

Western University
Scholarship@Western

SASAH 4th Year Capstone and Other Projects:
Presentations

School for Advanced Studies in the Arts and
Humanities (SASAH)

3-29-2019

Archivist at the Grand Theatre

Nicole Barrett

Western University, nbarret8@uwo.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/sasahr4pres>



Part of the [Theatre History Commons](#)

Citation of this paper:

Barrett, Nicole, "Archivist at the Grand Theatre" (2019). *SASAH 4th Year Capstone and Other Projects: Presentations*. 14.
<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/sasahr4pres/14>

Nicole Barrett

250858314

Dr. Barbara Bruce

ARTHUM 4492G/4493G

12 April 2019

Final Report

My unpaid internship position, in conjunction with my Experiential Learning credit, took place at the Grand Theatre in London, ON. I completed my internship in two parts: the first part took place over the course of six weeks in the summer of 2018; the second part took place on campus (at Western University) from September 2018 to April 2019. As part of this project and position, I have been working with the Grand Theatre's archive database. In this position, I sort through physical materials (like newspaper clippings of reviews or detailed meeting minutes) and then catalogue them in a digital database. Much of the organization of this database has come from The American Theatre Archive Project's manual; as such, it has been a useful resource throughout the process of working with the Grand's database. The manual sorts possible items into four categories: these are "Administrative," "Creative/Artistic," "Production," and "Design/Technical" (Brady 6-7). The Grand database, alongside these categories, also details things like season, box and folder number, and a description of the item.

Generally speaking, the position involved archiving theatre materials; this included data-entry and handling, organizing, and storing items, which were largely print or photo materials. This both required and further improved skills such as organization, attention to detail, the ability to respectfully handle archival materials, and data-entry. The Grand Theatre began with an

unidentified total number of boxes of materials to be catalogued, organized and sorted, and re-boxed and/or labeled depending on the box or item's condition.

When I first began, I was introduced to the archiving system as was already set in place; this included how to catalogue the items on a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. For the first few weeks, I worked exclusively with the photo materials, which included items such as production photos, albums, CDs or tapes, and negatives. I found and archived the majority of the photo items (other than those miscellaneous items mixed into different boxes) from the collection of boxes that the Grand had originally brought down to be archived (as there were more archival boxes elsewhere in the building). Thereafter, I shifted to focus on archiving the textual materials such as scripts, press clippings, and financial records. The photo materials were entered into a specific spreadsheet and were kept in different boxes with their own numbering system than the textual materials. To process an item, it was removed from a storage box, and then it was examined and entered into the data-base based on set categories such as quantity (including how many photos were in an album, collection of production photos, etc.), condition, production, and season. Materials were then either returned to the same box or moved to a new one (depending on the condition of the original box as some were heavily damaged from storage), and the boxes were numbered and labeled. Similarly, the textual items were entered into a separate spreadsheet and boxes. This spreadsheet was largely similar, but it included some different categories; for example, items were categorized as administrative, production, creative/artistic, or design/technical, and then they were described (for example as "house program" or "publicity"). The boxes that these items were placed in were, again, numbered and labeled; however, these were organized by year(s)/season(s) (and, if needed, more specifically by which productions

from a certain season) and with numbered folders. For both photo and text materials, the box number (and file number, if applicable) were included in the spreadsheet.

The project, at large, began recently and is (and presumably will be) an ongoing process; the Grand has a large quantity of stored (and unfiled) boxes/materials, and future seasons' materials may be further added as well. The intended outcomes of this project are as follows: as archivists, we would catalogue as many boxes as was possible; the materials might contribute to a possible exhibition and/or another archive (such as Guelph's extensive collection); and this would salvage materials from further damage in poor storage conditions. To conclude our internship positions with the Grand Theatre, Sarah Ball and I are creating a summative report of the entirety of this project as a deliverable that will be submitted to the Grand Theatre. This document will describe an overview of the project; how it was initiated; details on the archiving procedure(s); what the intended outcomes were at the outset of the project; a chronology of events; the outcomes from each iteration; and our collective recommendations. We will contact the other students who have participated in this internship to better inform our report. This report, in addition to the physical work that we have done with the archives, will hopefully help inform how the Grand chooses to shape the future of their archives. Our experience with the system will likely provide insight into its best and worst features so that the Grand, in future, can best utilize this archiving process. In this capacity, the report itself presents a further opportunity to contribute to this community institution.

