

Marini, Francesca. "Showcasing Theatre Memories: A Case Study." Invited chapter for PAR: Performing Arts Resources 33, Theatre Exhibitions, edited by Dr. Martha Schmoyer LoMonaco. New York: Theatre Library Association, 2017: 19-30.

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Showcasing Theatre Memories: A Case Study

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From stage to archives, performing arts materials never stop to engage with the audience. Even when they are archived, performing arts documents and objects remain a source of research and inspiration for theatre professionals and become a sort of aide-mémoire for the patrons who were present at the performances. When displayed, documents and objects bring back the physical memory of being part of a performance.

This article has four goals: to provide insight on how to set up a small museum, as well as a display area within an archive; to consider how to adapt and fund existing spaces, specifically a warehouse and a commercial store space, for exhibition purposes; to offer ideas and suggestions based on practical experience and address the joy of keeping theatrical memories alive through continuous engagement; finally, to candidly discuss successes and failures.

As a case study, I will discuss my experience at the Stratford Festival Archives (Stratford, Ontario, Canada): the renovation and creation of a 4,000-square-foot display area within the archives and the creation of a museum/exhibition space in Downtown Stratford for the 2012 and 2013 seasons. Founded in 1953, the Stratford Festival is a leading classical repertory festival with a loyal audience, including patrons who have been continually attending since 1953. The Festival affiliates and the Festival audience represent the legacy and living memory of over sixty years of theatre. The archives is open to the public, and serves Festival staff and artists, Festival patrons, outside researchers, students, and anyone interested in Festival history.

Ensuring an Artistic and Professional Legacy

I became Director of Archives at the Stratford Festival in July 2010. As part of my work, I wanted to continue the legacy of the former Director, the beloved Jane Edmonds. Jane had always wanted to set up a Festival museum, and had organized full-scale exhibitions of Festival materials. After she passed away, the Festival Archives staff started offering archives tours, which brought patrons behind the scenes. Tours were, and still are, guided by Friends of the Festival volunteers, as well as archives staff. Besides creating a well-designed space for archives tours, we also tackled the creation of a downtown museum/exhibition space.

Archives Renovation and Development of a Display Area

Upon my arrival as new Director, the Festival administration, the archives staff and I started looking at options to expand the tour offerings. This initiative was part of a major re-organization and renovation of the archives, which I initiated and which was completed in December 2010. The archives occupy about 10,000 square feet. The renovation entailed revamping the public areas and creating new spaces for users, including a media room for viewing recordings of Festival performances, which date back to 1968 with the taping of *Romeo and Juliet*, featuring Christopher Walken as Romeo. We were very lucky to have great support from the senior administration, and exceptional talent within the Festival, to help us in our work. Funding was entirely within the Festival budget, and the facilities team was invaluable in transforming the space.

One of the storage areas is internally referred to as the “High Bay,” because of the very high ceilings. As part of the renovation, we carved out a public tour space there, creating a 4,000-square-foot display area. This area was previously occupied by items that were stored in the archives, but were not part of the collections. There were also collection materials that needed to be rehoused and moved to the proper archives location.

A little less than half of the High Bay is taken up by a metal structure, which adds two storage levels. These two levels, and the area immediately underneath, house costumes, costume sketches, and more. The one-level display area came to co-exist with this multi-level storage. Having a display area and a storage area in the same space raises issues of security and preservation. Visitors cannot wander off into the storage area, plus you want to make sure that the en-

vironment remains clean and stable (for example, no food allowed). To address these concerns, we created a very clear demarcation between the tour and storage areas, and we made sure that visitors were accompanied at all times. We succeeded in keeping the collections safe, and the visitors enjoyed looking at the displays up close, as well as getting a glimpse, from a distance, of the stored collections.

