A Balancing Act: Digital and Physical Access to Ephemera at the Harvard Theatre Collection

The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Published Version</td>
<td><a href="http://www.tla-online.org/publications/performing-arts-resources/performing-arts-resources-volumes/">http://www.tla-online.org/publications/performing-arts-resources/performing-arts-resources-volumes/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citable link</td>
<td><a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:31887336">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:31887336</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms of Use</td>
<td>This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Balancing Act: Digital and Physical Access to Ephemera at the Harvard Theatre Collection

MICAH HOGGATT

Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University, (Cambridge, MA – United States of America)

Our profession has been grappling with the acquisition and care of digital objects for decades now. These concerns have taken multiple forms: predictions of crises on the horizon, project proposals that leverage the unique properties of digital media, and the working out of best practices just to name a few. Thanks to these conversations, best practices for digital object lifecycles have coalesced, facilitating remarkable projects from both scholars and librarians which have increased the visibility and utility of our holdings. In turn these projects have led administrators, scholars, and researchers to call for an increase in digitization of our physical holdings. Moreover, we know new acquisitions will include an increasing amount of born digital material.

Yet we are not (at least most of us) only responsible for digital media. We continue to be acquirers and caretakers of the physical documentation of performance, a charge whose desiderata are often just as complicated as digital curation. Indeed, unlike digital curation, there is no standard for the description of ephemera which comprises a large proportion of performing arts documentation. Demand for access to this material has not decreased with
digital facsimile, and it is this tension that I will be discussing: the simultaneous increase in demand for digitization and continued demand for access and acquisition of physical material.

My considerations will be provincial, centered on the Harvard Theatre Collection, but will hopefully have broader implications. Since the history and nature of the collection have been written about extensively,¹ I won’t rehash it much except to give our current context. We occupy a space of overlapping constituencies. We are, of course, a part of Harvard University and thus serve the research and educational missions of our institution and the larger scholarly community. We are more specifically a department of Houghton Library, the central repository for rare books and manuscripts within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, an affinity which magnifies the attraction of our holdings beyond performance researchers to bibliographers and scholars in fields as diverse as literature and architecture. And, of course, we are a resource for practitioners of performance – perhaps most notably and most often our neighbors at the American Repertory Theater.

I will be focusing on three categories of users today (or more properly three functions of use, as individuals often fit more than one function): scholarly researchers, students and instructors with goals focused on pedagogy and learning, and practitioners preparing for performance.

By scholarly research, I mean research with the intention to responsibly gather information on a subject and then disseminate it in some form, whether the researcher be affiliated with an academic institution or not. Our collection attracts theatre historians, art historians, cultural

and literary critics, biographers, and researchers in many other fields. Often, these researchers are focused only on the intellectual text that is embodied in the object, not the object in which the text is embodied. For such researchers, digital reproductions generally suffice. Indeed, they are preferable for nonlocal researchers, and even for local researchers who wish to work with the text outside the library.

We go about providing digital reproductions in two ways. The first is by library initiated projects in which user demand is one factor. The second is entirely driven by user demand. When a user requests copies of an item in the public domain, we scan the item, deposit the image files in our digital repository system, then link the images to the OPAC record or finding aid. This has led to an interesting phenomenon of what might loosely be described as user-curated digital holdings. For example, one remote user has requested copies of a number of items across several of our collections related to the Ballets Russes. While there isn’t a web portal with a collocation of all the material the user requested, the images are now freely available and discoverable. Thus, there is in effect a collection of digitized items related to this particular research topic – in essence a micro-digitization project funded and curated by a user.

Turning from user-initiated digitization to traditional project digitization, the first thing to note is that photoduplication project work isn’t new, nor is the idea that it involves tradeoffs and thoughtfulness about the best use of funding. In some ways digitization is simply a continuation of microform projects. The major caveat is that data manipulability and potential access are orders of magnitude higher. The most ambitious project ongoing in the Harvard Theatre Collection is digitization of the majority of our holdings related to blackface minstrelsy.
We decided on this project for several reasons: the importance of the material, its high use, and its fragility. Although a painful topic, the minstrel show is important to multiple fields in the social sciences, arts, and humanities. Our collection is one of the most comprehensive, containing 39 boxes of playbills, visual prints, photographs, sheet music, printed books, and manuscripts. It has also been highly used for decades by both researchers and instructors, which is particularly impressive when you take into account the fact that the majority of the collection was uncataloged until 2010. Given such high use, fragility of portions of the collection (particularly playbills and newspaper clippings that often break apart during use, sometimes causing a loss of text) was a major concern. Due to these three factors of importance, use, and fragility we decided that digitization would be beneficial both for users and for preservation.

