‘Our Theatre Royal Nottingham’: Co-creation and co-curation of a digital performance collection with citizen scholars

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The project discussed here was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund; the evaluative research was supported by the AHRC under the Follow on Funding for Impact and Engagement project, ‘Citizen Scholarship in Nottingham’. The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funds world-class, independent researchers in a wide range of subjects: history, archaeology, digital content, philosophy, languages, design, heritage, area studies, the creative and performing arts, and much more. This financial year the AHRC will spend approximately £98 million to fund research and postgraduate training, in collaboration with a number of partners. The quality and range of research supported by this investment of public funds not only provides social and cultural benefits and contributes to the economic success of the UK but also to the culture and welfare of societies around the globe.

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While the major theatre collections of universities and libraries in the UK, Europe and the USA have been long established, and companies such as the Royal Shakespeare Company or Ballet Rambert hold their own extensive archives, the past decade has seen increasing attention paid to the need to support smaller theatres in preserving their own records. At the same time, new collaborative practices have emerged in the curation of heritage, often drawing on digital media and technologies: community archives, heritage crowdsourcing, community-university partnerships evidence this participatory turn.
This article reflects on an ongoing collaboration with the Theatre Royal Nottingham, UK, and volunteer researchers from the city, to preserve, order and digitally curate the theatre’s 150-plus year history. The project builds on the potential of digital technologies – both to enhance participation and engagement and to most effectively capture and represent the interlinked stories and memories mobilized in the making and reception of theatrical performance. In reflecting on the successes and challenges of the project, we develop a model of what we term ‘citizen scholarship’ in arts and humanities research, which has enabled and supported meaningful and sustained engagement with the theatre’s archive and heritage by community volunteers.

Keywords: theatre and performance archives; theatre and performance history; digital collections; citizen scholarship.

Introduction

While the major theatre collections of universities and libraries in the UK, Europe and the USA have been long established, and companies such as the Royal Shakespeare Company or Ballet Rambert hold their own extensive archives, the past decade has seen increasing attention paid to the need to support smaller theatres in preserving their own

records. In the USA, the American Theatre Archive Project (ATAP) was established in 2010 in response to theatre scholars' concerns that the archives of twentieth-century theatres would be lost to the future because they

> had not been acquired by manuscript repositories or had not been processed or catalogued; or they were not accessible through the theatre because staff members were unprepared to make them available; or records had been destroyed due to accidents, natural disasters, or the theatre's inability to maintain them when the theatre closed or moved (Brady and Koffler 2015, 105-6).

ATAP's *Archiving Manual* (Brady et al, 2015) has subsequently been widely used across the world by theatres aiming to explore their own heritage and history. The UK's Association of Performing Arts Collections (APAC) similarly offers a 'Starting Out Guide' for theatre companies, noting that archives can 'represent a valuable record of your work from which future generations can take inspiration' (V&A Museum 2008). But challenges in terms of staff capacity and skills within smaller theatre companies and venues inevitably remain.

Over the same period, new collaborative practices have emerged in the curation of heritage. The 2014 European Commission Communication, *Towards an integrated approach to cultural heritage for Europe*, recognised that 'Museums are increasingly community-oriented, led by people and stories […]. They place audiences on a par with the collections, at the heart of their activities'. The following year the EU Expert Group on Cultural Heritage argued that innovative use of cultural heritage 'has the potential to actively engage people – thereby helping to secure integration, inclusiveness, social cohesion and sound investment' (2015). And strong arguments have been made that the digital sphere can be used to enhance these collaborations. The 2016 'Experiencing the Digital World: The Cultural Value of Digital Engagement with Heritage' report suggests that 'digital tools almost automatically invite a more interactive, and

consequently active, engagement with heritage culture', and notes that this 'new kind of engagement' allows ' possibility for enhanced value through participation and co-creation' (King, Stark and Cooke 2016: 85, 90). Such interactive, community-based approaches are, we would suggest, perhaps uniquely suited to exploring the history and heritage of theatre, which is itself a necessarily collaborative practice. Theatre involves performers and spectators encountering each other within the place of performance, and that encounter is further supported by collaborations with set and lighting designers, stage managers and front of house teams among others.

