Participatory Community Archives

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About me

- MLIS, University of Washington
- BA Community Studies, University of Massachusetts
- Studies in Scenic and Lighting Design for Theatre, Shenandoah Conservatory
- Community Collections Archivist
  - Work with traditionally marginalized communities
  - Support other community-related collections (e.g. local theatres, grass-roots orgs., clubs, etc.)

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Outline

- Historical bias in archives
  - History of professional practice
  - Alienation of communities
- Community archives
  - Self-organized archives
  - Attempts to change archival practice
- Theatre archives
  - Some current approaches

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Historical Bias in Archives

Evolution of archival practice

- Evidence archives: c.1800 – c.1945
- Memory archives: c.1945 – c.1975
- Identity archives: c.1975 – 2010s
- Community archives: 2010s – future

Archival paradigms as defined by Dr. Terry Cook (1947-2014), Associate Professor of Archival Theory, University of Manitoba and noted archival scholar.

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Evidence archives: c.1800 – c.1945

- Publicly available archives: French

- Provenance & Original Order ideas: German, Dutch

- Archives are the mechanism of state transparency

- Archival objects are products of government

Les Misérables

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Archives existed to document and record the actions of government

Documentation was made available to the public

Archivists did not select what to archive – they archived everything

Transparency through public access to records – ideal of French Revolutionaries

Ideas of Provenance and preservation of original order developed via German and Dutch influences

Foundations for modern archival practice developed in Europe during this time

Memory archives: c.1945 - c.1975

- WWI, WWII, Depression Era social programs lead to LOTS of new records
- Archivists begin selecting what to keep
- Focus is on serving historians
- Attempts to adjudicate and preserve the objective truth

Allegiance

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Plethora of new records following WWI, WWII, Depression Era social programs
Archivists had to become gatekeepers – select the material that would be preserved
Preference for things historians would use – historians (and archivists) were White cis-gender male heterosexual Christian and affluent – So were the people they chose to document
They set up an idea of preserving objective truth discounting the realities of the inherent bias in their practice

7

Identity archives: c.1975 - 2010s

- Civil rights movement shifts archival focus
- New definition of "truth" to include multiple perspectives
- Shift to archives as cultural heritage institutions
- Emphasis on representational diversity
- Slow realization that not everyone shares European ideas of historical preservation

Hair

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Vietnam, Flower Children, the sexual revolution, the Civil Rights Movement, the Gay Rights Movement, the Women's Rights Movement
Societal pressures shifted the focus of archival practice
Archives become cultural heritage institutions and work to preserve the multiple truths "revealed" by these movements
The emphasis is on "diversifying" the archives by seeking any and all documentation of the identifiable "other"
General adherence to European ideals of documentation, preservation, organization, and description – belief that traditional methods and systems are the only way to do archival practice
Slow realization of other systems of knowledge

Community archives: 2010s - future

- Possible shift happening now
- Explosion of content – everyone is a content creator (e.g. YouTube)
- Recognition that removal from community to institution can alter document meaning
- Archivist shifting from institutionally-bound authority to expert guide, mentor, and partner

The Wizard of Ahhhs

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Today – new emphasis on respect for community as an authority on themselves

Tons of new content – no way to preserve it all

Traditional practice would say selection and appraisal are key to choosing what to archive

Slow shift happening to recognize communities as the authority on themselves

New recognition that removal of content from its context and placing in an institution changes its meaning

Methods of archival practice where archivist is no longer the authority but an expert guide, mentor, and partner being developed

Examples of community created content: The Wizard of Ahhhs; Cinderonce; Hipster Disney Princess – The Musical; Harry Potter in 99 Seconds

Community Archives

Responses to archival marginalization

- If you want something done right, do it yourself
- Reject archives and their methods
- Influence archival practice

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If you want something done right…

- Spurred by lack of representation in traditional archives

- Led by professional archivists within the community

- Focus on digital collection of surrogates

- Extensive outreach to the community

ROAD TRIPS PROJECT
Reimagining an American Tradition
South Asian American Digital Archives

Share your story.
Help us reimagine this American tradition by sharing your photos and memories!