There were tradeoffs in this decision, however. Ironically, given our concern with fragility, the sheer size of the collection made the full preservation measures traditionally undertaken as part of Houghton’s digitization projects unfeasible. Instead, we digitized for access, and items were only treated to withstand the imaging process itself before being safely re-housed. Because of the focus on access through facsimile, we hope that physical handling will decrease, thus increasing preservation overall. This hope is complicated by the fact that digitization often drives demand for physical access to the original and, as I will discuss later, digital facsimiles have limits to their usefulness. Still, I am happy to report that in addition to the many individual researchers who have benefited from access to the digitized material, Carol Oja, the William Powell Mason Professor of Music at Harvard, recently approached us regarding using
the digitized collections as part of a course that will culminate in a student-led exhibition of facsimiles.²

Access to digitized material clearly has benefits for scholarly research. We are, as a profession, so well aware of this now that I don’t feel the need to dwell on those benefits. But for some scholars physical access (and thus continued acquisition, description, and care of physical material) is necessary. It is important to think through why this is still the case, so that it isn’t forgotten amid the truly great work happening in the digital realm.

Researchers might require physical access because they are examining the object in which the text is fixed, rather than the abstract, intellectual text. Perhaps their project is bibliographic in nature and requires collation, the examination of watermarks in paper, or similar work. Or perhaps it is rooted in material culture other than book production. Theatre libraries, after all, hold items other than printed artifacts, items that might be more usually associated with museums. At Harvard, we collect props, puppets, toy theatres, set models, models of theatres, early motion picture devices, and numerous other three dimensional objects. Two dimensional digital photography as it is generally practiced in our studio cannot adequately capture the physicality of many of these objects.

Researchers might also need access to the original item because it is unfeasible for the library to inexpensively or legally digitize it. Much ephemera is in fragile shape precisely because it

---

was not intended to last. Material might also be very large, such as with circus posters, or require special lighting, as with original artwork. All of these scenarios make low-cost, high-quantity scanning and deposit impossible. Furthermore, material might still be under copyright, in which case digitization for access becomes more fraught. Thus, when allocating library resources (particularly staff time), we have had to balance new needs for digital access with the continuing need to acquire and provide access to physical items.

A similar balance of needs takes place with teaching and learning initiatives. Occasionally, instructors simply want use of the disembodied text, but more often they come to us in order to expose students to the object itself, either physically or through digital facsimile. Sometimes, as with the minstrelsy playbills, condition necessitates digital access due to fragility. Other times, a digital facsimile just happens to better meet their pedagogical needs. In the summer of 2005, through the generous support of a Harvard Presidential fellowship, trained graduate students developed digital course materials for Professor Oja’s freshman seminar on the American musical. The fellows digitized extensive holdings in our collection and made them available through the course website, where students then used the images in course assignments. This project was a significant amount of upfront work for the instructor, graduate students, curator, and reference staff. After the proposal was accepted, the fellows worked with staff to go carefully through the collection, select items, scan them, and design and implement the website. This upfront work paid off tremendously, however, as there have been iterations of the class since that have used the same website.
With Harvard’s entrance into Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) through HarvardX, teaching using digitized objects expanded to the general public. In addition to scanning, objects are also being filmed for course modules. Filmed teaching allows for better representation of size, dimensionality, and other factors not well captured by the sort of “flat” photography done in the studio. Theatre Collection material hasn’t yet been used as part of a HarvardX course, but other Houghton collections have. We’ve learned MOOC modules are similar in content to courses we facilitate in person, but that they require much more coordination and planning, and thus staff time. We have had to develop a filming policy to balance the film crews’ need to get the best shot and the library’s needs to preserve material and follow best security practices. Preservation librarians, photographers, and curators must devote time and effort to digitization and filming as with any similar project. Additionally, there may be teaching duties on the part of the coordinating librarian.

While an exciting new arena, MOOCs remain a small percentage of instructional work at Houghton. More often than not courses conduct onsite physical examination of material. A particularly thoughtful and engaging example was *African American Theater and Performance*, a course taught both in 2012 and 2013 by Robin Bernstein, Professor of African and African American Studies and of Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality. Throughout the course, students met one day each week in an ordinary classroom setting, and one day at the library. Each library session was led by students in the class who had worked with research librarians at

---

Houghton to uncover as much material as possible related to the week’s topic, then pared down that material to develop an instructional session centered on it.

This emphasis placed on physical access accomplishes at least two goals. One is to acquaint students with the mechanics of archival research and with the kinds of materials they might find in archival collections. In training future researchers it is, after all, important that they have some sense of the formats that were in use in the past, and of how archives and libraries catalog and serve them. As we move deeper into the 21st century, digital natives are becoming more and more removed from many physical formats of material. It’s not just broadsides or wax cylinders that may be unfamiliar to them, but formats commonplace just a decade or two earlier, like newspapers.

Secondly, at a deeper level of physical engagement, is to try and understand the ways that items existed in relationship with the people and things of the culture in which they were produced. Professor Bernstein examined this relationship in her article “Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race” utilizing, among other tools, “thing theory.”

Thing theory is concerned with a specific relational aspect of a person and an inanimate item - namely the difference in relationships where that item acts purely as an object that is a means to a utilitarian end, and relationships where that item acts as a thing that scripts human actions. Scripting is not meant to be understood here in the sense of dictation or of stripping

---

away human agency, but rather in the way that a script might be used by a production company: guiding action through its structure, but allowing for great variance in performance.

