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Should Theatre Disappear Like Soap Bubbles?

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The late Sir Peter Hall claimed in an interview that he was happy for his materials to disappear “like soap bubbles” (Reason, 2006). Sir Peter Hall was the Artistic Director of the National Theatre from 1973 to 1988 and a significant proportion of the NT Archive relates to his work, so it is fair to say that I was saddened to read this about Hall’s approach to the afterlife of his work. But this goes to demonstrate the approach that some practitioners take to their work and epitomizes the difficulties that performing arts archivists can face.

The National Theatre Archive aims to document, preserve and make accessible everything related to the history of the National Theatre and its ongoing activities. This is a broad remit and collections span as far back as the mid-1800s with the movement to found the National Theatre and go right up to present day.

We split our collection into three sections, which helps us with budgeting, access and cataloguing planning. The first area is the Cultural Archive, which contains all of the material relating to productions. We archive programs and posters for all productions. We take three sets of photographs: technical, rehearsal and production. The prompt scripts along with rehearsal notes, running order and blocking and cuing information comes to the Archive along with the costume bible with fitting images, swatches of cloth and designs. The stage management reports are archived from every night of every show and we also archive all of the press reviews for our productions. We have recorded all of our productions since 1995 and receive all NT Live recordings into the Archive, including those we broadcast from other theatres, which are all free to view for visitors.

What is not included in the above list is set models. We keep a sample set of these as they are very large and usually remain the ownership of the designer. Our sample set includes the model of our first production, *Hamlet* in 1963 designed by Sean Kenney as well as a range of shows throughout the years that demonstrate particularly interesting or innovative uses of our stages. We do not actively collect costumes as we have a costume and props hire department which is a lucrative commercial arm of the theatre though we do hold a small number of historical costumes from the 1960s. This Cultural section of the Archive is what is accessed most frequently by researchers and where the majority of cataloguing is focused. Our online catalogue lists this whole section as well as hosts our production database, which is up to date to within a week and holds information on each play, its opening, closing and press nights, length of performance and duration of run as well as the names and roles of the all-important cast and creatives. This performance database is the backbone of our work and we are now relied on by all departments at the NT for our historical data on performances, exhibitions, readings and events at the NT. We use CALM’s performance database and our online catalogue is available through [CALMView](#).

The Business Archive holds all of the administrative and legal documentation of the National Theatre including board papers, strategy documents,

architectural plans and refurbishment information. The NT Archive was formed as a business archive and functions as such alongside the cataloguing and access requirements of the Cultural Archive.

The third section of the Archive is that of the external collections. We do not actively collect but we have had several collections donated to us and hold the Shakespeare Memorial National Theatre Collection charting the movement to found the NT as well as the Jocelyn Herbert design archive. The latter is used extensively in learning activity with the University of the Arts London. We run a two-week intensive course with the second year BA Theatre Design students and a term long course with the MA Curating and Collections students resulting in independent exhibitions curated by each student at the Cook House at Chelsea College of Art.

The former project, run most recently in October 2017, resulted in all groups conducting practice-based research. The most rewarding outcomes of the project were the boost in students' confidence in using an archive for research and the awareness they gained of the importance of documenting their own design work. This was particularly evidence with the group, who were frustrated by the lack of information to be found in Jocelyn Herbert's archive about how she had painted glass projection slides and how she had then effectively projected the backdrop onto the set. We could use this example to explain to the design students the importance of documenting their process for their own reference as well as those in the future who may wish to study their practice. This is an ideal juncture in their professional careers to encourage serious thought around the documentation of their process and we hope that working with this collection will encourage other design students to consider this too. 2017 was the second year we have worked with the BA students and we are hoping that their work with the archive will inform their dissertation topics in their third year.

The MA Curating and Collections students tend to come from a fine art background and a huge array of countries. This has resulted in the students drawing out parallels and comparisons in Herbert's work that the Archive team would not have seen or thought to make. These students bring fresh thinking to the topics they are exhibiting on and produce a workbook around their research, which provides a basis for the research of the following year's students.

