

Bid to Revive Ward Theatre

ON December 12, the outside of the Ward Theatre in downtown Kingston will be transformed into a spectacular setting with guests arriving in carriages to enjoy a magnificent night of entertainment, packed with star-studded performances, to recreate a 'Night at the Ward' on the theatre's 97th birthday.

The celebrations will be the first of a series of local and international fundraising events, to be held over a three-year period, in a bid to raise funds for the grand reopening of the theatre on its centennial birthday in December 2012, and to raise awareness of its significance in the island's rich cultural history. The theatre, one of Jamaica's national treasure, has fallen into a state of disrepair and needs US\$20 million for its restoration. Details of the three-year restoration programme, which is being spearheaded by the Ward Theatre Centennial Committee, under the guidance of the Ward Theatre Foundation, was outlined at the launch of the Ward Theatre Centennial Celebration at the Spanish Court Hotel in Kingston on Thursday. "The goal is to fully restore the Ward Theatre to its magnificent glory but also to raise the bar to ensure that the Ward is the most modern cultural performing arts centre in the Caribbean with all the modern components to put on world-class events not only from folk music, plays and dance but all aspects of what represent the cultural richness of this country and to attract international performances once again," said Neil Lowe, who heads the centennial committee. The December 12 event, which will feature live entertainment by local artistes, will be followed by a series of monthly concerts with local and international acts, along with art shows, plays and auctions. On the international side, Lowe said a campaign titled 'Save the Ward' will be launched in all the major Diaspora cities in Canada, England and the United States in January 2010, and each city will have its own series of fund-raising events.

He said that the committee is hoping to raise between US\$20 million and US\$25 million from the events, and that work should start on the theatre by February 2010 to be completed in time for the 2012 celebration. Sydney Bartley, principal director for culture in the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Culture, hailed the programme and emphasised the significance of the theatre to Jamaica's rich cultural history. He disclosed that Minister of Youth, Sport and Culture Olivia "Babsy" Grange has pledged her support and has promised to source funds to support the cause. "It's a very good plan to use the two years for Ward centennial celebration for 2012 and also to strategically leverage the fact that it comes at the time of the country's 50th anniversary of independence, so the development of the Ward will be ensured," he said.