As an example of scripting by way of function, most Western codices require readers to turn pages in order from the front to the back cover, a function that, while usually benign, can be insidious. Bernstein uses the example of E.W. Kemble’s *A Coon Alphabet*. This children’s alphabet book follows the common formula of “is for” (as in “A is for Apple”). But rather than using religious or commonplace objects as signs, Kemble’s book utilizes images of violence towards African Americans attempting social mobility. A is not for apple, but for “Amos / what rides on a mule.” The first half of the rhyme is always printed on the recto of a page, followed by a blank verso and then the second half of the rhyme on the following recto. The image printed with the second half of this rhyme is of the mule violently pitching Amos, and is one of the tamer acts of violence depicted. The structure of the book, with its blank versos, compels the reader (a learning child) to turn the page in order to complete the rhyme, a function by which violence to the African American characters depicted within it becomes enscribed through the gesture of turning the page.

Thus Bernstein sees the thing as not just archival object, but, through its scriptive aspect, part of what Diana Taylor calls the “repertoire” - gestural, oral and other ephemeral acts not captured in the text itself. The archival thing scripts the repertoire’s gesture. Therefore, inspecting the thing in its physicality, understanding the motions and the tactile sensations involved with it, is important to understanding its place within the broader culture. Or, as Professor Bernstein more eloquently states:
To glimpse past repertoires through the archive requires a revision of what qualifies as “reading” material evidence. A scholar understands a thing’s script both by locating the gestures it cites in its historical location and by physically interacting with the evidence in the present moment. One gains performance competence not only by accruing contextualizing knowledge but also, crucially, by holding a thing, manipulating it, shaking it to see what meaningful gestures tumble forth. Ultimately, historians must place our living bodies in the stream of performance tradition. The archive then becomes a ghostly discotheque where things of the past leap up to ask scholars to dance; and we listen, accept the invitation, and, hearts pounding, step onto the floor.5

A similar phenomenon, though not usually so methodically laid out, can be seen at work among dramaturgs and other theatre professionals. It is true that much of that work, such as conducting production histories, is essentially uncovering facts and figures. How were past productions staged? What was the critical reception? There is, however, a functional difference between scholars and practitioners. Scholars seek information in order to produce research publications. Practitioners seek information to produce new creative works. In an archival setting, that inspiration can be found not just textually, but physically encoded in material.

In 2013, the dramaturg and cast of John Tiffany’s production of *The Glass Menagerie* visited the Harvard Theatre Collection as preparation for their run at the American Repertory Theater. The

5 Bernstein, 90.
Theatre Collection is privileged to hold a significant amount of Tennessee Williams’ personal and creative papers, including photographs, journals and correspondence spanning his lifetime, and family photographs predating it. Because *The Glass Menagerie* is so highly autobiographical, drawing specifically on Williams’ years living with his dominant mother, Edwina, and mentally fragile sister, Rose, the production felt it would be beneficial to spend some time with the library’s collection.

But why? The journals and correspondence had for the most part been published. Many of the photographs had been digitized and made available online. The dramaturg was exceptional in her duties, and had provided all the needed published works and links. What made physical consultation of these items, however brief, useful in preparation?

One aspect of the visit points to a possible answer. Celia Keenan-Bolger, who played Laura, the character based on Williams’ sister, focused intently on a photo album that had been assembled by Rose herself. Actors use a variety of methods to prepare for their roles, and I haven’t spoken with Ms. Keenan-Bolger about her own preparation. But from my observational standpoint it seemed that she treated the object as something precious, something which conveyed information with emotional resonance.

Revisiting Bernstein’s article can, I think, yield a valuable framework for understanding this kind of preparation. The photo album was not an *object*, a mere means to receiving the text of the photographs. It was a *thing*. It certainly was to its creator, Rose, who assembled it from tangible pieces of memory, in formats and conventions that scripted how she would piece it together. It seemed also to be a thing to Keenan-Bolger, who had the opportunity to turn and
feel the pages as Rose had done decades earlier. Such gestural interactions can facilitate an understanding of the physical relationship between this object and its creator - in this case the basis for the character the actress was playing.

Obviously, not all plays are autobiographical, and this particular example won’t extrapolate in that sense. But we should remain sensitive to the creative information seeking of theatrical professionals. A digital facsimile can convey much, but are there shades of meaning and emotion encoded in its physical aspects that cannot be captured digitally? There is, of course, a danger of fetishizing an item, but perhaps there is a place for theatre librarians to practice a specific kind of information literacy to combat this tendency. As much as is responsible in terms of preservation, we should endeavor to make materials physically accessible, even (perhaps especially) while increasing digital access.

As a coda, neither digital nor physical access is possible without description. And only poor access is available with poor metadata. To that end, over the past few years we have been working to create bibliographic descriptions of the ephemera in our collection. An article on that effort has already been published, so I won’t rehash it here except to note the increased importance of bibliographic description as expectations for access increase.

---