Against the backdrop of these twin contexts, this article reflects on an ongoing collaboration between academics from theatre history and computer science at the University of Nottingham and the Creative Learning manager at the Theatre Royal Nottingham, UK in a project titled 'Our Theatre Royal Nottingham: its stories, people and heritage'. With financial support from the UK's Heritage Lottery Fund and Nottingham's Civic Society for a two year period from March 2017 to March 2019, a community of nearly 60 new volunteers from across the city has been trained to research and co-curate the Theatre Royal's history through two parallel outputs: the sorting and cataloguing of the analogue archive of materials held by the Theatre and not currently accessible to the public, and the curation and creation of a digital collection that brings together objects from that archive with material held in different repositories across the city which are seldom accessed (hosted at ourtheatreroyal.org). That platform is organised around four themes – Building the Theatre, The Theatre in Wartime, Pantomime, and Onstage and Backstage – which between them cover the key strands in the life of Nottingham's Theatre Royal since it was built in 1865.

Figure 1. Homepage of ourtheatreroyal.org highlighting the four themes (2018).

Our approach builds on three key aims. First, it is founded on what we argue are the potential affordances of digital technologies to enhance participation and engagement with heritage more generally. Here we build from the substantial review of literature and practice undertaken by the authors of 'Experiencing the Digital World', who note the potential of digital experiences 'not only to open up heritage to new groups, but also to enable a restructuring of authority and the possibility for a more democratic engagement with history' (King et al 2016: 78). Second, we build on Robinson's previous work on the particular potential of digital platforms to most effectively capture and represent the interlinked data generated by the making and reception of theatrical performance, given the nature of theatre as a collaborative art form (see Robinson et al. 2011, also Caplan 2016). Third, we draw on a model of what we term 'citizen scholarship' in arts and humanities research (Carletti 2016), which has enabled and supported meaningful and sustained engagement with the theatre's history and heritage by community volunteers. All three factors are important to the success of the project we describe and analyse here, because as Cooke, King and Stark point out,

> there exists a disparity between major case studies [of digital engagement] on the one hand and the experiences of smaller heritage institutions on the other. Many of the latter struggle to get to grips with digital tools which are very often beyond their capacity both in terms of funding, expertise and personnel' (2016, 20).

Hence, these authors suggest that there is a need to 'let go' and enable a shift in power relations between heritage users and professional institutions (22). It is precisely this approach that has underpinned the '*Our* Theatre Royal Nottingham: its stories, people and heritage' project (emphasis our own).

We begin this article with a brief introduction to the Theatre Royal Nottingham and to the rich performance history of the venue which the 'Our Theatre Royal Nottingham' has researched and shared. Here we highlight both the changing relationships between theatre and city across 150 years, and the resource challenges for a local-authority owned but commercially-oriented venue in terms of understanding and managing its heritage. Second, we explore the potential for 'citizen scholarship' in enabling the Theatre Royal to meet those challenges, introducing key aspects of our methodological aims and approaches. Third, a section on outcomes then captures the rich results of this citizen scholarship approach for the Theatre Royal's heritage story: here, in sharing the outcomes of the digital curation process, we aim to reflect on the challenges that have arisen, as well as the achieved goals. Finally, our conclusion reflects on the potential of this model for other theatre and performance organisations. If history, as Raphael Samuel suggests, 'is not the prerogative of the historian', but 'is, rather, a social form of knowledge', the model of citizen scholarship discussed here reveals the potential for social collaboration in the research, creation and curation of performance history (1994, 8).

The Theatre Royal Nottingham: what's the heritage?

When the 'New' Theatre Royal Nottingham opened in September 1865 the local press described the Charles J. Phipps designed venue as being 'on a scale of magnitude and elegance rivalled only by the first class theatres of Europe' (*Nottingham and Midlands Counties Daily Express* 25 September 1865). As previous research has shown (Robinson 2009, 2010) the building of the theatre was not without controversy, but on the evening of its opening, it was reported by the *Nottingham Journal* that 'there never was a more brilliant auditory assembled in Nottingham'. The list of names and ticket purchasers that followed in the report suggests that much of the elite of the town were

indeed present, as well as what the writer described as ‘an *omnium gatherum* of the lower classes [in the gallery] – a party of bricklayers at the front being particularly conspicuous’ (30 September 1865).

Figure 2. Theatre Royal Nottingham, c. 1903.

For over 150 years since that opening night, the Theatre Royal has welcomed in audiences from all classes in Nottingham and beyond, and faced success and challenge as the landscape of the city and of arts funding and management changed around it. The building has undergone two substantial renovations: the first to the designs of Frank Matcham in 1898 and the second led by theatre architects and designers Nick Thompson and Clare Ferraby in 1977. Beyond the confines of the building, the landscape of the city’s performance culture has also changed: the Empire Palace of Varieties, built on the adjoining site by Matcham in 1895, was demolished in the late-1960s, with the vacant land eventually occupied by the Royal Concert Hall in 1982.

