this evening. So to start with . . . ***“I am reviewing, the situation.....”***

London is a world city. Its arts and culture are world renowned, contributing to the quality of life in the Capital. Some recent Government policies and uncertain tax treatment have given the impression that London does not welcome foreign nationals and those doing business globally. The arts and culture of London counterbalance that unfortunate impression and keep people in London instead of offshore tax havens. Or as Nancy would say: ***“If you don’t mind having to go without things... It’s a fine life.”***

I would prize the value which London’s theatres provide culturally way beyond their immediate economic benefit. However, at a minimum, London’s theatres make an economic contribution of around £1.5bn per year.

But, the contribution of our theatres is threatened by the need to upgrade the building stock to 21st century standards. As John Osborne wrote in his 50’s play, the Entertainer: ***“Don’t clap too hard – it’s a very old building”***. The buildings are even older now.

London is a living city, not a museum. The needs of audiences and artistes should be considered hand in hand with the preservation of buildings, which even Dickens may have considered to be of indifferent quality. They were built to stage shows, not to be considered as future heritage!

Making them meet 21st century disability access requirements, environmental health requirements, fire and evacuation requirements is increasingly difficult.

The radical solution, in many cases, would be to delist them and in some cases to demolish them. Owners and developers would then be free to redevelop the sites to include modern performing arts facilities. In a sporting parallel, the Wembley Towers were treasured, but the quality of the new stadium far outweighs their loss.

There appear to be two options for Government:

- Either preserve the current buildings in aspic and subsidise uneconomic refurbishment, or
- Accept that at least some of the buildings need a less purist approach, thus making it commercially viable to improve them

The current stand off between Theatre owners and the Government is profoundly unhelpful, particularly in the run up to 2012. Please, ***“can we have some more?”***



The prospect of the Olympics turning the limelight directly on London offers fresh opportunity to find solutions. If on the other hand Government is unwilling to help the owners by reviewing the listing of theatres, then it needs to look at the options to subsidise them to make up for their decision.

Some five years ago the Theatres Trust published a compelling report appropriately entitled **Act Now**. (After 5 years of government silence, perhaps it should be called '**Act Then**'). It called for an investment of £250M at 2003 prices to be spent over a 15 year period to raise the quality of theatre buildings. That's roughly £20m a year – a tiny amount of money considering the benefits they bring.

With the Olympics only four years away there is an imperative to **Act Now**. Could we not find £80m from the roundings of the Olympic budget to make an investment which would leave a very manifest and achievable legacy for the UK?

There are many ways for the Minister to help. He could, perhaps, "***pick a pocket or two***" from his Government colleagues? For example, using VAT receipts from theatre ticket sales to help kick-start a refurbishment fund.

Or we could leave the situation as it is. I could say . . . "***oom pa pa oom pa pa that's how it goes : they all suppose what they want to suppose.***"

Instead I call on the Minister to enter into constructive engagement with the theatre owners and then, if you don't mind me saying Minister, . . . "***you could consider yourself one of us***".