

British Theatre Archives: Scattered but Accessible

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Abstract: Theatres are often under-funded, yet they produce a vast amount of archival material that is not limited to documents. The archival material produced by a theatre has immediate value to future performances, whether through the re-use of costumes and props, or through the analysis of stage directions and/or video recordings of previous performances. The trend in digitizing archival and special collections materials provides new opportunities for access to finding aids and collections. However, most theatre archives cannot afford to provide this level of access to their collections or even the traditional option of in person research opportunities. The focus of this study is to examine the archives of selected British theatres, theatre companies and educational/cultural organizations to determine how the archives are managed, how collections differ based on the type of institution in which they are housed, and access to the collections. Unlike existing work on theatre archives, this research looks critically at the various manifestations of archives related to theatre and how the type of institution maintaining a collection affects its completeness, organization and accessibility.

Keywords: Theatre, Performing Arts, Archival Collections, Access, Britain

“We do on stage things that are supposed to happen off. Which is a kind of integrity, if you look on every exit being an entrance somewhere else.”

— Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1994)

1. Introduction

Theatres often cannot afford to employ archivists, yet they produce a vast amount of archival material, not all of it documents. The archival material produced by a theatre has immediate value to future performances, whether through the re-use of costumes and props, or through the analysis of stage directions and/or video recordings of previous performances. The focus of this study is to examine the archives of selected British theatres, theatre companies and educational/cultural organizations to determine how the archives are managed, how collections differ based on the type of institution in which they are housed and how accessible the collections are to the public and researchers. Unlike existing work on theatre archives, this paper looks at the various manifestations of archives related to theatre and how the type of institution maintaining a collection affects its completeness, organization and accessibility.

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Literature Review

Searching for information about theatre archives reveals that relatively little can be found about theatre archives in the form of published material. The majority of material takes the form of directories listing the available archives in a given country as seen in the *Directory of Performing Arts Resources* (1998) and Innes, Carlstrom and Fraser (1999). The Theatre Library Association in North America publishes an occasional journal, *Performing Arts Resources* (2001, 2004, 2008). The Society for Theatre Research in Britain also publishes a journal entitled *Theatre Notebook*, but it deals more with research and performances than with resources related to theatres or performances. In her article "Performing Arts Archives" and other works, Francesca Marini (2007, 2008) looks at the issues related to archiving performing arts materials and how scholars and members of the profession utilize them. These works do not consider how the nature of the institution housing an archive impacts its maintenance and accessibility to researchers and the public at large.

Methodology

The following research into specific companies, educational/cultural institutions, "corporate" theatre groups and individual theatre archives reveals that archival material related to the theatre takes many forms and finds a home wherever it can. Beginning with the Royal Shakespeare Company and concluding with a look at individual theatres, this paper focuses on a select few but important archival collections related to theatre. The methodology has been to examine the Royal Shakespeare Company Archives held by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Shakespeare's Globe Library and Archive, the University of Bristol Theatre Collection, the Victoria and Albert Theatre and Performance Archive, Delfont Mackintosh Theatres Ltd. and the Royal Theatre Haymarket in turn. Research into these theatre collections included website analysis and consultation, consultation of pertinent directories for British theatre archives and contacting archivists or other staff directly when necessary. Contacting theatre archivists and staff was often the only way to find out information on an individual theatre or a corporate group of theatres.

Results by Archive

Royal Shakespeare Company

The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Library and Archive contains collections that cover all aspects of Shakespeare's life, work, times, and the history of Stratford upon Avon. The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Library and Archive also maintains the Royal Shakespeare Company Archive. This archive includes production materials covering the history of the Royal Shakespeare Company and its predecessor, the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, from 1879 to the present. The archive includes photographs, programs, prompt books, reviews, and designs and houses video recordings of productions from 1982. The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Library and Archive takes responsibility for

the maintenance of the collection with no monetary contribution from the Royal Shakespeare Company for staff or preservation.

While the library works on retroactively converting their card catalog into an online searchable catalog, the Royal Shakespeare Company's performance database can be used to search for productions, performances, plays and people involved in the productions. Productions can be searched for press nights to order programs and cast and crew details. Names can be searched to look for productions that involved a particular actor or director. Theatre can be searched for archival materials such as prompt books, photographs, music, videos and production records as detailed on their website. The online catalog and the availability of the collection within the library and archive in the heart of Stratford-upon-Avon facilitate access for the public and some of the production images are available online. However, while the library and archive maintain production materials from the Royal Shakespeare Company, it appears that institutional records related to the day-to-day functions of the company have not been placed in the care of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.

Shakespeare's Globe

Shakespeare's Globe contains three distinct types of archives: the performance archive, the costume archive and the institutional archive. The performance archive holds items relating to the actual performances, such as recordings, prompt books, wardrobe bibles, and an assortment of reviews and ephemera from Globe productions since its opening in 1996. The costume archive contains a selection of costumes created using carefully researched and reproduced Elizabethan techniques. Shakespeare's Globe also has a library that holds texts and criticism of plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries, as well as twentieth-century and current works on the Globe, Shakespeare and his contemporaries, theatre history and social and cultural history of early modern England. The library catalog is available online but no online access is available for the archives.