Get started ↗

http://roadtrips.saada.org

02/23/18

12

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Frustration by archivists from underrepresented communities led to the creation of archives specifically designed to serve the needs of those communities
Emphasis is on community engagement, documentation of culture – AND participation of the community in describing that culture
There is no requirement that the community relinquish ownership of their history to an institution (often an institution that mistreated them in the past)
Because the archive is "home-grown" it has a level of trust the institutions of the dominant culture do not

Reject archives and their methods

- Born of social protest movements

- Broad focus on documenting entire community

- Active rejection of staid, antiseptic, institutional approaches

- Try to reflect the community being served

Lesbian Herstory Archives –

http://www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org/index.html

02/23/18

13

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Often archives created in rejection of traditional archives are created by non-archivists – those without formal training

Rejecting traditional practice can be a badge of honor – and provide respect from the community

Generally organically accumulated over time – often lose momentum – sometimes eventually absorbed by institutions

Influence archival practice

- From within or without
- Lobby the profession to change practice
- Often done in concert with other approaches
- Hints at future state where archivist is partner
- 'Nothing about us without us'

Drafters of The Protocols for Native American Archival Materials

http://www2.nau.edu/libnap-p/

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Example is The Protocols for Native American Archival Materials
Developed by professionals working with the "community"
Provides suggestions on how to conduct traditional practice – complications because much material has been in institutional hands since 17th Century
Includes lobbying the profession to make suggested practice official recommendations
Emphasis on consultation with the community and respect for community values in representation of community
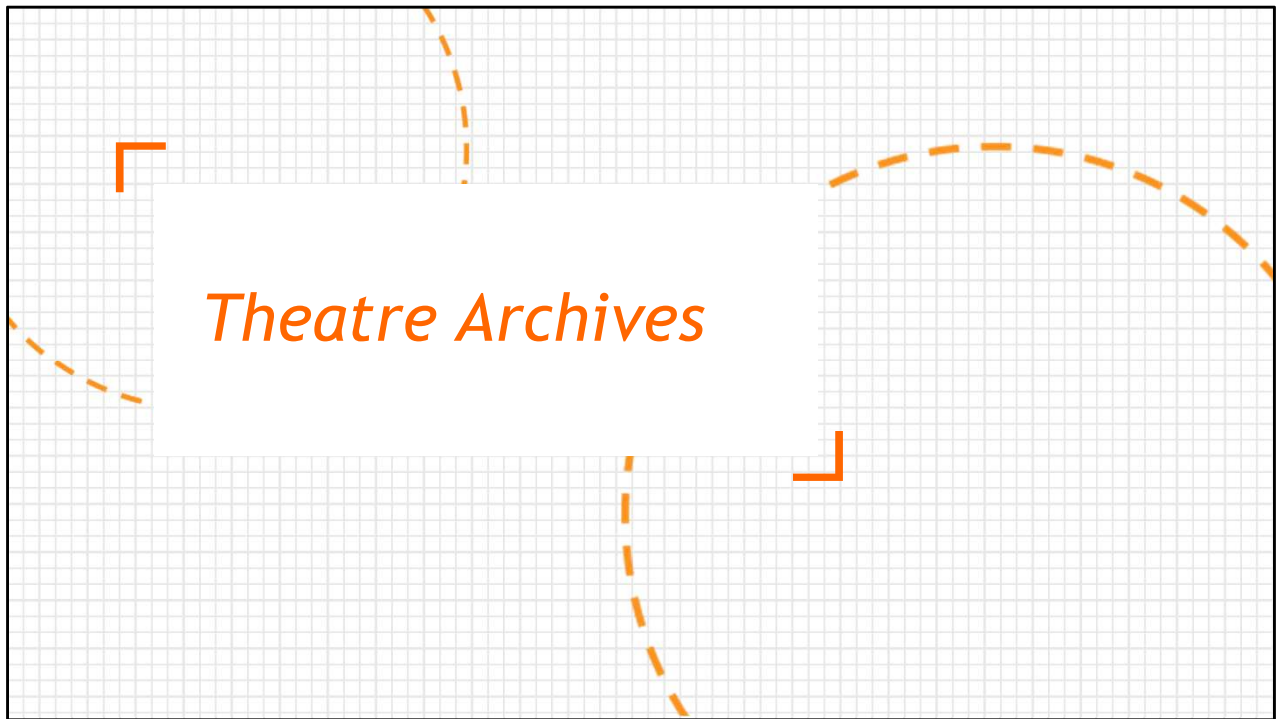
Theatre Archives

