

Research

Guide

Theatre Archives

Why Use This Guide?

Accessing theatre archives in the UK and Ireland is essential for researchers, historians, theatre practitioners, and enthusiasts interested in exploring the vibrant history and culture of the performing arts. This guide is designed to assist individuals in navigating theatre archives effectively, providing guidance on what to expect, where to begin your research, and how to properly reference your findings.

The Archives: What Kind of Things You May Be Able to Find

Theatre archives in the UK and Ireland preserve diverse materials that document the rich tapestry of theatrical performances, companies, and practitioners. Here are some common types of materials you might encounter:

Production Records:

Scripts, playbills, programs, and prompt books offer insights into the creative process behind theatrical productions, possibly including casting decisions, stage directions, and historical performances.

Audiovisual Recordings:

Audio recordings, videos, and film footage of live performances allow researchers to study acting techniques, staging choices, and audience reactions, preserving the ephemeral nature of live theatre.

Personal Papers:

Archives may contain personal papers, diaries, and memorabilia of renowned actors, playwrights, directors, and other theatre professionals, offering intimate glimpses into their lives, careers, and creative processes.

Performance Reviews:

Newspaper clippings, magazine articles, and reviews offer critical assessments of theatrical performances, shedding light on their artistic merit, cultural significance, and audience reception.

Correspondence and Manuscripts:

Letters, emails, and manuscripts exchanged among playwrights, directors, actors, and producers can provide glimpses into the collaborative nature of theatre production and the development of new works.

Photographs and Posters:

Visual materials capture moments from performances, promotional posters, set designs, and costume sketches, providing a visual record of the theatre's aesthetic and stylistic elements.

Administrative Documents:

Records related to theatre management, financial transactions, fundraising efforts, and organisational policies offer insights into theatre production's business side and the challenges theatre companies face.



THM/636/1/11 Royal Ballet – *Beatrix Potter*, Royal Ballet Les Patineurs /Tales of Beatrix Potter, V&A Theatre and Performance Archive, 2007.

Examples

Victoria and Albert Museum, London (V&A) Theatre and Performance Collections: The V&A's Theatre and Performance Collections serve as the national archive for the performing arts, documenting both contemporary practice and the history of all aspects of the performing arts in the UK. This includes drama, dance, opera, circus, puppetry, comedy, musical theatre, costume, set design, pantomime, popular music, and more. Typically, the archives contain a wide range of materials, including diaries, correspondence, manuscripts, photographs, business papers, and designs.

National Theatre Archive, London: The National Theatre Archive houses records related to the history and productions of the National Theatre in London. It includes scripts, production photographs, designs, administrative documents, and audio-visual recordings. The archive offers valuable resources for studying British theatre history, theatrical innovations, and the creative processes behind National Theatre productions.

The Theatre Archive Project, De Montfort University Archives: Was initiated in 2003 by Professor Dominic Shellard, Vice-Chancellor of De Montfort University. It is a long-term collaborative project between De Montfort University and the British Library. The central aim of the project is to 're-investigate British Theatre History 1945-1968, from the perspective of both the theatre goer and the practitioner.'
<https://archiveshub.jisc.ac.uk/search/archives/9fe10d22-25eb-311b-b848-4e3ce844d40f>

Abbey Theatre Archive, Ireland: The Abbey Theatre Archive has over one million items dating from 1894 to the present day. The Abbey Theatre Archive preserves materials related to the theatre's productions, its posters, programmes, photographs, lighting plans, set and costume designs, scripts, audio and audio-visual files, administrative records and other material. The archive offers insights into Irish theatre history, cultural movements, and the evolution of Irish identity through the arts.

Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) Archives: The RSC Archives preserve the history of the Royal Shakespeare Company, one of the world's most renowned theatre companies. The archives contain materials related to productions, performances, actors, directors, and administrative records. Researchers can explore scripts, rehearsal notes, production photographs, costume designs, and marketing materials, offering insights into the RSC's artistic legacy and its contributions to Shakespearean performance. The official archive is looked after by The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, who have the world's largest publicly accessible library and archive devoted to Shakespeare, the sources of his plays and their history on the stage.

Scottish Theatre Archive: The Scottish Theatre Archive at the University of Glasgow Library houses a comprehensive collection of materials related to Scottish theatre history and performance culture. It includes manuscripts, prompt books, scripts, programmes, posters, photographs, and personal papers of Scottish playwrights, actors, directors, and theatre companies. Its role is to help preserve and promote interest in Scotland's theatrical heritage. Researchers can explore collections that illuminate Scotland's cultural heritage, social dynamics, and contributions to the global theatrical landscape.

Where to start:

Identify Research Focus: Clarify your research objectives. Are you interested in a specific playwright, theatre company, historical period, genre, or thematic topic? Narrowing down your focus will help guide your search.

Locate Relevant Archives: Identify theatre archives, libraries, museums, and special collections that hold materials relevant to your research topic. National institutions, university libraries, and local theatre organisations may house theatre archives.

Contact Archivists and Staff: Reach out to archivists or staff at the identified archives. Discuss your research interests, inquire about access procedures, and confirm opening hours and any access restrictions.

Understand Access Policies: Familiarise yourself with the archive's access policies, registration requirements, and any copyright restrictions that may apply to certain materials. Be prepared to provide identification and adhere to any preservation guidelines.

Referencing Your Research

Citation Style: Follow the citation style specified by your academic institution or field (e.g., APA, MLA, Chicago).

- **Documenting Sources:** Include detailed citations for all materials referenced in your research, including the title of the document, collection name, repository, and relevant identifiers (e.g., box and folder numbers).
- **Permissions and Copyright:** Be mindful of copyright restrictions when citing materials from theatre archives. Obtain necessary permissions if you plan to use reproductions of copyrighted materials in your research.
- **Acknowledgements:** Consider acknowledging the theatre archive and its staff in your research to recognise their contribution to your work.



GL1/4/1959/MND1 A Midsummer Night's Dream, Tom Holte Theatre Photographic Collection Prints: Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, 1959, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

Searching the Archive and Using the Collections

Catalogues and Finding Aids: Utilise the archive's catalogues, finding aids, and online databases to identify relevant collections and materials. Pay attention to keywords, titles, and subject headings related to your research.

Plan Your Visit.

Handle Materials Carefully: Treat archival materials with care to ensure their preservation for future researchers. Follow the archive's guidelines for handling fragile documents, photographs, and audio-visual recordings.

Take Detailed Notes: Keep detailed notes during your research. Record the source, date, and relevant details about the materials you consult, including collection names, box numbers, and folder titles.