In the summer, on site at the theatre, an unspecified number of boxes were brought down from storage (in the upper floors of the theatre) for us to work through; we were able to archive a large percentage of those materials that were there for us to access. Since the summer, some of the boxes (in which the materials are kept) have been moved from the Grand to the SASAH

offices on campus. Like in the summer, at the end of the second part of my internship, a large quantity of boxes have been archived and several thousand entries have been input into the theatre's database.

Some challenges that arose during my position were as follows: because the textual materials needed to be individually input into the database (rather than photo materials, which were often summarized together), they took more time and thus withheld the overall number of boxes we could complete. In regards to the shift from the theatre to the SASAH offices, we lacked some resources such as new banker's boxes or physical space. Had I not had the opportunity to work on site at the theatre the prior summer, one issue, too, that may have arisen is a lack of direct interaction with the organization. Working from the SASAH offices, we were largely isolated from the Grand Theatre (and its staff) itself. This meant that we could neither (further) develop relationships nor utilize the staff as a resource (as many staff members could provide insight into materials that we were otherwise unable to identify to record accurately).

Because the materials were moved from the Grand, we have not (since then) been engaging directly with the theatre. However, when I was on site there, I had the opportunity to work under the supervision of both Deb Harvey (Executive Director) and Paul Fujimoto-Pihl (Project Manager). Additionally, other staff members would visit us where we were set-up in the wardrobe department, which is on a floor separate from the rest of the Grand's offices and departments. During the summer, the theatre was preparing for the autumn High School Project, *Prom Queen: The Musical*. Altogether, by interacting with the theatre staff, I gained both insight into the early stages of this particular musical's production and what it was like to work in a theatre from reception to technical operations.

While I did not work directly with the community, I did have the opportunity to more fully understand and appreciate the Grand's relationship to the community by interacting with the archives. As I have discussed in my reflections, from student applications for the 2006/7 season production of *West Side Story* to photo albums of the Grand's 100th anniversary celebration in 2001, the documents characterize and archive the stories of the concrete relationships between theatre and community.

More broadly, this position allowed me to consider the relationship between the arts and community. In reading press clippings, I could read the audiences' reactions to various productions and subject matters. For example, there were several letter-to-the-editor columns in response to one another: while the first audience member called a play too obscene and claimed to tear up his season subscription, several others passionately responded in the following month to support the change and the less traditional themes. I could see the Grand continuing to challenge what is "traditional" theatre and what is shown onstage such as with their "UnderGrand" series, which was introduced by Martha Henry, who was artistic director from 1988 to 1995. The Gazette, in 1989, wrote an article titled, "UnderGrand Theatre Shows Not Made for the Squeamish" discussing the shows' grittier or darker themes, and many others praised the season. For example, the 1988/1989 UnderGrand season featured Judith Thompson's *The Crackwalker*, which is "a dark portrait of the underbelly of Kingston Ontario" (Charlebois 1). Through this position and these materials, I could come to understand how involved the Grand is with the London community and vice versa; and, as a local, I was overjoyed to be able to contribute to the Grand in any capacity. Furthermore, these materials gave me a comprehensive look at the productions over the years from various perspectives. The Grand remains an artistic space that continues to evolve within and beyond expectations of what theatre

is or can be. They continue to present and flourish the Canadian theatrical arts. I have gained a stronger understanding and appreciation for the space and overlap between the arts and, not just the audience, but, the local community.

Furthermore, a position such as this engages with the community in the sense that one learns about the history of a community institution (such as the Grand) or London's arts scene more broadly. For example, I found documents like handwritten notes for guided tours that detailed how the Grand became the professional theatre institution that it is today; I read about past artistic directors on the Grand's website to understand the context of press clippings. Natalie Scola would ask the building manager, who had worked there for many years, if he could recognize what year a photo came from; he told us about the interior redesigns of the theatre and the installation of the HVAC system. Every now and then, Deb Harvey would come downstairs from her office, and she would say, "Tell me a story." This position not only provided an opportunity to not only learn (and physically handle) the theatre's history, but it also allowed me to engage and participate in the uncovering of this expansive history.