The NT also co-manages the Jocelyn Herbert post-doctoral research fellowship with the University of Arts London and we are actively looking to expand learning work with the collection. As of January 2018, there will be three Jocelyn Herbert fellows working on various research areas such as set models, visual dramaturgy and early design at the English Stage Company. These fellows are involved in archive activities where possible including exhibition curation, inductions and workshops with students.

We also hold external collections donated by staff members such as the Catherine Fleming collection, who was the NT's first voice coach as well as two collections relating to the building of the National Theatre building on the South Bank. These hold valuable information about the decision making behind the location of the building and how it was designed and built.

The splitting of the collections into these three sections has helped us to consider future strategies for the Archive. We have focused cataloguing and digitization on the Cultural Archive as it is the most heavily used by our researchers. The Archive has a mixed pool of researchers from the general public who may want to catch up on productions to theatre practitioners to academics who could be studying playwrights, directors, genres, architecture or any other of a plethora of subjects. We are averaging around 3,500 visitors per year. We also host around 100 school and university visits per year from Key Stage 3 to 5 as well as groups of university students, both undergraduate and postgraduate levels studying a variety of topics. These audiences drive our strategies in the Archive and our work is focused on improving our service for them as well as attracting newer audiences.

That is a quick overview of the Archive and what we can offer in the research room, we also work extensively with the Learning department on events and exhibitions, with Marketing on social media content, and with Press and Publications on sourcing images and making sure that what we send out to the world is a true narrative on the history of the NT.

This split in the Archive has also allowed us to see where we may have gaps in the collection. We do not have much documentation of theatre making processes and so we are actively working to close this gap and ensure that we are documenting the ever-changing processes in use at the NT. If you are familiar with the arguments of Peggy Phelan (2006), Rebecca Schneider (2011) and Mathew Reason (2006), you'll know of the rife debate around documenting performance. As a performing arts archivist, it is my role to capture as much as remains from a performance but, in my role at the moment, I do not wish to affect the production process by having a view to having better or different documentation. At the NT, the production will always come first.

Operating within this limited framework, the Archive team is seeking to fill the current gaps in the collections. One area that is lacking is around staff voices, which are always so difficult to capture in an archive. We are continuing with an oral history project, which focuses on recording the experience and memories of those who have been related to the National Theatre for a long period of time. We have been capturing their memories of what it was like to work for the NT when it opened in the 1960s as well as how the transfer to the new building in 1976 felt for them. Recently we have recorded histories from people who have held the positions of Head of Publications, Art Director, Music Director and Video Designer, which gives you an idea of the breadth of work that we are aiming to document. By

focusing on the people who have worked at the National Theatre for a long time a researcher can get a sense of the ethos and strategic vision of the organization, how this was disseminated to the workforce and how that impacted on productions. This will really augment the Archive's collections and offer interesting angles for interpretation of a production.

There are some things, however, that are trickier to ensure are captured in the Archive. We are always keeping an eye on the horizon for projects that the NT is undertaking in order to prepare for the ultimate archiving requirements. As information professionals are aware, augmented and virtual reality along with the likes of 360-degree films are now very present issues for archivists. The NT has set up an Immersive Storytelling Studio in the same building as the Archive, which was established to examine how virtual reality, 360-degree film, augmented reality and other emerging technologies can widen and enhance the NT's remit to be a pioneer of dramatic storytelling and enable audiences to stand in other people's shoes. Theatre regularly uses technology to enhance the theatrical experience, or to allow creative teams to do things that might otherwise be difficult or impossible. The Immersive Storytelling Studio commissions new work to be experienced through or to incorporate these technologies. Some of the projects are originated entirely within the NT while others are developed in partnership with creative, technical and commercial collaborators. We are well aware in the Archive that we are going to need to start planning for how we capture this material for the future and are following developments in this area with great interest.

Alongside the Immersive Storytelling Studio, the Archive shares the NT Studio building with the New Work department. New Work is the engine room for the NT's creative output, developing work and artists for our stages and beyond.

It might seem odd that the Archive shares a building with this department, but we are starting to make the relationship really blossom. Not only are we on hand for all of the artists in residence to research and develop their ideas but we are now actively involved in some of the department's projects.