Not all theatres or companies manage to hold on to complete records of their activities and productions. In some cases, they may have maintained them for an extensive period of time or at least kept the material without taking particular efforts for maintenance before choosing to pass the collections on to an educational or cultural institution better capable of caring for and providing access to the materials. This is often frequently the case for private collections related to the theatre, either the personal papers of those associated with theatre or individuals building artificial collections. Two of the most prominent repositories for theatre materials are the University of Bristol Theatre Collection and the Victoria and Albert Museum in partnership with the National Art Library.

University of Bristol Theatre Collection

Looking at the University of Bristol's massive theatre collections reveals the many ways in which the archives can be organized in an educational

institution. Once removed from their theatre of origin, the collections can no longer be considered institutional. The University of Bristol Theatre Collection was founded in 1951 and has since expanded and become a fully accredited museum and theatrical research center. It still serves as a research resource for the drama department at the University of Bristol and for the Bristol community. The collection focuses on British theatre history, with strengths in Victorian theatre, post World War II theatre, live and performance art, theater in the South West and scenery and costume design. A significant portion of the holdings has come from donations and bequests of collectors and professionals who wished to preserve a record of the theatre in Britain.

One of the largest and potentially most significant artificial collections created by the University of Bristol Theatre Collection is the women's theatre collection. It creates a record of women's contribution to theatre, which includes playwrights, directors, actors, characters, administrators and theatre groups. Scripts by women of performed but not necessarily published plays have a tendency to be lost as companies move onto new projects or cease operations, but in 1990 the Theatre Collection established this collection to preserve them and make them available to scholars.

The University of Bristol Theatre Collection continues to grow in size and prominence. Recently they were chosen to receive the world-renowned Mander & Mitchenson Theatre Collection. This move will create one of the world's largest theatre history collections. The combination of artwork, recordings, props, photography, costumes and ceramics with a vast array of archival material is expected to provide a comprehensive record of British professional theatre, which is described on their website. It is important to note that the level of access to the collections online is much higher with the University of Bristol Theatre Collection than with either the Royal Shakespeare Company or Shakespeare's Globe. While it does not make everything available and not all collections have an online finding aid, the presence of video along with images and finding aids makes it more accessible to the public at large.

Victoria and Albert Theatre and Performance Archives

The theatre and performance archives held by the Victoria and Albert Museum and the National Art Library comprise a varied range of materials and collections, much like those held by the University of Bristol Theatre Collection. The Victoria and Albert theatre and performance collections include archives from performing arts companies and other organizations associated with the performing arts, as well as from individual performers, stage designers and private collectors among others. Their particular strength is in the archives of government bodies for the arts, such as the Arts Council. All of their archival collections hold a wide range of materials, among which there may be diaries, letters, manuscripts, photographs, institutional business records, newspaper cuttings and designs. They may also contain a variety of the ephemera typical of the theatre such as playbills and programs. They have organized and indexed the collections with as much variation as the collections themselves.

The theatre and performance collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum and the National Art Library does make some of its content available online. Images as well as finding aids are provided though by no means for every collection. Perhaps its most significant contribution to theatre archiving to date is its collaboration with the Theatre Information Group in efforts to establish a National Performance Database. To date the database infrastructure and data seem to be in place, and the member organizations are seeking funding for final implementations and launch of the service according to their website.

Delfont Mackintosh Theatres Ltd.

Delfont Mackintosh Theatres operates seven theatres, five freeholds and two very long leases, which have all undergone or are undergoing refurbishments to maintain their role as prominent establishments in London's West End, which is detailed on their website. According to their archivist, Rosy Runciman, the main archive for the seven theatres is maintained at the Head Office of Delfont Mackintosh Theatres Ltd. in Bedford Square. She also mentioned that the Prince of Wales Theatre has an archive of its own that had been in place for some years, and they have chosen not to alter that arrangement. For the seven theatres under the Delfont Mackintosh umbrella, they keep posters, programs, leaflets, and information and photographs about the architectural history of each theatre. Using the material on hand as well as available in other theatre archives they have created an extensive exhibition about each theatre's architectural and production history since it first opened as they have been refurbished.

When asked about other archives holding collections related to or from any of their theatres, Ms Runciman mentioned that the Victoria and Albert Museum theatre collections are more comprehensive than those held by Delfont Mackintosh Theatres in many respects. This is due primarily to the fact that the museum and its collections were established long before Delfont Mackintosh Theatres. The organization only took over the running of some of the theatres, such as Wyndham's and the Noel Coward as recently as 2006. She mentioned that the Albery family formerly owned both of these theatres and sold the archives to the Harry Ransom Centre. For this reason the joint archives held by Delfont Mackintosh Theatres had to start from scratch in terms of rebuilding a collection for their use. This can be contrasted with the substantial collection maintained and kept at the Prince of Wales Theatre prior to its acquisition by Delfont Mackintosh Theatres. She also mentioned Bristol University Theatre Collection's acquisition of the Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection, and said that the collection is superior to those held by the theatre group.