Creating the tour display area entailed removing large warehouse shelving units, approximately sixteen feet in height. We sorted through the materials stored on these units, and brought back to life some outstanding pieces, as well as many recordings of shows. We disposed of the pieces that were not part of the archives, as well as pieces that were irreparably damaged. Once the shelving was removed and the collection items were properly relocated and rehoused in other parts of the archives, we refinished the floors, painted the walls (twenty-two feet in height), and added new lighting, with the advice of lighting designer Kevin Fraser. The new space launched in the 2011 season and created a great canvas for showcasing treasures from the archives, representing both old and new performances. After each season, we acquired new pieces and the public enjoyed seeing up close costumes, props, set pieces, set models, and more. The space enabled us to display large set pieces and even entire small sets. For example, in the 2012 Season we displayed the full set of the play *Hosanna* (2011 Season), scenic design by Michael Gianfrancesco (image 1, right side). The set occupied the same footprint in the archives as it did on stage at the Studio Theatre. Visitors enjoyed walking through the set (but without touching anything!) and looking up close at the intricate design, which reconstructed a 1970s' apartment, with the use of vintage objects.

A favorite piece that became a permanent part of the display was the collage backdrop used on the set of the play *Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris* (2010 Season), scenic design by Katherine Lubienski. We mounted this very large piece (sixteen-feet tall) on two corner walls (image 1, left side, corner). When I first saw the play on stage at the Tom Patterson Theatre (one of the Festival's four venues), I was struck by the exquisite historical and artistic detail that Lubienski embedded in the collage. While watching the show, I kept thinking how great this collage wall would look in the archives display area. During the show intermission, I remember hearing members of the audience whispering that they were going to ask for pieces of the wall. This confirmed my impression that the wall would



Image 1: The Archives Tour Display Area, 2012 Season. Photo: Stratford Festival. On display: The full set of the play *Hosanna* (2011 Season), scenic design by Michael Gi-anfrancesco, and the collage backdrop of the set of the play *Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living in Paris* (2010 Season), scenic design by Katherine Lubienski.

become a display item of great interest; and I made sure that it stayed in one piece!

The display area was the grand finale of the tours, which started with an introduction in the reading room and the screening of historical footage (on a newly added 90" TV monitor), then moved to the workroom for a brief talk by archivist and stage manager Nora Polley, and finally entered the display area for a guided tour and a photo opportunity. When tours first started, patrons had to go up a set of stairs, a major accessibility issue; the new set up was all on one level and addressed that initial problem.

The renovation and the creation of a display area greatly increased the visibility of the archives. In-person visits (for research and tours) increased from 300 to 2,000 a year.

Creating the Downtown Museum/Exhibition Space

The creation of a downtown museum/exhibition space was, as I mentioned in the beginning, a dream that dated back to the work of the former Archives Director. It was a highly collaborative endeavor, as everything that happens in the theatre, and was strongly supported by the administrative and artistic staff of the Stratford Festival and a co-creation of the entire archives staff. We also worked with Festival prop-makers and seamstresses, some retired, some still ac-

tive, to repair and prepare items for display. Toronto-based textile conservator Elizabeth Griffin attended to the more fragile and historical textiles, including the sixteen-foot-long red velvet cape worn by Alec Guinness in the 1953 opening show, *Richard III*. We also worked with professional video and photography labs in Toronto to transfer rare footage and print rare photo negatives. Different names for the museum/exhibition space were discussed among Festival constituencies, and we eventually chose Festival Exhibition. The research phase, and how we decided on content and selected pieces, was a fascinating journey, but it is not the focus of this chapter, which looks at the practical tasks of finding, adapting, and funding a space.

A very big part of creating the Festival Exhibition was to find an adequate space, and I embarked in this search early in my tenure as Director. The archives has a rather remote location, and my vision was to find a downtown space where we could bring the archives' treasures to Festival patrons, the Stratford community, and Stratford tourists alike. We also looked at Festival spaces closest to the main theatre, but the downtown vision prevailed. We eventually found a very promising space at 104 Downie Street, kitty-corner from the Avon Theatre (image 2), the Festival's second largest venue.



Image 2: Exterior of the 2013 Festival Exhibition. Photo: Stratford Festival/Rick Schmidlin. On round window: Jack Creley as Trimalchio in *The Satyricon* (directed by John Hirsch 1969; music by Stanley Silverman).

It was a two-room (plus bathroom), 1,500-square-foot commercial space, which had seen different incarnations over time, most recently a meeting space and two different kinds of restaurants. It needed some renovation, but it was overall in good shape and the monthly rent and utilities were within our budget. We received great support from downtown businesses and Stratford Tourism. They greatly helped us with promotion, and a restaurant across the street even loaned us chairs for some of our sold-out talks!

