

UNIVERSITY OF
WESTMINSTER

RESTORING THE SOHO POLY

THE HISTORY

From 1972 to 1990, the Soho Poly was London's most important alternative theatre venue. Located in the basement of the University of Westminster's Riding House Street building, it was a radical pioneer of 'lunchtime theatre', dedicated to widening democratic access to the arts. It also gave voice to underrepresented writers, particularly women. Timberlake Wertenbaker, Caryl Churchill, Hanif Kureishi, Simon Callow and Bob Hoskins were just some of the writers, actors and playwrights who cut their teeth here. Many BBC producers from nearby Broadcasting House also commissioned works first showcased at the Soho Poly.

Leaving our premises in 1990, the Soho Poly morphed into today's hugely successful Soho Theatre on Dean Street. Sadly, its former home, the much-loved basement, was left abandoned, despite being one of the very last existing spaces from the 'Fringe boom' and a site of considerable historical importance. In 2012 it was rediscovered by playwright and Head of Creative Writing at the University, Dr Matt Morrison. He, and co-Creative Producer Guy Osborn, have now built on the University's reputation for public engagement through a dynamic series of events including pop-up festivals, new plays, 'Ghost Gigs', poetry readings and exhibitions, and the launching of the Soho Poly Arts Club in 2020.

SohoPoly



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**The Soho Poly
was the equivalent
of Shakespeare's
Rose Theatre for
the alternative
theatre movement**

David Edgar, playwright, in a 2012 interview
with Project Lead Matt Morrison

OUR VISION

The Soho Poly's original 'lunchtime theatre' philosophy was rooted in the inclusive belief that the arts should be an integral part of the ordinary working day. A revived Soho Poly will re-imagine this philosophy for today with a policy committed to 'Disrupting the Everyday' with arts and culture. Our radical financial model will ensure that professional practitioners and community groups are able to use the space for minimum cost in return for the 'quid pro quo' offering of workshops, work experience and mentorship opportunities to the university community and local partners. This will offer a lifeline to struggling companies and individuals, placing a reinvigorated Soho Poly at the forefront of the capital's Covid-19 arts recovery.

The Soho Poly will create a vibrant community hub for inclusivity and wellbeing within the Regent Street and wider London area. It will celebrate our heritage, support the next generation of theatre makers, and enhance access to the arts in the local community. The theatre will offer community engagement and diverse programming to our partners such as Open Age and local schools and provide a contemporary performance and education venue for the wider London arts community.

To achieve this, the theatre needs to be health and safety compliant, and capital works are urgently required in order to realise the enormous future potential of this historic site. These works include disabled access and the creation of a dynamic exhibition space on the floor directly above.

Image credits:

Preceding page: University of Westminster Archive

Above: Rock Townsend Architecture & Design

Below: Nobby Clark / ArenaPAL, from the play 'SUS' by Barrie Keeffe featuring Paul Barber, Roger Allam and Stuart Barren

Following page: Studio Eger / Rock Townsend Architecture & Design



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This is a space with a unique atmosphere, steeped in history. I hope it will be saved to continue its contribution to experimental and community theatre

Jennifer Kavanagh, local workshop participant and Soho resident



'SOHO POLY UPSTAIRS' EXHIBITION AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT SPACE

The floor above the Soho Poly theatre will house the Soho Poly Upstairs – our proposed new Exhibition and Public Engagement Space. This will be a flexible and adaptable window to the world, featuring exhibitions, events, and interactive interpretation panels showcasing the theatre's extraordinary heritage. Drawing upon the University's proud history of public engagement and 'being different', the Soho Poly Upstairs will provide a highly visible interface between the University, the local community and the Creative Industries. The space will also house the entrance to the basement theatre – our restored professional performance venue.

In the spirit of the original Soho Poly, this ground-floor space will be playful, inclusive and friendly. A history wall will display texts, quotes, and images from pivotal past performances. 'Peep' holes will allow visitors to view images and archival footage of actors preparing in the green room, adding to the sense of theatre and secret reveal. A 3D stage model of the original Soho Poly and an 'Urban Village' walking tour, linking to other London arts venues, will illustrate the pivotal role played by the Soho Poly in its heyday. Digital panels will showcase our 'Telling Stories' series, featuring oral histories from past actors and directors, as well as information on the Soho Poly's 'pre-history' when the venue operated as the Polyfolk Club and hosted early rehearsals of Sigma 6, later to morph into Pink Floyd. In honour of the venue's even earlier history as an arts workshop, the Soho Poly Upstairs will also operate as a 'makerspace', showcasing the best of student creative design.

The Soho Poly Upstairs will contribute to the wider project's guiding belief that 'disrupting your day' with arts and culture enhances wellbeing. And it will also demonstrate our commitment to inspiring creativity in all who visit. We will engage wide and diverse audiences, encouraging them to become producers as well as consumers of culture. Our emphasis on openness and public engagement will act as a catalyst for local groups and other key stakeholders to partner with us, learn new skills, and have an opportunity to contribute creative stories of their own.

Welcome to

SohoPoly

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HOW YOU CAN HELP

Aligning with Westminster City Council's recovery of London's West End, we need to raise over £500,000 from our fundraising campaign to fully restore our Soho Poly theatre and Exhibition Space as a major centre for London's post-Covid arts recovery and cultural revival.

Capital works to fully restore the theatre to a high quality include:

- Widening doorways to the theatre enabling disabled access
- Demolition and building a new staircase into the theatre basement
- Building an elevator that connects the basement theatre to the ground floor
- Creating a dynamic multipurpose Exhibition Space on the ground floor above
- Creating an accessible entrance route to the theatre
- Installing a history wall with interpretation and digital panels

Naming opportunities will be available for major support. Benefits including VIP tickets and priority seats at performances, sponsored programmes, seat naming, names upon our donor tree installation and illuminated stair-risers, and branded merchandise will also be available.

To discuss the funding and creative recognition opportunities available, and to find how you can become part of Performing Arts history please get in touch at: development@westminster.ac.uk

The Soho Poly – one of the last remaining 'fringe' venues in London, is a site of significant heritage importance. The university currently has no dedicated performance venue, and in addition to a community hub, your donations will enable our students to see their own creative work performed, and gain professional work experience in marketing, production and technical theatre. This project will place the university at the forefront of a West End Arts Revival.



Soho Poly supported by The National Lottery Heritage Fund