

Oral Histories of Theatre: a Survey
Commissioned by the Society for Theatre Research

by
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Aims

This survey was undertaken from January to early March 2009. Its aims were to compile information about currently active oral history projects focused on theatre and performance (or projects including an oral history element) together with planned projects and recently completed projects. It also aimed to gain an initial overview of the representation of theatre/performance-related material in other oral history projects.

This survey consists of three main parts:

- this short report (and two appendices),
- a detailed document giving responses from those questionnaires that were returned, supplemented by information gleaned from other sources on those projects which failed to return questionnairesⁱ,
- a composite list of interviewees compiled from those that were submitted by the various projects.

Theatre and Oral History

The material found for this survey suggests that the use of oral history to record aspects of British theatre history is a growing and widespread one. The use of oral history to explore the history and experience of theatre is largely a recent phenomenon. There are oral histories of brass bands, punk rock, Glastonbury festival among others and as might be expected large quantities of interviews have taken place in areas of traditional folkloric performance, especially of music and dance, in wide range of communities. There are also accounts of performance within the cultural traditions of African, Asian and other immigrant communities within oral history projects focused on the wider culture and experience of such groups.

Maybe because more traditional, text-based forms of British theatre were perceived to be adequately documented through conventional means, oral histories of theatre have been slower to emerge but there are now many of them. They cover a whole range of material from theatre buildings to amateur theatre companies of long standing to the big companies, with their own archives, like Royal Opera House and the National Theatre, to contemporary queer performance festivals and to amateur theatre companies of long standing. Many recent oral histories of theatre buildings have been funded (e.g. by Heritage Lottery Fund – HLF) as part of architectural development projects, as means of creating access and a sense of community ownership and engagement with the building. Other projects are based in the higher education sector with support from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), often as part of a larger research project that might include archival digitisation and publication of monographs, essay collections or DVDs.

Most projects aim to create collections of oral history interviews, sometimes on video, usually on audio, sometimes both, lodged in libraries, usually these days on CD or DVD. Older material is in a variety of audio or video formats including cassette or reel-to-reel tape, VHS and partakes of larger preservation and accessibility issues related to this areaⁱⁱ. Caches of interviews are occasionally donated to a Library or Archive as part of a scholar's research collection. Whether these are properly housed, catalogued and made accessible may depend on how far the Library or Archive is geared up to dealing with such material. Otherwise it may languish, forgotten, in archive boxes. Other projects generate audio or video material specifically for web use. There may be issues to be addressed here of long-term archiving of the web site and the audio and video material that forms part of it and, where only short extracts are used, the material recorded which is not selected for web use. This also applies to some interviews recorded for documentaries e.g. the V&A Theatre Collections has a collection of tapes of some of the hours of interviews recorded for a documentary about the redevelopment of the Royal Court Theatre, only a fraction of which were used in the completed programme.

Some projects, often those found via the HLF web site, proved problematic to contact. They were often run by temporary specialist oral history staff who left at the end of the project. Permanent staff at the relevant theatre were sometimes unfamiliar with the details of the project or even where materials had been lodged. Even where this was known it was not always possible to get information from libraries where a deposit of oral history interviews was one among many and provision for transcription, detailed description or cataloguing had not always been included in the funding. It might or not be findable (if recent) via an online catalogue but was unlikely to be found unless you already knew that it was in that individual collection.

By the by, where oral-history-focused-on-theatre is still a relatively small phenomenon, there has been an explosion of theatre-focused-on-oral-history with numerous locally-based projects, listed on the HLF website, giving site-specific performances or workshop devised plays, based on the content of oral history interviews, where the performance is their primary outcome or one among their key results. These projects, overlapping but not identical with the areas of applied theatre, reminiscence theatre and the currently-in-vogue verbatim theatre, also deserve more critical attention.

Definition of oral history

For the purposes of this investigation oral history has been interpreted broadly, reflecting the various approaches across the field. Where the Oral History Society (OHS) approach tends to favour a broad-ranging interview conducted over the course of many hours, even several days, covering an individual's background and early experiences as well as their work, some of the projects included here tend to be shorter, more narrowly focused and agenda-driven. Here these focus on an individual's memories of a particular theatre or company: tending closer towards interview than oral history and would not count within a strict OHS definition. Some are quite strictly edited for public consumption, others only minimally or not at all. Some were carried

out as ends in themselves – to gather oral testimony for posterity; others as evidence towards a particular thesis, material for a performance or site-specific event or educational resource or for an anniversary celebration. All are included to exemplify the diversity of material found within the broad area of oral history of theatre/performance.

Theatre/performance–focused projects: a brief overview

Theatre/performance–focused projects have emerged in recent years, alongside the increasing availability of funds for such projects from the AHRC and HLF and a recognition of the importance of capturing first-hand accounts of theatre-making and theatre-going, while they are still preserved in memory.