From the condemnation of the original opening of the theatre by dissenting preachers in the 1860s, to the rows in the late 1970s about the wisdom of embarking on what was described as a ‘glaring example of Socialist extravagance’ by a local Conservative Councillor (‘Festival Hall under Fire’ 1976), the history of the theatre captures the history of debates about the place and role of theatre in society more generally. But it also reflects the memories – individual and collective – of those who have enjoyed performances in the venue from 1865 until today. As well as the performers and crew who tour to the theatre and those who work in and care for the building on a daily basis, the Theatre and Concert Hall now welcome over half a million visitors a year to a mix of performances that include internationally renowned orchestras, the highest quality ballet, contemporary dance, opera and touring drama

alongside West End musicals, family shows, stand-up comedy and rock & pop music.

Figure 3: The Theatre Royal 'archive room', 2014

The archives and materials that represent the traces of that history can be found in many different places. The 'archive room' of the Theatre Royal, which we first visited in 2014, contains much of the paperwork generated in the building since the addition of the Royal Concert Hall and new backstage and administrative areas for the Theatre Royal in 1982 (Figure 3). Covering both Theatre and Concert Hall, this material includes: showfiles for every performance since 1988, containing print promotional materials, contract documents, press cuttings and details of takings/audience figures; posters; programmes; contra receipts, and boxes of blank tickets. In addition the room holds materials collected over the years that reflect earlier times in the venue's history: copies of Victorian playbills; the Book of Words from the first pantomime in 1865; milk bottles bearing adverts for the pantomimes of the 1980s, and a visitor's book from a local theatrical lodging house covering the 1930s to the 1960s. The Nottinghamshire County Archives holds the early business records of the Theatre and the architects' plans, while the city's Local Studies Library has a rich collection of nineteenth-century playbills, press cuttings and a daybook that records every performance in the Theatre since it opened. And as we have discovered since the project began, all across the city and region people who have loved visiting or working at the venue have collected the ephemera generated by the performances they have attended. The *Nottingham Journal* described the theatre's first night gallery audience as an *omnium gatherum* of the lower classes; that term – defined by the OED as 'a gathering or collection of all sorts of people or things; a catch-all, an inclusive group or category [….], miscellaneous people or things considered together' (2004) – seems to fit the richness and variety of these collections and their locations all too well.

Project aims

How could we best share these rich stories? In order to identify potential models for researching and sharing the theatre's history, in 2014 we carried out workshops and interviews to capture the voices and views of theatre users and city residents, as well as a scoping exercise to establish the extent of materials held in local libraries and archives as well as in the theatre building. Following our focus groups, we identified four key themes for a pilot digital project that would allow us to focus our research and energies:

- Building a Theatre: Examining the venue's development and key characters from the original build in 1865, renovations in 1897 and closure and re-development in 1977.
- The Theatre Royal in Wartime: The role and operation of the theatre from 1914 to 1918 and 1939 to 1945.
- Pantomime: A key fixture in the Theatre Royal's calendar every year since 1865.
- Onstage and Backstage: From leading actors to local landladies - highlighting individuals and the social history behind the theatre's heritage.

Conscious of the familiarity with digital, image-led storytelling on more informal platforms such as Flickr, Pinterest, Instagram and Facebook – reinforced by discusions with our focus groups – within the boundaries of these themes we decided on an approach to a digital collection that would be based on images and stories through which users could navigate their own journeys. The theatre's physical archive would – in accordance with the standard archival practices outlined by the University of Nottingham's Special Collections team – be primarily catalogued by date and show. But the digital platform offered the possibility of exploring different kinds of associations across time, tracing connections between performers, repertoire, audiences and wider

histories of the building in new ways, as we explain in our discussion of our achievements below.

Convinced that there was a story to tell, our next challenge was one of resources. As a local authority-owned performance venue, the Theatre Royal and Royal Concert Hall has very limited skills or capacity for understanding and managing its heritage. David Longford, the Creative Learning Manager, has responsibility for all outreach programmes and educational offers. He also created and led Nottingham's first Puppet Festival in 2018, which took up considerable time at a key period in the timeline of this heritage project. Such resource constraints are common not just in theatres but across other small heritage institutions, as we have already noted through our discussion of the 'Experiencing the Digital World' report above.