We started renting several months prior to our 2012 opening, to allow for renovation. Working mostly with the facilities team, we cleaned, painted and prepared the space. The landlord removed the ceiling tiles containing asbestos and contributed to some repairs. Most notably, the landlord agreed to paint the façade, which was falling into disrepair. The nearby downtown businesses welcomed the face-lift.

We fixed the outside entrance to create an incline that enabled wheelchair access, and added a wheelchair door opener. We painted and fixed the outside window frames and created signage with the graphics department. Signage enabled us to cover the top of the window frames, which were strangely shaped. We refinished the floors, which were in relatively good shape. We adjusted the shape of the arch between the two rooms. Festival staff carpenter Gary Brady built a beautiful new, accessible counter and several feet of wood shelving. He built two units with glass shelves, standing back-to-back in the center of the room, between two existing pillars (image 3).

He also helped us fix exhibition cases we already had, including cutting down the large Plexiglas top of one of the cases, which was partially damaged. This task required great precision and care, and spared us from having to entirely replace the top with a new one. Other adjustments to the space included covering a door at the back of the main room and, during the second year, we worked with a local drapery business to add a red velvet curtain over the door, as well as matching accents at the entrance. To elevate and protect the costumes, we used risers, but also adapted beautifully decorated stage boards that had been used in the 2011 production of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (image 4).

We added an alarm, but our approach to the security of items was relatively low key: we had at least two paid staff members onsite all the time, stanchions in front of some items, and a simple red tape line on the floor in front of most of the displays. The patrons were very respectful and we did not encounter any issues, apart from some minor damage to a costume, which was successfully repaired. Our



Image 3: Interior of the 2012 Festival Exhibition. Photo: Stratford Festival/Rick Schmidlin.



Image 4: Interior of the 2013 Festival Exhibition. Photo: Stratford Festival/Rick Schmidlin.

low-key approach worked in the Festival environment, but might have not worked elsewhere.

We covered the large windows with UV film inside, and also added blinds. We used the windows as a way to showcase more Festival images and we printed enlargements of photos. High-quality large-size printing can be expensive. We obtained quotes from vendors in town, and eventually found a vendor in a nearby town who offered excellent quality at a much lower price. The first year, we used historic black and white photos from the early days of the Festival, applied as film to the windows, visible from the street. The second year, we had graphics visible from the outside (applying film on the windows) and printed enlargements of color photos on the inside of the blinds (image 5).

We installed new lighting, with advice from Festival lighting designer Michael Walton. Because of the relatively low ceiling, we had to address issues related to the shadows cast by the lights over the objects, a problem we could only partially solve. Walton also helped us realize an interactive lighting display, aimed at children and young adults, but very popular with all ages (image 6)!



Image 5: Interior of the 2013 Festival Exhibition. Photo: Stratford Festival/Rick Schmidlin. Blinds: Richard Monette and Marti Maraden in *Romeo and Juliet*, 1977 (directed by David William); photo: Stratford Festival/ Robert C. Ragsdale. On the screen: Colm Feore in *Romeo and Juliet* (directed for the stage by Peter Dews, 1984), CBC *From Page to Stage*, 1985.



Image 6: Interactive lighting display, 2012 Festival Exhibition. Photo: Stratford Festival/Rick Schmidlin. Set model for *Fiddler on the Roof* (2000, directed by Susan H. Schulman) designed by Debra Hanson.

We chose a different set model each year. Walton placed the model in a display case, had the Plexiglas darkened at an auto shop, and added LED lights inside, connecting them to a manual lighting board, and provided instructions to users, printed on the outside of the case. Walton pre-set some lighting combinations, but patrons could also experiment with their own designs. This display was extremely successful, and was sponsored by Martie and Bob Sachs, who wanted to do something with special appeal for the younger audiences. The display was inspired by and adapted from a design by Karl G. Ruling, who developed the idea (see *Bravo! A Theatre Exhibition Case Study* in this volume for more detail).