HLF projects, in theatre or otherwise, are focused on specific communities, overwhelmingly geographically-defined. In theatre this tends to emphasise artists and audiences at particular venues such as the Lyric Theatre, Belfast or the Green Room, Manchester or festivals such as It's Queer Up North. In granting funding the HLF emphasise three things: learning, conservation and participation. The planned participation of volunteers in running the project and helping make decisions is central to their funding decisions and projects focused on collection and preservation of material because of its inherent value are unlikely to be successful unless they also have a strategy to recruit and involve volunteers both in running the project and in decision-making.

AHRC–funded projects generally have a larger national or regional focus, mapping an art form like live art or more generally recording accounts of an era such as the University of Sheffield /British Library Theatre Archive Project, focused on 1945-1968, or area of work like British Stage Design or Live Art.

Other projects like Unfinished Histories: Recording the History of Alternative Theatre, with a geographically broad focus, but operating outside the higher education sector rely on smaller foundations and trusts for funding.

Some projects generate oral history interviews, not as their or primary purpose but as one strand among others in documenting and analysing an area of work such as in the Asian Performance in Britain project at University of Exeter. In the case of these projects generating oral history material as part of a wider investigation, the issue of preserving the interviews as a resource beyond its immediate use as research material is sometimes inbuilt to the project, sometimes not.

A further context for the generation of oral history interviews focused on theatre is that of PhD research which, alongside the finished thesis, creates a collection of interviews as a deliberate outcome of the research project or as part of the working process. Such material would, it is assumed (though this is unconfirmed) normally be deposited along with the completed thesis in the University Library. It is unclear whether this would be separately cataloguedⁱⁱⁱ

Similarly academics, journalists and other writers often build extensive libraries of recorded interviews in researching books or articles, much of which often goes unused. Some respondents to this Questionnaire had built

up collections of such material, some in recorded form, others as detailed transcripts of no-longer-extant recordings or verbatim notes. Some were prepared to lodge it, long- or short-term with a Collection for wider use.

Material in other Oral History Projects

It is clear that there is also theatre/performance-related material in oral history collections in many other depositories. This will often be hard-to-find as it may relate to only one or two interviewees within a project focused on another topic entirely – boiler-makers in Stafford who incidentally happened to be keen theatregoers, or residents of an estate in King's Cross, London, who happened to be retired music-hall performers, or bharata natayam practitioners whose involvement might be recorded as part of a project on Asian experience in Northampton. How findable such material is depends upon what general cataloguing aids were produced for each project, what detail they go into and whether theatre/ dance /performance etc. were identified as significant keywords by cataloguers. Inevitably finding aids/ topic lists for earlier projects are available on paper or card index formats only. A sample response from one SCUDD list member 'there are so many local amateur societies all over Britain who will have carried out interviews without having published them. When I worked at York City Archives there was a whole filing cabinet full of transcripts. It may be worth contacting York's Oral History Project.' This is undoubtedly so but the ability to do so, however, and survey this area in detail would require a much more extensive project as such societies rarely have web sites. Along with targeted projects and organisations thought to be active in the area of theatre and oral history, this survey contacted more than 100 local studies librarians, regional archives and museums and most responses suggested that this area was not covered in interviews or that there would be relevant material in some interviews but locating it would involve a detailed study of transcripts.

Process included

- Individual emails were sent to projects known to be active in the field enclosing a questionnaire (Appendix A) about aims, policy, format, accessibility, running time, copyright, plans, lists of interviewees and other material, topic lists, transcripts or other indexes.
- Group emails were sent to SCUDD and Theatre Information Group mailbases. The former received a number of responses from individual researchers especially PhD students who had done interviews as part of their research process. Some of these were connected to archives and depositories, others not. A further more detailed survey might discover where previous submitted M.A.s and Ph.Ds within given institutions had included recordings of interviews and whether /where these were preserved.
- A notice was submitted to the Oral History Society.
- Emails sent to theatre archives, national and local research collections, selected individual theatres inc. amateur sector to discover additional projects completed, in progress or planned in this sector.
- A search made through the Heritage Lottery Fund and other funding bodies re: relevant projects funded in this sector, also

- Individual researchers were contacted via email alert on mailbases/ newsletters inc. SCUDD, Performance Studies International, Live Art Development Association, SIBMAS/ Theatre Information Group, etc.
- Detailed responses and lists of interviewees compiled. Report written.

Findings

40 projects are given entries in the Survey Results though a few of these e.g. Royal Opera House, V&A Theatre Collections/Talawa's Blackgrounds and Blackstage include more than one sub-project, some with different funding, meaning that totals may amount to more than 40. In other cases where information was taken from HLF web site and organisers did not respond directly certain questions went unanswered. Given the above the following summarises some key responses.

