

PERFORMANCE!

The Newsletter of the Society of American Archivists' Performing Arts Roundtable

Issue for December 2002

[The Performing Arts Roundtable: Encourages the exchange of information on historical and contemporary documentation of music, dance, theater, motion pictures, and other performance media. (from the SAA Web site)]

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Table of Contents

- **Message from the Roundtable Chair.....2**
- **Report on the Roundtable Meeting in Birmingham.....2**
- **News Items.....3**
- **Reports from the Field.....4**
 - **Academic, Artist and Archivist4**
- **Editor's Corner.....6**

Message from the Roundtable Chair

By Bridget Carr

Boston Symphony Orchestra Archives

In August 2002 members of the Performing Arts Roundtable gathered in Birmingham, Alabama. I'd like to thank all of you who attended the meeting for giving me the opportunity to serve as your Chair for the next few years. Special thanks to immediate past chair, La Nina Clayton, for the considerable enthusiasm and energy she has shown the roundtable during the past two years. She has clearly breathed new life into our group! I would also like to applaud newsletter editors George Bain and Ashley Yandle for their tireless efforts to compile and distribute the newsletter.

Next summer may seem like a long way off, but the SAA 2003 meeting in Los Angeles meeting will be here before you know it. Los Angeles is an ideal location for sessions that have a performing arts component and I am happy to report that many of the ideas for sessions generated at our meeting materialized into session proposals and are now being considered by the Program Committee. Thanks to all of you who followed through! A sampling shows sessions that deal with the jazz scene in Los Angeles' Central Avenue area from the 1920s through the 1950s; a session on preserving cultures that includes a paper on Hip-Hop; a session on the history and use of motion picture collections; a session on California's theater community; and

At next year's roundtable meeting in LA, I am interested in setting aside some time – maybe 15 or 20 minutes – for one of our members to either give a brief presentation or to arrange for someone to talk to us on a topic of general relevance to performing arts archives. I'd like to invite you to contact me with your suggestions.

Report on the Roundtable Meeting in Birmingham

The SAA Performing Arts Roundtable held its annual business meeting at the SAA conference in Birmingham, AL on Friday, August 23, 2002. With the chair, La Nina Clayton, delayed, Newsletter co-editor George Bain called the meeting to order at 4:45 p.m. (The meeting followed immediately upon the session on African American musicians and the musician unions.) 18 people were in attendance.

The first item was a brief statement by Kathy Neal from the 2003 Program Committee spoke briefly on the committee's planning for the Los Angeles conference. Postponing the election of a new chair temporarily, the group discussed the question of naming the newsletter. Mindful that the publication was once titled *The Muse*, Bain suggested using *Performance!* as the title, explaining reasoning for it. There was a short discussion about

the choices, and how the “muses” plural was also a possibility. It was then moved and seconded to adopt the title *Performance!* and the motion passed.

Clayton then assumed the chair and asked for nominations for a new chair. The group presumed the chair would serve for two years. Bridget Carr, archivist for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, volunteered and she was duly elected.

Next, Bain explained the absence of the other co-editor, Ashley Yandle. The membership accepted the two as co-editors for the next year. Clayton then turned to a discussion of ideas for sessions in Los Angeles. She recounted how the Birmingham session on African Americans in the unions had evolved from discussion with David Keller at the Washington meeting. Several possibilities emerged. Kit Leary noted an idea on set design being discussed by the Visual Materials group. David Keller spoke about a session on musicians in Los Angeles. George Blood and then Bridget Carr raised the possibility of presentations on issues of rights, for example administering copyrights for audio-visual materials. There was a consensus that the new chair was to make decisions about the roundtable’s endorsement of proposals developed.

The members of the group then introduced themselves to each other. Following this, Clayton adjourned the meeting at 6:10 p.m.