In conjunction with the research that I have done for my CEL reflections, this iteration of my internship has especially given me insight into the archiving process and possibilities. More broadly, it allowed me to apply and develop my research and organization skills. More specifically, I have come to understand how developing and engaging with archival materials effectively distributes and enables information access and information links. In many of the articles that I have researched, the authors/archivists consider how an archivist can predict the needs of the user and thereby meet those needs when organizing an archive: "The key element affecting the interaction between student [user] and archival material is the organization and accessibility of that material" (Barker 47). In the instance wherein Dalhousie University

introduced its students to its theatre archives, this meant developing documents like “finding aid[s]” to “facilitat[e] research into specific productions” (Barker 48-9) so that students could more easily navigate and engage with the archives.

As Michele Hilmes notes, “Normally, archives collect, catalogue and preserve, leaving the interpretation and analysis of materials to the scholars who consult them” (78). However, as examples such as Dalhousie University’s collaboration between archive and academia demonstrate, an archive that works in conjunction with its users may ultimately be more effective. As a student, I have often conducted research for assignments; more specifically, in SASAH, I have focussed a lot of my research on musical theatre. When researching the aesthetics of theatre revivals, I studied costume sketches, reviews, and scripts to understand variations between performances; I sought to “[gain] a sense of contact with a past production” (Barker 49) through these variously documented materials. As such, when considering my internship and research, I could apply my own experience to fully recognize the inherent necessity of the symbiotic relationship between archivist and user—especially with materials of such an interdisciplinary nature.

In the process of archiving, I as well could consider the preservation of the arts and art materials. The Grand’s archive, which spans over a hundred years of the theatre’s and building’s history, allows myself and others to recognize, reflect on, and value the legacy and growth of the Grand and the local and national theatrical arts. Archived materials allow one to compare what was being shown, for example, when the theatre was first opened versus the present day; it allows us to visibly see how the building has changed; it allows us to see how the Grand has survived financial crises to continue pouring art into the local community; and it provides the

Grand's creative departments with resources, for future productions, such as scripts, costume sketches, and costume bibles.

Another aspect of archiving that I explored in my written reflections were the outcomes of these archives. Originally, the Grand had considered utilizing the materials to create an exhibition that would celebrate their 50th anniversary. However, it seems that they have chosen not to move forward with this exhibition. Following my presentation, Patrick posed the question of whether or not these materials could be utilized for any sort of exhibition. While, as I said then, the collection does not favour visually aesthetic items (but instead is heavily populated by text centric items), the archive itself offers insight into a particular moment and place in time and space. It offers an in depth history or scope of Canadian, and to some degree specifically Southern Ontario, theatre. Materials on shows like the aforementioned *The Crackwalker* and Joan MacLeod's *Toronto, Mississippi* (performed during the Grand's 1988-1989 season); on actors like William Hutt; and from other Canadian theatres (such as house programs used as references by the Grand) showcase and celebrate the rich history of these various Canadian artists, performers, narratives, etc.. Whether these materials be exhibited to the public; are made available as tools (whether physically or as textual/digital data) in another archive such as Guelph's or online platforms like the Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia; or are utilized for any other purpose, they can potentially celebrate or contribute to the legacy and history of Canadian theatre.

Furthermore, engaging with the archives directly demonstrated to me the vast and interdisciplinary elements of theatre production. As Harvey and Moosberger write, "each type of record"—such as "General Correspondence[s], Administrative Records, Scripts," etc.— "contributes to our understanding of the theatre's milieu" (50). A theatrical production comes to

exist through the collaborative process between departments; the archive and its collection of materials from financial reports to house programs to actors' resumes and contracts demonstrates precisely this. I think an experience like my CEL project, then, is especially essential to any student considering a career in an arts industry whether that be theatre, writing/publishing, visual arts, or otherwise. While we theorize and practice the creative arts as Arts and Humanities students, we often do not consider the "real-world" application or contexts of what we study. For a scriptwriter's drama to be performed, a writer must collaborate with the theatre; the theatre must sell advertisements; the actors must collaborate with wardrobe; and so forth. It is not, to be cliché, a "one man show."