Primary funding

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| AHRC | 5 projects |
| HLF | 11 projects |
| Core revenue funding e.g. theatre or museum | 5 projects |
| Foundations | 1 project |
| Arts Council | 3 projects |
| Self-funded by researcher | 4 projects |
| STR | 1 project |
| Friends organisations | 2 projects |
| Universities/studentships | 5 projects |

Running time of average interview

(NB some future projects had not yet determined this)

| | |
|------------------|------------|
| One hour or less | 8 projects |
| Up to 2 hours | 7 projects |
| 3-5 hours | 1 project |
| 5-12 hours | 4 projects |

Accessibility

Apart from those not responding and not detailed on web sites (3) all projects gave details of a location where interviews would be held and be made accessible, sometimes given certain stipulations (with notice, to serious researchers or after some future date). Six collections were currently inaccessible, often those of individuals, who in responding to the survey however were signalling an awareness that the material might in future be made available. Of greater concern were collections of material housed in non-archives e.g. Watford Palace Theatre or some university departments where, in some cases, access would be hard to allow and the long-term preservation of material after the end of the immediate research project was not ensured. Even university libraries have not always proven reliable depositories in the past where space is in demand and material lodged there is no longer in active use by the academic who brought it there. This is true of archive material generally and oral history material may be more vulnerable as technology moves on, if is recorded in a format no longer readily accessible.

Listserv

Of those projects responding almost all respondents were keen to participate in a listserv to share new developments and best practice in this area, though one suggested that this should be via the Oral History Society.

Joint web site

Of those projects responding a large majority were keen to have information on their project (and web links where relevant) listed on a joint web site, possibly run by the STR.

Recommendations

- That STR or another body commissions follow up research to identify the costs and organisational and technical issues involved in ensuring preservation of earlier material recorded in non-digital formats, both oral history interviews and performance recordings.
- That STR set up a database facility on its web site to raise awareness of and share information on projects in this area and encourage their use by researchers.
- That STR or another organisation (TIG/SIBMAS?) sets up a listserv to share new developments and best practice in this area.
- That STR encourages HLF to ask those awarded funding for work in this area to communicate details of the project to STR and ensure the placing of completed interviews with a national or local collection e.g. museum, local history library, university, sound archive which will ensure it is made accessible (or more than one – this material once in digital form can be easily copied; though some Collections like to be the unique repository of a set of interviews, this is unnecessary and narrows potential access). That HLF recommends that projects, or the Collections receiving completed material from them, communicate details of holdings in this area to Access 2 Archives to enable centralised searching^{iv}
- That STR and SCUDD encourage academics recording interviews as part of larger research projects to ensure they are lodged with special collections with a commitment to preserving making them accessible long-term and that this also be required of oral history interviews submitted as part of or support material for research degrees.
- That STR encourages members and others, such as journalists, recording interviews in this area to ensure they are lodged with an accessible Collection, preferably a registered Museum, Special Collections library or well-resourced local history archive and made available longer-term for wider use.

- That in any future updating of Backstage web site STR/ TIG ask specific questions about oral history holdings.
- That STR consider jointly hosting a future conference on Oral History of Theatre or possibly Oral Testimony and the Theatre (to include the explosion in use of oral history as a source for making theatre). Rose Bruford College have expressed an interest in hosting such a conference.

Appendix A: Questionnaire

Appendix B: Key National Collections

NOTES

ⁱ All were chased up several times for a response before they were either included in the detailed responses on the basis of information from elsewhere or moved to the section 'Projects in progress or with no details supplied'

ⁱⁱ In my former post as Curator of Contemporary Performance at the Theatre Museum I identified large quantities of sound material donated to the Museum individually or as part of archives, which needed copying for preservation and access purposes. Also I undertook the National Audit of Performance on Film and Video which identified a mass of recordings of performance, undertaken usually by companies themselves and often the only film or video record of the show, scattered and in need of collecting, archiving and preservation copying. Addressing both these issues would need major initiatives and funding.

ⁱⁱⁱ With the exception of the Wimbledon/ NSA Life Histories Theatre Design project, those PhD projects identified as part of this survey were generally at an early stage of development and certain key questions around the status of the oral history material generated.

^{iv} A search on A2A website under Oral History and Theatre revealed detailed listings only of the Blackground / Blackstage projects, Charles Parker's from Birmingham City Archives given his involvement in Banner Theatre; some material on Its QueerUpNorth and papers of Betty Heathfield at the Women's Library including some oral history materials, used in an Age Exchange production i.e. only a fraction of material found in this project – most projects are not feeding information on holdings into this central resource.