We added monitors throughout the space, showcasing newly-found and restored historical footage, news, documentaries, interviews, 3-D recreations of the original stage, and more. In the second year, we added a dedicated viewing space, with seats, to the front room (image 5). On that screen, we ran a thirty-eight minute 1985 CBC *From Page to Stage* educational television version of the Festival staging of *Romeo and Juliet* (directed by Peter Dews in 1984), with Colm Feore and Seana McKenna.

The first exhibition opened in 2012, on Shakespeare's birthday, April 23rd, to celebrate the Festival's sixtieth season. *Most Rare Visions: 60 Years of the Stratford Shakespeare Festival* featured content from each decade of the Festival's history, including costumes, props, set models, rare photographs and footage, the interactive lighting display, and a room with artefacts dating back to the Festival's beginnings, 1953–56, when it was still operating in a tent.

The second exhibition took place during the 2013 season, and was built around Festival performances of the four Shakespeare plays featured that season. It was titled *Four Shakespeare Masterpieces: Present and Past Productions of Othello, Romeo and Juliet, Measure for Measure and The Merchant of Venice*. The exhibition was a retrospective of all Festival productions of these plays, and also included items from the 2013 productions, such as the set model for *Romeo and Juliet* (scenic design by Douglas Paraschuk). Visitors could look at different interpretations of the plays over time, through clips, costumes, photos, props, and more.

Over the course of the two seasons, more than 10,000 visitors viewed the exhibitions, and attended talks by actors, directors, composers, and staff, all held on Saturdays. The talks almost invariably sold out. The Exhibition developed a following, and became a meeting point for actors and artists, who enjoyed the historical overview

and remembering past experiences. Visitors included famous artists from the very first season (1953), such as Douglas Rain and Bill Neadles, young actors, and present and past artistic directors who, together with patrons old and new, created a space for memory and contributed their stories, both in person and through comments in the guest book. The staff was trained to give tours to anyone interested, and patrons had very rewarding experiences visiting the Exhibition.

Funding

Funding the Festival Exhibition was relatively straightforward, because of the support from the Festival and the generosity of donors. We had several donations, including the one by Martie and Bob Sachs towards the interactive lighting display, and a large donation by a group of friends who called themselves “The Moore Militia” and had been attending the Festival for fifty years. Donations contributed to the renovation and set up, including buying monitors. Admission fees and funding from the Festival covered the operating expenses. We hired staff, and in our first year, we were open ten hours a day, seven days a week. We scaled down in the second year, but still stayed open six days a week. The admission fee was very modest: \$6 full price, with lower prices for seniors and groups, and free for children. We also distributed discount coupons through local businesses. We considered running the Exhibition with the help of the Friends of the Festival volunteers, but went with paid staff instead, because of the commitment required, which included working long hours and often on weekends and some holidays, running the cash register, compiling financial reports, making bank deposits, and setting up and disarming the alarm.

Successes and Failures

Developing and running the Festival Exhibition was an extraordinary and rewarding experience. We had a group of returning and new visitors and a faithful crowd that attended all talks. As mentioned, more than 10,000 people visited the Exhibition. I personally spent hundreds of hours in the space, and witnessed the community it created and the warmth of exchange between us and the patrons. We showcased the Festival’s history, provided context for the current productions, engaged the long-term patrons, and connected with those new

to the Festival, including Festival artists. We also engaged and honored the downtown community.

We invested a lot of passion, money and time into the Exhibition. We wanted to create a permanent space, and honor a dream. But, unfortunately, the dream did not last. Although we had high numbers, they were not high enough to financially support the operation long-term, within the tight economy of not-for-profit theatre. Rent and paid staff made this a costlier operation than the archives tours. The tours' admission fee is about the same as the Exhibition, but the tours operation has basically no additional cost, since it is set within a space owned by the Festival, and is run by the regular archives staff and Friends of the Festival volunteers.

The archives tours, although smaller in the number of visitors, are more financially sustainable. The Exhibition did not produce the expected revenue, and we decided to close it at the end of the 2013 Season. Working on the Exhibition was very rewarding, though. It gave us insight and great memories, and helped us connect with the local community. Even if the Exhibition closed, the value of it remains, and we are grateful for the experience.