My internship position has provided me insight into how a theatre operates; through both engaging with the materials and the staff, I have come to understand the business, educational, and community focused aspects of the Grand. I have come to learn how various creative roles fit into the larger context of theatre and arts businesses, and I have broadened my understanding of what positions are available in an arts institution as a whole. My CEL, then, functions similarly to the experience of interacting with an archive: by parsing through the various production photos, CDs, scripts, and resumes, one can more directly understand the pieces that come together to create a performance. Overall, for SASAH students and our vast array of artistic passions, a CEL projects presents an opportunity to contextualize our education outside of the classroom. We can effectively shift our interests—whether musical theory, musical theatre, or writing—into a professional context and develop relationships with those already working in these industries.

So, do I believe that archiving itself will play a role in my future career? No, I do not. As Sarah (Ball) said in her presentation, an archivists best friends are good company and a pair of

headphones; the process itself is not always the most thrilling. However, this experience working with an archive has better informed me on their creation and vast applications; I greater appreciate their function and what can flourish from such a construction. Specifically, too, because I enjoy working with theatre in academic contexts, it gives me insight into the broad manner of ways that things can intersect or portray a show.

Much of my experience could be embodied in an anecdote. In the summer, the building manager brought myself and Sarah (MacDonald) to the upper floors. The boxes (other than the ones that had already been removed) were kept upstairs in the HVAC room, so we were going there to assess the quantity, quality, and contents of these other boxes. After we had briefly surveyed the remaining materials, the building manager paused and looked at us. “Do you want to see something?” he asked.

Sarah and I glanced at each other, and we both said, “Sure.”

Across the (squished) hallway was another door, and he unlocked it and told us to follow him. We walked through a narrow passageway, uncertain but trusting, and shortly realized that we were walking across the catwalks. We walked alongside—high above—the stage, and he pointed to the pulleys and told us what they did and how they’ve changed over the years. We ascended and descended staircases over criss-crossed walkways. When we stood facing the stage above the mezzanine seats, looking through a slot like a window, Sarah said, “I wish that I had my phone on me so that I could take a picture.”

We continued on and wound up in his cramped office with posters, photos, and other memorabilia on the walls. Then, soon, we had navigated our way back to the familiar office hallways and the summer sunlight.

“Sorry for taking you away from your work,” he said.

We laughed. We were busy trying to imprint the brief tour in our minds.

Moments like this have stuck with me long after I have left the theatre and will likely persevere far after my internship position ends. It was a moment of unexpected wonder and fascination; it was an instance of seeking to document something fleeting; it was insight, a “behind the curtain” look, into how the theatre operates and an appreciation for the grand staff who have shared this with us.

When I worked out of the Grand Theatre in the summer, I would enter the building through the stage doors. I signed my name on the sign-in sheet, and I climbed a flight of stairs past the props department and the offices to the wardrobe department. Bundles of fabric climbed the corner wall; puffy gowns peaked out from the dark doorway of the closet; and a poster of Joseph’s Technicolour Dreamcoat costume hung on the wall near the sink. Throughout the years, SASAH’s interdisciplinary education and nature has allowed me to engage with musical theatre in the university context. The possibility to work in and collaborate with the Grand, then, in itself was an amazing opportunity to further engage with something that I am so passionate about. Just walking into the building through the stage door gave me a thrill each day. The opportunity to work with a company that I have admired and enjoyed, as a Londoner, since I was young and who is monumental in the local arts community has been extraordinary.

