Selection Process for a Digital Theatre Archive: OnStage at IPFW

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In 2005 Helmke Library at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW) began work on mDON, mastodon DIGITAL OBJECT NETWORK, a digital archive that would provide worldwide access to and preserve from "extinction" the history and growth of IPFW and northeast Indiana. One of the first collections targeted for inclusion in mDON was the Purdue-Indiana Theatre (PIT) physical archives. There were several reasons for this choice. First, the items in the collection would likely be of interest to IPFW alumni, members of the community-at-large who have been involved with PIT, and those beyond the university and community who are searching for theatre information. A second major consideration was that theatre has been an integral part of IPFW's history from its beginning when Indiana University and Purdue University combined into one campus in Fort Wayne. In addition, PIT and its successors in the Department of Theatre are well-known in the community. Finally, the collection is large, has few gaps, and consists primarily of IPFW-generated materials which do not require copyright permission. While the Theatre program began as Purdue-Indiana Theatre (PIT), that moniker is no longer used. A new name was chosen for the digital collection which would be flexible enough to allow the inclusion of all types of stage presentations and OnStage at IPFW [http://onstage.mdon.lib.ipfw.edu] was launched in September 2007.

There are numerous articles that examine the broad factors information professionals must consider in selecting items for digitization, such as accessibility, preservation needs of the physical items, audience demand, copyright, and cost. Many of those considerations were addressed even before a pilot project began for mDON. [See "mDON: The First Two Years" at http://mdon.lib.ipfw.edu.] The team for OnStage at IPFW began meeting more than a year before the collection's launch to make decisions on aspects specific to this project. These included determining the purpose and scope of the collection. The team had to learn how to structure the collection using the very complex format of multiple compound objects. Decisions had to be made about the metadata fields, which necessitated the writing of a dictionary to define those fields and guidelines for creating the metadata. Both those documents continue to be revised as new material to be added warrants.

Another issue that had to be resolved very early on for this collection involved the inclusion of materials from local newspapers, particularly preview articles and reviews. These are important to the collection as they provide great context for the other items about a show. Both daily Fort Wayne newspapers, The Journal-Gazette and The News-Sentinel, have graciously granted permission to include their copyrighted material in OnStage at IPFW.

Once the overarching details were decided, it was time to begin choosing the items to be scanned. It was decided that OnStage at IPFW should be more than a sampling; it should provide a comprehensive look at what has happened on the stages at IPFW since 1964. Not all items in the physical collection will be added to the digital collection, but it was agreed that every
show from each season should be included if there were materials available. While still images and written text can’t match the effect of seeing a stage play in person, by including a quantity of quality items, it is hoped that some of the energy and emotion of each production can be conveyed. The collection was launched with one season from each decade to give a historical overview of theatre at IPFW.

OnStage at IPFW is built around the plays that have been presented, each of which has its own quantity and quality of material. How does one decide on the individual pieces to be digitized? At first, the rationale for the selection process was not very clearly articulated. It depended as much on the content manager’s knowledge of theatre and plays as anything. Over time the process has become more concrete and formalized.

The original PIT collection was organized in the archives in three sections: programs, printed materials, and photographs. It was decided to use those divisions for the digital collection as well. Of course, not all plays have materials in each category. Most plays do have a program or playbill. Printed material might include posters, reviews, newspaper articles or clippings, press releases, promotional materials, and other types of text items. Photographs could be color, black and white of various sizes, or slides, or with more recent seasons, digital images.

The team decided that each play would be limited to no more than fifty items. The figure was arbitrary but gave a place to start. For most productions, that number is never even approached though some shows, especially large-cast musicals from more recent years, do have photographs that number over a hundred. With this collection, as with all others, what is selected to be scanned depends first on what is available.

The selection starts with the program or playbill. All pages are scanned and the cover or front page is used as the thumbnail image for the show. If a program or playbill is not available, another image is chosen, usually from the first print item selected.

In selecting printed material, the overriding consideration is what a particular item adds to the understanding of the play, the production, and/or the context in which it was presented. With so many different types of printed materials available for any one production, decisions about printed material may change from season to season, even show to show. The criteria below are general guidelines only.