Submitted by George Bain

News Items

New “Save America’s Treasures” Grants Announced

The “Save America’s Treasures” program awarded grants to 80 projects in 36 states in September. Among grants administered through the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), several relate directly to the performing arts. The New York City Ballet Archives received a prominent award for conserving and storage of this multimedia collection. The ETV Endowment of South Carolina won a grant to conserve and preserve tapes of Marian McPartland’s *Piano Jazz* program and the American Jazz Museum in Kansas City will work on the films of jazz film collector John Baker. The Vermont Museum & Gallery Alliance received funds to stabilize and conserve 100 colorful painted theater curtains across rural Vermont and the AppalShop Archive in Kentucky will address conservation needs of its audio, film and video archives. A related project outside the scope of the NEA will support restoration work on the theater of the Detroit Institute of Arts, touted as “one of America’s first museum theaters specifically built to show motion pictures.”

For more information visit the NEA at <www.arts.gov/>; to view the list of grants for 2000, visit the following address: www.arts.gov/endownews/news02/SATgrants.html.

Black Mountain College Grant Completed

In October the North Carolina State Archives completed a grant to improve the arrangement, description, and preservation of materials relating to Black Mountain College. Funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities, this major project included the processing of nineteen collections, the creation of EAD and MARC documents, and the preservation copying of 137 audiotapes of interviews and 4,354 slides. Black Mountain College was an experimental school located in Black Mountain, North Carolina from 1933 to 1956. The purpose of the college was to educate the whole person, with an emphasis on the role of the arts and creative thinking. An abbreviated list of teachers and artists drawn to the school includes Josef and Anni Albers, John Cage, Robert Creeley, Merce Cunningham, Joseph Fiore, Buckminster Fuller, Edward Lowinsky, Robert Motherwell, Charles Olson, and Xanti Schawinsky. For more information about Black Mountain College and the collections at the North Carolina State Archives, please visit

http://www.ah.dcr.state.nc.us/sections/archives/arch/bmc_web_page/bmc.htm.

Reports from the Field

Editor's Note: This section is intended to be an avenue for the exchange of information to members of the roundtable about collections or other topics of importance on the performing arts.

The report in this issue is by a person who first aspired to be a performing artist. But through life experiences that introduced possibilities of the field--the rich complexities and subtleties of the whole universe of documenting and preserving the performing—Leilani Dawson is now preparing to devote herself to the work of saving the enduring records of this field. The article grew from conversation at the roundtable meeting in Birmingham.

Academic, Artist, and Archivist: Towards becoming a performing arts archivist

By Leilani Dawson

When I went to NYU's Tisch School of the Arts to get a BFA in theatre, it was in defiance of the impression I got from people around me that I would make a great librarian. I secretly suspected that I would love librarianship, but I liked

theatre, loved acting, and wanted to do something more creative than shelve books. Obviously, I was not aware of what librarians actually do. Moreover, I was completely ignorant of the world of

archives, beyond the notion of “well, they’re what are in special collections, right?”

At NYU, I used primary source materials for the first time, courtesy of the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts. I loved the performing arts library, its services, its collections, and most especially its exhibits. I was drawn to all the puppets and costumes and designs and stuff (I didn’t yet know the phrase “material culture”) that regular libraries don’t normally collect. Amid studying and rehearsing, I filed “museum curator” away under my list of backup career choices in case the theatre thing washed out.

After graduation I worked mostly as a stage manager; after a short time out in the world I realized that, as much as I liked being on stage, I really disliked auditioning. I also worked at The Drama Bookshop in Manhattan. These two avenues of experience gave me different perspectives on theatre and the cultural record of the performing arts. Over the next few years I realized that the script or score of a work was really just a transcription; it did not truly document the show as it was performed. It certainly did not document the entire production process. I grew more and more interested in the types of materials that weren’t as well represented in the Bookshop’s collection; i.e. items other than scripts, scores, and books on history, criticism, practice, and technique. I became interested in the material that dramaturges, designers, stage managers, directors, etc. produce during the overall course of their work.