How could we build capacity, and share the burden? In 2016, the Theatre Royal and Robinson made a joint application to the UK's Heritage Lottery Fund by the through the HLF's 'Our Heritage' scheme, which facilitates funding of up to £100,000 for projects focused on preserving both material and intangible heritage. That application stated that we aimed to engage a new community of up to 30 volunteers over a 24 month programme beginning in March 2017: our vision was to enable the much-needed organisation and cataloguing of the venue's own physical archive, and to develop a digital platform which would bring together key documents and stories from repositories across the city in a resource generated by the public for the public. Given the limitations in both resources and skills outlined above, underpinning both these aims was the need to develop our volunteers as collaborative researchers. This would enable a shift in relations between the theatre institution and the volunteers, making this a genuinely volunteer-led and volunteer-powered collaboration to co-research, co-curate and co-create a digital history for the Theatre Royal. In the next section, we outline our

development of citizen scholarship as a model of co-curation and co-creation which enabled the Theatre Royal, if not to 'let go' completely, certainly to share the burden – and the excitement – of understanding and sharing the venue's history: preserving and organising its physical archive and researching and creating a rich digital collection of stories and objects to share with the public in Nottingham and beyond.

Sharing the story: building a community of citizen scholars

Citizen scholarship: our approach

The approach to that co-curation was underpinned by our developing model of 'citizen scholarship', a concept that builds on the widespread and well-established practice of citizen science. Citizen science draws on the fact that, as Bakhshi, Schneider and Walker suggest, 'scientific modes of knowledge creation, insofar as they rely on more stable and standardised languages, are easier to codify, transfer and build on' (2008, 2): the idea, as explained by Robert Simpson of Zooniverse, an organisation that hosts online citizen science based research projects, 'is to break down big tasks into understandable components that anyone can perform' (2013). Citizen science aims to facilitate public participation in scientific research through projects that invite non-professional volunteers to take part in crowdsourcing, data analysis, and data collection (for a discussion of the potential in different fields, see for example Silvertown 2009 in ecology; Haklay 2013 in geography). This approach has been transferred into the field of theatre history through projects such as the recently launched British Library's *In the Spotlight* project – which aims to tag and transcribe the library's significant collection of playbills dating from the 1730s to the 1950s in order to make them more searchable online – or the older New York Public Library's *Ensemble* site, which initially offered

1,000 early 20th century theatre programmes from 5 microfilm reels to web users for transcription with the aim of building a database of theatre and the performing arts

Drawing a contrast with scientific modes of knowledge creation, Bakshi, Schneider and Walker suggest that research in the arts and humanities has a different hue. Humanities-oriented citizen scholarship must take account of the fact that 'pluralism and dissent is a vibrant and creative element in the arts and humanities, and is often concerned with the different ways of making fragmentary and ambiguous evidence comprehensible' (2008, 15). Arts and humanities researchers adopt interpretative, contextual and analytical methods, acknowledging potentially differing understandings of historical evidence; tasks cannot be broken down into small and manageable asks that 'anyone can perform'. While Carletti's review of crowdsourcing (2016) notes that heritage institutions increasingly see crowdsourcing as enabling more than simple task completion – citing Mia Ridge's view that it 'as a form of engagement with the collections and research of memory institutions, it benefits both audiences and institutions' (Ridge, 2014) – we argue here that involving volunteers as citizen scholars offers the potential for deeper and more sustained engagement. We return to the successes and the challenges of this approach for the 'Our Theatre Royal' project in the final section of this article, but here we briefly describe the processes of recruitment and training through which we developed our citizen scholars.

Developing our citizen scholars

Having been awarded the HLF grant, we held recruitment sessions for potential volunteers in March 2017. Short presentations from key participants outlined the project, introduced the different strands, and explained what we were aiming to accomplish. An open call for participation was put out via local press and the Theatre

Royal's social media channels, as well as via a newsletter to all email contacts in the venue's marketing database. Over 200 potential volunteers attended the two recruitment sessions, and 75 completed and returned the detailed volunteer questionnaires that we circulated at the end of our presentation.