American Theatre Archives Project

- Current effort by American Society for Theatre Research & Theatre Library Association
- Focus:
  - Develop archival guidelines for use by theatre companies
  - Assist theatre companies in maintaining their records
  - Discover how theatre archives are used in academia
  - Identify ways for archives to build relationships with theatrical companies

http://www.americantheatrearchiveproject.org

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Regional teams work on establishing relationships between archivists and theatrical companies

Goal: Help theatrical companies establish their own archives

Help to educate companies about what records might be of interest – to the company, other theaters, and the academic community

Mostly an Identity Archives approach. Theatrical archives have been identified as an underserved community. Efforts to rectify that.

Still focused on primarily paper-based material

Have not delved deeply into preservation efforts focused on YouTube style theatrical productions

Focus is still documents – less about objects

Abbey Theatre Digital Archives

- Created via a digitization project

- Archive already existed prior to digitization

- Hearkens back to original purpose of European archives – sharing the state's records with the people

- Includes a database similar to the Internet Broadway Database (IBDB) or Internet Movie Database (IMDb)

- Lacks the social community involvement in description work common to many community archives
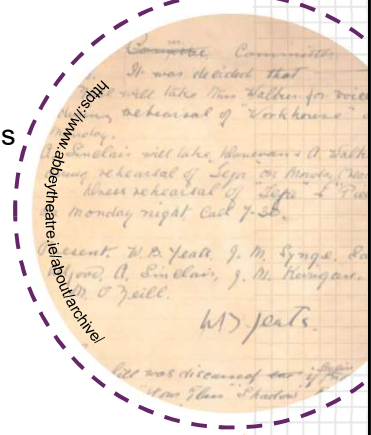
National Theatre of Ireland
Archive already exists – digitization was an effort to share it with the public
Developed database of shows, performers, characters as part of the project
Digital archive shares content with the public but doesn't allow public to help describe contents – no community tagging
Closes involvement of public in actual practice of project is inviting people to donate items

Cuban Theater Digital Archive

- Truly participatory community archive

- Theatre companies and artists are invited to create pages about their work and contribute digital objects

- Patrons, students, professors and others are all invited to participate in different ways

- Mostly an Identity Archives approach but has some aspects of Community Archives approach

http://ctda.library.miami.edu
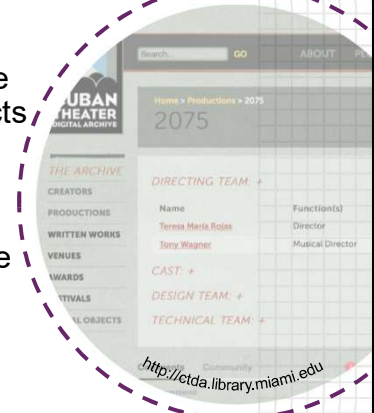
A project dedicated to serving the Cuban community and the theatre community
Offers a database and documents about historical productions
Offers a space for the community to share information on their own theatrical productions – so small companies are part of the record
Primarily takes an Identity approach to archives – seeking to redress deficiencies inherent in traditional archival practice
Incorporates some aspects of Community approach by allowing creators to add their own productions, incorporating community tagging of items, and allowing comments

Questions and Discussion

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