I also realized I was growing more interested in what I at the time called

“meta-performance studies”: I was fascinated by questions of how performing artists define themselves, their art, and what it means to be artists; how much overlap exists between the definitions of artists from different cultures and disciplines; how these definitions are transmitted and passed down from one generation of artists to the next; and how people outside of the world of the performing arts (or only peripherally related to it) learn to recognize a performance and those associated with it. Eventually I put two and two together and realized that many of these questions might be approached by studying the documents and other non-published material that results from the production process.

At this point, I decided to apply to library school. What I wanted to do was find a job at a place where performers could come together across cultures and disciplines to work out some of these issues. I imagined a place somewhat like a special fellows gathering at the Lincoln Center Library, or at the International School of Theatre Anthropology in Denmark. Most of all, I imagined stuff--a combination of library and museum materials, focusing on “special collections”--evidence from diverse historical records that would serve to facilitate communication among the artist-scholars by providing them touchstones and common reference points. Note that the word “archives” isn’t mentioned anywhere in the above description.

While applying to the School of Information, I noticed that one of the specializations was “Archives and Records Management”, complete with a blurb on an alumna who was working

managing the electronic records of a major corporation. I knew that this wasn't what I wanted to do, so I thought nothing more of it until I got to orientation, heard about the courses offered, and started reading syllabi. Slowly, it dawned on me that maybe what I was interested was archives after all. After the introductory archives course, I was convinced.

My current focus is on all aspects of performing arts collections. Eventually I intend to go for a Ph.D. in performance studies to pursue the research implied by my post-college musings, but in the mean time I want to know as much as possible about my future source materials: what is out there, what is being done to document the performing arts, and what new avenues are opened up to artists and archivists by advanced technologies. So, I'm enjoying what I'm learning and doing in the course of my archival education: processing collections at the Bentley Historical Library, theorizing about what a post-modern archives would look like and whether one would be desirable, even hand-coding EAD. (Well, okay, as much as anyone can "enjoy" hand-coding

EAD.) Moreover, this summer I did an internship with an Internet2/CNI working group chartered to report on good practices for capturing, archiving, and retrieving digital recordings of live performing arts events.

I think that what other archivists can learn from my story is that for every performance scholar who is really in the know about archives and their treasures, there is another working professional (and probably several students) who has no clue. One of my "perfect world" fantasies is that someday people will go to archives the same way they now go to libraries and museums. I don't think this is going to happen any time soon, but I do hope to contribute to performing artists' knowledge and use of archives. I believe that because the end product of the work of performing artists is so ephemeral and fleeting, the documents and artifacts found in arts archives are not only the only traces we have of performance, but also key to understanding the artistic endeavor.

Leilani Dawson is a student in the Library Science and Archival Studies program at the University of Michigan. Her e-mail address is leilaniid @umich.edu.

Editor's Corner

New Name for the Roundtable Newsletter!

With this issue the newsletter of the SAA Performing Arts Roundtable assumes a new title, ***Performance!*** The decision, as noted in the report of the proceedings above, was made at the business meeting in Birmingham. The performance is the ultimate test for performing artists. But documenting and preserving the record of performances and the performers who do them—with all this involves today—is the challenging task for

archivists who deal with the records that tell these stories. And as your editors we will do our best “to break a leg” with our editorial performance.

The Next Issue

The expectation for the issuance of the next issue of the newsletter is early March 2003.

The co-editors hope the article on one person’s pathway into the field expresses well the excitement one can experience in anticipating work as an archivist in an area of great personal interest. To further explore this idea, we would like to hear how you found your way into our mutual profession. We hope to include a series of short quotes from the responses we receive on this topic in the next issue, so we invite your submissions. Please send them to Ashley Yandle by February 10, 2003.

Again, we will appreciate your ideas for timely topics, etc. and suggested writers. We are currently at work on reports from two other roundtable members who indicated a willingness to do so in Birmingham.

We also request your help by alerting us of items to include in the **News Notes** section. We would prefer not to be like the Maytag repairman of TV commercials fame and you can help save us from that plight!

Newsletter Distribution

The method for distributing this newsletter is as a Word document sent as an attachment to an e-mail message to the subscription list maintained by the editors.

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