1) All theatre reviews are included. Reviewers have tended to focus on different aspects of the same show and therefore give a rounded view of the production. It does not matter whether the writers praised or criticized the show.

2) Materials that highlight the process of mounting a show such as audition announcements, cast lists (especially if there is no program), or rehearsal schedules that contain comments from the director are included. These are most important when other materials are not available.

3) A selection of press releases, mailings and flyers, newspaper clippings and preview articles are scanned. When there are items that are identical or similar in content, such as when a press release is quoted almost verbatim in a newspaper announcement, generally only one is selected. The exception to this is that posters are always included if they are available, even though in a few cases the poster is the same as or very similar to the program cover. This decision was made because posters are the most common and popular form of ad-
4) Short items, such as dates and times of performances in entertainment listings or newspaper advertisements of the show, are generally not chosen unless the information is not available elsewhere.

5) Captioned photographs from newspapers are included if the picture shows a character/performer not included in the photographs available. [See #2 below.]

1) Enough photographs need to be selected to give a good representation of the show from the opening line to the last blackout. This presupposes a familiarity with the play or having the script available for the content manager to reference. Photographs of the most important scenes are especially desirable. For example, the fight in the streets of Verona when Tybalt kills Mercutio and is then killed by Romeo is crucial to the development of Shakespeare’s play. If there is only one photograph of such a scene, it is included, assuming the quality is acceptable. If there are more from the same scene, other criteria determine which will be selected.

2) All of the characters in the production should be represented in the selected photographs. This does not mean that every character should have a “close-up” but that every character (and therefore, every actor) can be seen in at least one photograph. This can be difficult especially for large-cast musicals. Fortunately, there is often a photograph of the full cast that can be used to fill this criterion.

3) Action shots are selected over “headshots” or obvious publicity photographs. Action shots are preferred because they represent particular scenes and help show the progress of the play. Headshots or publicity photographs are usually not included unless they are the only photographs available of a character/performer.

4) Photographs should be of the best quality. Damaged photographs, photographs with cropping marks, photographs that are obviously unflattering or embarrassing to the performer are generally not included, unless it is the only photograph of a character. While it is the intent of the collection to be as comprehensive as possible, it is also the intention of the content manager to present the best possible material. The difficulty arises when a choice has to be made between a poor photograph of a main character, especially one that is unique or the only shot available, and a great photograph of a minor character.

5) If there are photographs of the same scene taken from different angles that highlight different performers, both are often included.

6) The quantity and quality of photographs for all the main characters should be balanced if possible.
If there is a close-up, individual shot of The Girl in “The Fantasticks,” a similar shot of The Boy should be included, if available.

7) Photographs that require an in-depth knowledge of the play to interpret or understand are generally not included. While it is important that the content manager has a good working knowledge of the play, it is assumed that the viewer may not have that same level of familiarity.

Just as the printed materials are organized in date order, every attempt is made to accession and scan the photographs in sequence according to the action of the play. Viewers who are familiar with the play can see its story being told in the photographs. If the content manager is not familiar with the play and the script is not available, the photographs are ordered usually beginning with individual shots of main characters and progressing through pairs, trios, etc. to full-cast photographs.

The selection guidelines for this mDON collection are a work-in-progress, as is the collection itself. As the staff at Helmke Library continues to add to OnStage at IPFW, it is likely that the criteria for choosing individual items will be revised as different types of material or new circumstances warrant. But one thing will not change: whether an item fills all the criteria or doesn’t fit any, if an item ignites the content manager’s passion for the stage and shows to the rest of the world the high quality of theatre in northeast Indiana, it’s likely it will make its way into OnStage at IPFW.

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Biography

Denise Buhr is the liaison librarian to the College of Visual and Performing Arts at IPFW and serves as interim archivist. She is also playwright-in-residence for the Primrose Theatre Project, a professional women’s theatre company. She is working on several projects to be presented in 2009, including a work for the bicentennial celebration of Lincoln’s birth.