

Item 3.1

Minerva/Metro Feasibility Study

File No: S051491

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

I have received a letter from the Hon. Don Harwin, Minister for the Arts, inviting the City of Sydney to co-fund a study into the viability of restoring the former Minerva/Metro in Kings Cross as an operating theatre. The letter is provided at Attachment A to this Minute.

The invitation follows an online petition with over 3,400 signatures calling for the theatre to be restored and suggestions that a private sector proposal to operate the venue will not proceed. The City's nomination to include the site on the State Heritage Register is currently being considered by the Heritage Council of NSW.

The 1,016 seat Minerva opened on 18 May 1939 with *Idiot's Delight*, a Broadway play that warned of a coming world war. It was almost continually used as a live theatre until April 1950, presenting over 100 productions, generally for runs of three to four weeks. Most were commercially successful plays from New York or London, although ballet, children's shows and Australian work were occasionally presented.

Whitehall Productions, the theatre company which leased the theatre from 1941 to 1950, struggled to get audiences in later years. In 1948, the theatre was sold to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. According to theatre historian John Clark, MGM was stopped from evicting Whitehall to enable it to try and recoup the £73,000 (the equivalent of \$4.5 million today) it had lost since 1946. Whitehall's final production, *Dream Girl* by Elmer Rice, closed on 28 April 1950 after a run of three months.

MGM took control of the theatre, converted it into a cinema and renamed it the Metro in 1952. It continued as a cinema throughout the 1950s and 1960s, in later years under Greater Union's ownership.

Harry M. Miller Productions leased the theatre for the first Australian production of *Hair*, which opened in June 1969 and ran until May 1971. It was the most successful show presented at the theatre, helped by the synergies of the theatre's location and *Hair*'s subject matter. It was subsequently used intermittently and not always successfully for live shows until June 1976.

Greater Union sold the theatre in 1979. It was sold again to a company which removed the raked auditorium among other alterations to create a short-lived food fair. In 1982, the building was again sold and converted into a small film studio and offices for Kennedy-Miller Productions. In 2018, the building was listed for sale and subsequently purchased by Abacus Ltd.

Throughout its history as a theatre and cinema, the Minerva/Metro was owned and operated as a commercial venue. Although built as a theatre, the building has been used for that purpose for less than a quarter of its 71-year history, and even less than that as a successful commercial venture.

While there is strong community interest in restoring the Minerva/Metro as a live entertainment venue, the viability of doing so is uncertain. Although the basic theatre fabric is apparently intact, the auditorium, stage and backstage areas would need to be restored and state of the art lighting, sound system, stage machinery and other equipment installed. I have heard estimates that the potential costs could range from \$20 million to \$40 million, if not more.

There is also the question of whether a restored theatre would be regularly used and successful, given its history. The potential costs involved could not be justified if there was a strong risk of the restored theatre remaining dark for extended periods.

A feasibility study could address these concerns by providing a realistic estimate of the restoration costs and its potential future use for live performance and entertainment, including live music. It could also complement the Kings Cross Night-Time Precinct Vision Project being undertaken by the Committee for Sydney.

A feasibility study would be a useful resource to guide the live performance sector should the building be available for purchase. Without it, the possibility of the Minerva/Metro being restored as a live performance venue would be diminished.

Recommendation

It is resolved that Council contribute up to \$10,000 from the 2020/21 General Contingency Fund towards the cost of a feasibility study into restoring the Minerva/Metro Theatre for live performance and entertainment as discussed in this Minute and proposed in the letter from the Minister for the Arts attached to this Minute.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor

Attachments

Attachment A. Letter from the Hon Don Harwin – Special Minister of State, Minister for the Public Service and Employee Relations, Aboriginal Affairs and the Arts