Royal Theatre Haymarket

A historical note in the program for a recent production of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (2011) at the Royal Theatre Haymarket revealed that they were attempting to gather archival materials related to the theatre. Ms Cath Penny is not the archivist for the theatre but rather a historian working on a collaborative project between the theatre and a university that requires archiving

in order to complete the larger project. She deals primarily with historical materials, not records related to the theatre's operation. She explained the types of materials they hold and the specific situation with the archives in more detail.

Currently the Royal Theatre Haymarket holds a variety of documents dating back from 1780, with a few earlier, to about 1970. According to Ms Penny, "They take the form of receipt books dealing with box office sales, bar takings, wages for staff and actors along with Director's minutes." The fullest records come from the Frederick Harrison period, and they also have an extensive collection of First Night issues and several volumes of contracts between the theatre management and playwrights/actors/producers going back to 1810. They have a large collection of signed photographs, drawings and original watercolors documenting productions and alterations to the building. There are also books, prompt books and annotated prompt copies, the earliest of which is one from Samuel Foote's day in the mid to late seventeenth century. There is also a robust collection of programs that date from the 1800s.

Private ownership has resulted in the dismemberment of the institutional archives as such, with possibly some help from a fire. Production related materials remain largely intact because their association lies with the physical theatre, whereas records seem to go the way of the owner or company associated with the theatre. She also mentioned that the Victoria and Albert Museum and the archives at Westminster Council hold extensive collections of Royal Theatre Haymarket material and that still more lies in the hands of private collectors.

Other theatres

The *Directory of Performing Arts Resources* released in 1998 by the Society for Theatre Research and the former Theatre Museum (now absorbed into its parent body, the Victoria and Albert Museum) provides a nearly comprehensive list of available theatre archives in Britain. The list for London includes only three individual theatres, though the Prince of Wales Theatre is not one of them and Ms Runciman of Delfont Mackintosh Theatres mentioned they have had their own independent archive for a number of years. The three theatres mentioned in the directory are the Theatre Royal Drury Lane; the London Palladium Theatre, which also holds material for the Stoll Moss Theatre; and the Finsbury Archive, which is listed as containing the Sadler's Wells Collection, considered one of the "largest collections of material in London on an individual theatre" according to the *Directory of Performing Arts Resources* (1998). Gauging by the information contained in the directory, individual theatres maintaining their own archives has not been a prevalent trend in London. It would also seem from the example of the Royal Theatre Haymarket that a theatre may retain a large amount of material without making a concerted effort to maintain, organize or provide access to it.

Conclusion

Theatre archives take on vastly different structures depending on the organization responsible for their maintenance. An archive maintained by its

respective theatre or company varies significantly from an archive maintained by a larger cultural or educational institution. While removed from their parent institutions, archives held by larger organizational bodies such as the University of Bristol or the Victoria and Albert Museum often have the advantages of better maintenance and more accessibility for research. Individual theatres may not be able employ an archivist of their own or take the time and care with their archives that a larger institutional body can give them. Looking into the details of case studies on theatre collections transferred to educational or cultural institutions in the United States reveals some of the issues that can result for isolated theatres or companies attempting to maintain their own archives.

The transference of the archives of the Shakespeare Festival to the New York Public Library demonstrated the sheer amount of material that can accumulate in a theatre or company over a relatively short span of time. Rogan (2011) estimated 2500 linear feet, and it was spread across multiple physical locations and comprised a variety of formats. Compared with theatres and companies in the United Kingdom that have, in many cases, been operating for over two hundred years, it is no wonder that maintaining and providing access to archival materials is beyond private or small enterprises. The movement to the digital age has also proved to be something that only well-supported, large institutions can manage and even then with limitations. Smaller operations such as individual theatres or even corporate-structured theatre groups cannot manage to provide online access to databases of materials held, let alone images or recordings. Even in the case of the Royal Shakespeare Company Archive and Shakespeare's Globe, the online availability is far more limited than that of the University of Bristol Theatre Collection or the Victoria and Albert Museum. However, there is the movement spearheaded by the Victoria and Albert Museum under the Theatre Information Group to form an online database of performances for the entirety of Great Britain that will hopefully fill some of the gap in online information about theatre performances.

One thing that is clear is that in one form or another, in one location or another or many, theatre archives survive into the future. Depending on the theatre or collection, they may or may not have complete institutional records, they will probably not retain costumes except in special cases, they will maintain detailed and complete production files, and in many cases a private collector or individual responsible for the creation of records related to the theatre will retain them and donate them one day in the future. They may not reside with the theatre or company of origin or at least will not reside there indefinitely, but theatre records and archival materials will be acquired, processed and made accessible to researchers and the public once they pass into the hands of a larger cultural or educational institution.

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