Our volunteers came from a wide variety of backgrounds and brought different skills and abilities to the work. From interviews carried out at various stages during the project we learned that while the majority found out about the project through membership of the 'Friends of the Theatre Royal' scheme, others heard via word of mouth or local press. Interest in and support for the venue was the primary motivation for most participants, but our volunteers also cited social and local motivations (contributing to the local community); cultural motivations (learning more about how the theatre works); sentimental motivations (giving something back to a venue that had given them many good memories) and motivations related to personal development (learning new skills, undertaking a meaningful activity). Some of the volunteers had previous experience of volunteering – sometimes considerable in some cases. However, reflecting our aim of developing citizen scholars who could take responsibility for supported independent activity, it seemed that this project was different in terms of professionalism. In the words of one of the volunteers, all team members in this project have stood as 'professional volunteers' (volunteer workshop, 29 November 2018).

With more than double our anticipated numbers, and not wanting to turn people away, we decided to recruit nearly 70 volunteers to the project, managing numbers by organising them into separate workteams. This was a decision which, as we explain below, has proved extremely beneficial to the project.

- 12 volunteers joined the Oral History team: they undertook three days training with the East Midlands Oral History Archive. The large group meant that interviewers decided to work in pairs: this enabled them to support each other through process, including completion of the formal ethics and information paperwork required by each interview.
- 15 volunteers joined the Archives team, including one volunteer who had previously worked as an archivist at the University of Nottingham. This group, working to catalogue the archives currently held within the Theatre Royal building, received training in cataloguing, archive handling, digitisation and generation of metadata, and are supported at each weekly session by a paid research student - the project's only direct employee.
- 20 volunteers - 5 allocated to each of the project's four research themes - were asked to research across the city's archival resources to identify objects and documents which could be added to the digital platform to illuminate those themes. Introductory sessions on resources and search strategies were run with Nottingham Local Studies Library and a follow up session with the University of Nottingham's Department of Manuscripts and Special Collections; initially, the groups met the project co-ordinators on a six-weekly basis to discuss findings and challenges.
- 10 volunteers joined the Events and Exhibitions team, helping to organise the four main events throughout the two years of the project, each of which is focused on one of the key themes, and liaising with the theme research groups to curate analogue exhibitions in the theatre foyers for those events and for general visitors.

- 8 volunteers were recruited to help us to design and develop the digital platform and to upload materials generated by other researchers.

As the project developed, the project leads met with the separate research groups bimonthly. The archive volunteers continued to work in the theatre on a weekly basis; these dates became drop in dates for other volunteers to help with scanning or transcribing, or simply to work in the Theatre as part of the project's research community. As different materials were generated, sessions with digital volunteers developed protocols and instructions for uploading items to the platform, and enabled us to test and evaluate the site as it developed. In addition, regular open events were held for all volunteers, where both progress and challenges in different areas were discussed, and potential opportunities for cross-fertilisation between groups identified: the four public events also brought together our teams of volunteers to plan, curate and host public talks relating to the themes, such as a talk by the Frank Matcham Society, or on the theatre of the First World War. Those events, held in the foyer of the Theatre's Dress Circle, have brought a capacity audience of over 130 people to the venue on each occasion.

Figure 4: 'Onstage and Backstage' public talk, 24 April 2018.

Building a research community

The success and achievements of the project are grounded in the practices developed of team work, and in the mix of experts and non-experts that emerged - serendipitously - from the unexpectedly large and varied numbers of volunteers recruited to the project. Several of the volunteers have relevant professional experiences and as noted above, others had done previous volunteer activity in heritage settings. When forming the

groups, attention was paid to the mix of 'experience' and 'novice' to create a sort of small community of practice in which the less experienced researchers learnt through the regular interaction with others in more informal ways, supporting the training offered by the HLF project. This learning framework was not planned in the original HLF proposal, as it was not possible to know in advance what type of volunteers the project would attract. It was also made possible thanks to the high number of volunteer recruits which led to the creation of a multi-layered organisation, in which the sub-groups worked mostly autonomously and the project co-ordinators at the Theatre Royal and the University of Nottingham have a distributed responsibility in relation to the groups of volunteers. The members of each group seemed to feel responsible for their own 'piece' of work, but were also committed to the whole group; the regular sharing meetings ensured that they felt part of the whole project.