Works Cited

- Barker, Roberta & Barrett, Creighton & Lahey, Doyle. "Archival Collaborations: Using Theatre Archives to Teach Canadian Theatre History and Archival Literacy." *Canadian Theatre Review*, vol. 156, 2013, pp. 46-51. *Project MUSE*, muse.jhu.edu/article/524245.
- Brady, Susan, et al. "Preserving Theatrical Legacy: An Archiving Manual for Theatre Companies." Version 1.3, *American Theatre Archive Project*, 14 Aug. 2015, https://www.americantheatrearchiveproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Manual_ATAP-08-14-2015.pdf. Accessed 20 Jan. 2019.
- Charlebois, Gaetan, and Anne Nothof. "The Crackwalker," May 05, 2014. *Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia*. Athabasca University. Web. July 12 2018.
- Harvey, Kathryn, & Michael Moosberger. "Theatre Archives' Outreach and Core Archival Functions." *Archivaria*, vol. 63, 2007, pp. 35-54. Accessed 20 Jan. 2019.
- Hilmes, Michele. "The work of the archive in the age of digital reproduction: featured collections at the Wisconsin center for film and theater research." *Critical Studies in Television*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2010, p. 77+. *Academic OneFile*, <http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A392573037/AONE?u=lond95336&sid=AONE&xid=5c362785>. Accessed 20 Jan. 2019.

Presentation Summary

I conducted an internship with the Grand Theatre, which is a local theatre here in London. I worked, specifically, with the Grand's archives. I completed my internship in two parts: in summer 2018, I spent six weeks on site at the Grand; during the academic term, I worked out of the SASAH offices on Western University's campus.

The Grand's archives is a project still in development and in an ongoing process. The Grand has a collection of their materials, kept in numerous boxes, in storage; these hadn't been sorted or catalogued and were often damaged in storage. Natalie Scola, another SASAH student, worked with the Grand to develop a database and process to archive these materials. My role was to archive these physical materials (like press clippings or costume sketches) into this new system.

The intended outcomes of this project were, for us as "archivists," to catalogue as many boxes as possible. We sought to contribute to the theatre by helping salvaging the damaged materials from poor storage conditions; making items accessible that they could possibly utilize; and beginning a process that they could thereafter continue with new items after each season.

When I worked on site at the theatre, I worked out of the wardrobe department.. I worked under the direction of the Executive Director and Project Manager; and, I had the opportunity to interact with other staff members whether that be the Technical Director, Receptionist, or Building Manager. Altogether, this gave me insight into the range of positions available at the company as well as into the upcoming High School Project musical, *Prom Queen: The Musical*.

During the academic term, some materials were moved to the SASAH offices wherein we continued work on the project. Altogether, between both sessions, a large quantity of boxes were completed, and thousands of entries were input into the database. Another student and I will be

compiling and submitting to the theatre a final, summative report. It will give an overview of our collective experience with the archives, and we will make recommendations that may contribute to informing the future of these archives. Ultimately, this collection is massive, and it is one that is something that will likely be ever-expanding season after season.

Overall, I had the opportunity to learn about local arts/theatre history and engage with the community. The Executive Director would ask us to “tell her a story”: she instilled in me a recognition of the importance of the history—or *stories*—that these archives tell. I could directly engage with the history through both the materials and staff; it gave me insight into all of the lives that have touched or been touched by the theatre.

As well, I gained insight into a professional arts company. I learned more about the vast interdisciplinary operations of a theatre from production to reception to finance to wardrobe. This, I believe, is applicable knowledge—unto other arts professions like designers, writers, publishing, or museums—for understanding any art in the larger context of a company or industry.

Finally, I am passionate about (specifically musical) theatre, and it is something that I have incorporated into my studies through SASAH. So, the opportunity to engage with, broaden my knowledge of, and contribute to theatre and an institution like the Grand was an exceptional experience.

Reflection

My presentation, like the written reflections and summative/final report(s), provided an opportunity to really engagingly reflect on my experience with my internship position. As well, the overall process places my experience in juxtaposition or collaboration with the academic materials that I explored for my written reflections to further inform and broaden my experience.

Notably, because Sarah Ball and I both presented this term, it gave us an opportunity to also reflect on the benefits or difficulties of working on and/or off site from the theatre. For example, working from the Grand provides one with an opportunity to better build a relationship with the theatre staff; in putting a student in proximity to the staff and institution, it inherently allows one to learn from the larger staff body (such as the art or financial departments).