

**PROPOSED LONDON UNDERGROUND
(VICTORIA STATION UPGRADE) ORDER**

OBJECTION BY VICTORIA PALACE (OBJECTOR NO 21)

PROOF OF EVIDENCE OF BRIAN CONLEY

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Background

- 1 I am Brian Conley and I have been a professional performer and actor for more than 30 years.
- 2 I started out in cabaret at the age of 16 and soon had a regular slot on the ITV variety show 'Live From the Palladium' which led to my getting my own show 'This Way Up' and frequent extensive appearances on television including 'The Brian Conley Show', which was regularly watched by more than 12 million viewers.
- 3 I have also appeared on many sitcoms and became a regular on stage in live performances in major theatres throughout the UK, including London's West End. In the West End my appearances include starring roles in *Me and My Girl*, at the Adelphi Theatre, on the Strand; *Elton John's Glasses*, at the Queens Theatre on Shaftesbury Avenue; *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, at the London Palladium, near Oxford Circus; and most notably and relevantly, *Jolson*, at the Victoria Palace. I am currently playing the leading role of Professor Harold Hill in *The Music Man*, at the Festival Theatre, Chichester.

Victoria Palace Theatre

- 4 The Victoria Palace Theatre is one of the great theatres in London, and is held in high regard by the acting community. I am certain that there would be widespread shock and outspoken public protest by the acting profession as a whole if they were to discover that the Victoria Palace's future was at risk; and the risk from becoming unusable through excessive external noise and vibration is just as bad as the risk of being demolished.
- 5 I initiated and played the role of Mr Al Jolson in the very successful Olivier award-winning hit musical *Jolson* at the Victoria Palace for about a year, beginning in the autumn of 1995. The show was critically acclaimed: the Mail on Sunday said it was "the performance of the decade".
- 6 The role required a great deal of research – I wanted it to be more than just an impression of Al Jolson, the Greatest Entertainer in the World, I wanted, for two and a half hours every night to actually be Al Jolson.
- 7 This show contains many of the songs performed by Mr Jolson, and recreated for this production, but it also has many scenes of dialogue, where the Jolson character is discussing his career and his personal relationships. For example, it contains a scene in which the Jolson character is alone, but speaking on the telephone to the President of the United States. This latter scene is one of the quietest, and most moving, in the show. I was always on tenterhooks however, in the expectation that a train might pass during those moments.

- 8 Throughout the many months I was performing at the Victoria Palace, I was always aware of every train that passed, as there is a distinct rumbling - a mixture of noise and vibration, it's hard to know which is which. It was always my hope that no train would happen to pass through during the quieter moments of the show, and particularly during the scene when I speak on the telephone to the President, and I found that constant worry to be very unsettling, making what is a pretty hard job even harder.
- 9 The noise and vibration from trains passing was obviously a distraction to me as an actor. It risked interfering with my concentration on performing the role of Mr Al Jolson satisfactorily. However, when it came at quiet moments in the show, it must also have had a negative effect on audiences' enjoyment of the show, and imagining they were seeing events in another time and place.
- 10 It is absolutely essential for an actor to be able to concentrate entirely on the character he is performing, so that his performance can remain 'in' that character, and not revert to his own personality. An actor also has to concentrate to remember all the actions and movements around the stage, including the lines he is to speak. Any interruption to concentration makes this very difficult and can easily disrupt and ruin a performance. Apart from noise such as the train rumblings which affect the Victoria Palace, customary difficulties are emergency vehicle sirens heard from the street or mobile phones ringing in the audience. That is why theatre managements go to such lengths to remind audiences to silence mobile phones and other devices, and why some actors (most famously Richard Griffiths) have refused to continue performing after a mobile phone has rung a second time until the offending audience member has left. A distraction of that sort can completely ruin the atmosphere of a play which the actors have attempted to build up so carefully.
- 11 All such distractions from outside the play make it even more difficult for the actor to achieve a realistic portrayal of his character. They also bring the audience 'back into the real world' and make it harder for audience members to enjoy the play they are seeing, which needs them to 'suspend their disbelief' and feel they are witnessing the world and the characters and their actions being portrayed on stage. When you take into account the work which goes into the staging of a show, not only from the actors and directors with weeks and weeks of rehearsals and punishing schedules, but also, literally behind the scenes in set design, wardrobe, lighting, front of house [etc?], it is a terrible shame if all that is ruined by incipient repetitive noise reminding not only the actors, but also the audience that they are sitting in a theatre after all.

Conclusion

- 12 In my opinion, the level of noise and vibration which the underground trains cause in the Victoria Palace Theatre at the moment (or at least in 1995-6) was just acceptable for performers in a musical production; but even at that level the noise and vibration would have made it difficult for any actor to be in a non-musical production there.

- 13 As an actor, I believe that any significant increase in the level of noise and vibration would make non-musical productions impossible, and also cause serious difficulties to any musical production. Certainly, I cannot imagine that actors would want to perform in the Victoria Palace Theatre if the intrusion of underground train noise and vibration into their performances was any worse than it was for me in *Jolson* in 1995-6.
- 14 It would be a great shame, and a huge loss to the world of theatre if the Victoria Palace could no longer host the vast majority of productions due to noise issues.