I am going to highlight one of these projects in particular though I cannot detail any specifics as the project is confidential. I was approached by the creative team to be involved from the very beginning of the project as it had an archival element, which required my input during the process of making the production. I have never worked collaboratively with a director before, so it was quite an eye opener for me to be part of such a creative and free flowing environment. I was specifically called on for my experience in documentation and practical knowledge of materials, labelling, and digital and analogue preservation.

Throughout the project I was involved in key decisions around design, technology and how the project was to be archived. What was challenging was that the creative team wanted to take advice from me about how they labelled their files before they came to the Archive. They were reluctant to manage the content

themselves. I tried to ensure that they created the content in the way that suited the project and that this was then transferred to the Archive where we would catalogue it. It is positive that they wanted to take advice about their content from the Archive, I am well aware that this is a small victory in itself, but they were unwilling to use their own logic on the project and we risked losing the identity of the creators as a result. This is not something that I had considered before the project but can completely understand—it was odd for everyone to have the Archive involved but we have now got to a place where the materials are in the Archive including the creatives' comments and notes and the material is all catalogued and ready for their future life.

All in all, it was a really important opportunity for the Archive to be involved in a project from start to finish and for me to appreciate the process that the creative team goes through. It is all too easy to continue to accept the same materials from creative teams season after season and not to question whether this is a true documentation of the creative process so this project was useful as an eye opener to the many other materials that may be useful to the archive collections. This is something that I want to learn more about and the New Work department are supportive of the idea of me being embedded in their work in some way to explore the formative steps of a production and follow the production through to completion and staging. This role of an “embedded archivist” is an interesting concept; does this need to be an information professional who could be termed an outsider in the rehearsal room or could there be a creative involved in the process who champions documentation on behalf of the archive? The most important thing is not to disrupt the creative process by the method of documenting it. I hope to develop research and opportunities in the New Work department around this subject in the coming seasons.

Separately, the New Work department and I have recently been in conversation with a designer, who is fascinated by the idea of documenting the invisible threads that are woven to create a production. She is interested in the relationships between craftspeople, designers and those on stage. Oftentimes an actor has no idea who made his suit or her cardigan but in fact there is a complicated web of relationships behind the scenes, many times covering disparate parts of the country, that all work to create a coherent whole on the night. How do you document these relationships and what would this documentation look like? An exhibition, a series of photographs, an installation?

We are having a two-day workshop on this in spring 2018 to try to answer these questions. The New Work department are bringing together designers, artists, digital producers and directors to tackle this subject and I will be there too to offer input from the archive sector. It should be an interesting forum for some blue sky thinking around this topic and hopefully we can come up with a strategy for documenting this particular area of the design process.

Alongside these projects, I have noticed an increase in these sorts of conversations, including the DocPerform project. At the 2017 APAC symposium—APAC is the Association of Performing Arts Collections, offering a network for all archives, libraries and museums holding performing arts content in the UK—the focus was on bridging the gap between archivists and researchers. As archivists there can often be a gulf between our work and that of academics who want to access collections. Conversations can be difficult if academics have unrealistic expectations of what archives can provide them with and if archivists are not open to the ideas of access.

This APAC symposium covered a lot of areas from collaborative doctoral projects with embedded academics to using archives for teaching within universities. But the most interesting and empowering outcome of the day for me was the idea of the triangle of communication that is absolutely necessary to ensure the future integrity of performing arts collections. Currently there are a lot of conversations happening within the archive sector, in our own echo chamber and there is plenty of academic research on the subject with many conversations happening between the two. But what we really need is a lively debate and discussion involving the people creating that content, practitioners, those looking after that content, archivists and those wanting to access that content, researchers. It is only by having a free discussion between these three groups that we can ensure that all requirements are being met and a true representation of a process is documented.

What I find challenging as a performing arts archivist is encouraging creatives to document their process in a way that will be accessible in the future. Some are incredibly keen to engage with the Archive and use their work in education and also to ensure its legacy. Others, though, as the title of this paper suggests, are not as keen. It is only through engaging practitioners that we can have a fully informed discussion and start to tackle the big issues around documentation and unlock the huge potential for future research.

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