

## **Lusaka Playhouse opens membership to the public**

### **THE MAST**

**APRIL 16** - The Lusaka Theatre Club has opened its doors to new members.

Artists and the public can join the beleaguered cultural institution, popularly known as the Playhouse.

Future members from the art fraternity and art patrons (members of the public) can now join as members and shareholders.

The membership fee is K350, while shareholders pay an additional 1,000 after a probational membership period of three months.

Membership applications are open until April 30.

"I am calling artists and anyone who wants to rebuild the playhouse to pay up for membership and become shareholders," says Sampa Kangwa, an artist.

Shareholders have the right to vote and can stand for positions, but members cannot.

Kangwa says it makes little sense to be a member without voting rights.

"It's a bizarre clause that will cleverly exclude many artists from voting or being voted into leadership positions. Unfortunately, the current economic situation makes it hard for many artists to afford K1350 to become a member and a shareholder," she said.

In May 2022, a plan by the board and management of the Theatre Club to turn its car park into a filling station as part of a 25-year lease to Hass Petroleum Limited was condemned across the country.

Artists, policy makers, stakeholders, and members of the public described the plan as retrogressive and not in the interest of building the art industry and would violate the institution's cultural and historic character.

In a petition to the Lusaka City Council, artists accused the board of making decisions without consultation, inclusion, participation, and consensus from the wider art community and other stakeholders.

For their part, the board, then led by Henry Phiri, defended the plan as a source of revenue for the cash-strapped club to help keep it afloat and maintain its dilapidated infrastructure.

The Lusaka City Council moved in quickly to cancel the temporal permit following a public petition against the plans.

"We stopped the permit in response to the huge public interest and a petition against the development," explained Chilando Chitangala, the mayor of Lusaka.

Subsequently, on August 22, 2022, the Energy Regulation Board announced a revision in its regulations for the siting of petroleum infrastructure, forbidding the construction of filling stations within a 50-meter radius of auditoriums, schools, churches, markets, and bus stops, among others.

Opened in 1958, the Lusaka Playhouse remains one of the city's most iconic and historical landmarks and has staged thousands of theatre and art productions.

The petition also called for the intervention of the Government of Zambia to protect and declare the property as a national treasure of historical and cultural significance to the country.

"The membership drive, in particular, the shareholding, comes as part of a small, but welcome victory after more than a decade of exclusion and overwhelming rejection of membership applications from artists," says Kangwa, one of the petition leaders.

"This is a window of opportunity for artists to join the Playhouse, re-build it, re-brand, and re-adapt to a changing cultural industry."

The new membership drive ends on April 30.