While a few of our initial recruits have moved on from the project - to jobs, through illness and in some cases due to the challenges we discuss below - for most of our volunteers this distributed responsibility seems to have been a success factor in supporting their enduring engagement with the project. The volunteers are working quite freely in terms of time, logistics, and organisation but within a framed context. In Carletti's earlier experience with *ArtMaps*, a digital crowdsourcing project which involved the University of Nottingham, the University of Exeter and the Tate in a project that sought help from the public to geo-reference the Tate's art collections via an online tool at https://artmaps.tate.org.uk, a critical issue emerged as to 'the extent to which the generation of audience content needs to be or should be open ended and the extent to which it should be a scripted or "scaffolded" experience' (Stack 2013). The scaffolded experiences proved to be successful and engaging, but as the Tate Head of

Digital John Stack noted, ArtMaps also demonstrated that 'less scaffolded experiences can lead to creative and personal content' (Stack 2013).

The Our Theatre Royal Nottingham project, as it has evolved, has employed a sort of hybrid approach: the project provides the overarching framework in terms of themes and archival approach, the training, the expertise, regular meetings with the groups of volunteers, but at the same time the volunteers have had extensive freedom to follow their interests, and organise their own work both individually and as member of a group. As a consequence, the various groups have very different ways of collaborating (e.g. in pairs for the oral history group; in teams working with two coordinators for the archive group). Evaluative workshops carried out with the volunteers at the end of 2018 confirmed the importance of this community: volunteers spoke of the importance of teamwork and developing friendships, as well as feeling a greater sense of community and pride in the theatre and in Nottingham itself.

The lasting engagement also is of course also supported by the high level of enthusiasm brought to the project by both Theatre staff and the academics involved which, in turn, is rewarded by the enthusiastic response and commitment of the volunteers, thus creating a virtuous circle of engagement. Writing from a background in organisational studies, Sandberg highlights the role and importance of 'champions', who

> adopt the project as their own and become very committed to it. They tend to utilize both formal and informal networks in communicating with colleagues, stakeholders and customers in order to gain support for the development process … act as enthusiasm catalysts in organisations developing radical innovations; they create the enthusiasm in the first place and, provided that they are allowed to, they spread it throughout the organisation. (2007, 266)

In providing the freedom for our volunteers to develop their own areas of interests and

to pursue their own research routes within the framework of what one volunteer described as 'supported independence', the project seems to have serendipitously enabled the creation and support of our own champions, who reported both pleasure and pride in the outcomes of their work, feeling an enhanced sense of ownership and involvement in the Theatre Royal.

Outcomes

Analogue achievements

As the project reached the end of its two-year funding in April 2019, there was much to celebrate. The contents of the archive room which relate to the Theatre Royal have been identified, sorted and largely catalogued – including 1148 showfiles, 1494 programmes and 1139 posters among other items – enabling both other researchers and the Theatre's press and marketing department to quickly access materials when needed. After discussions with the Theatre Royal and the archive team, the eventual aim is for this archive to be transferred to the University of Nottingham's Department of Manuscripts and Special Collections. The University's Keeper of Manuscripts has been an advisor to the project from the outset, ensuring that the materials have been sorted and cared for to appropriate standards.

Figure 5. Theatre Royal archive room, 2018.

With an initial aim of 30 oral history interviews across the lifetime of the project, 39 were completed by April, with interviewees including a former Front of House Steward, the producer of the regular Boys' Brigade show held at the theatre, the architect and designer responsible for the 1977 renovations, cleaners, pantomime stars and child performers. The interviewers also received training in editing and summarising their

interviews: clips from 24 interviews have been added to the site so far, with transcriptions completed by the transcription team. Interviewees have also loaned or given their personal collections to the project, including the design sketches for the auditorium's renovation in 1978 and the scrapbook of Gillian Haywood-Widdowson. Haywood-Widdowson performed in pantomimes at the Theatre Royal, most notably *Dick Whittington* in 1948, *Jack and the Beanstalk* in 1949 and *Red Riding Hood* in 1950, as one of the star performers for Kirby's Flying Ballet, which performed spectacular aerial routines; extracts from her oral history interview are also available on the site.

Figure 6. Production photograph featuring the aerial dancers from Kirby's Flying Ballet in *Red Riding Hood,* the Theatre Royal Pantomime for 1950.

Across the project, the Theatre Royal's citizen scholars have been trained in different topics and they are supervised, but not led, by an academic with an expertise in theatre history. As might be expected, researchers for the four themes combed through local archives, newspapers and online resources, as well as working with the material generated through the processes above. But – key to this collaborative project, in which the 'our' in the project title 'Our Theatre Royal Nottingham' is intended to signify the individual and shared experiences of theatregoing – they have also mobilised their own local knowledges and networks to uncover stories and documents outside as well as inside the official archives. Our volunteers have brought many interesting stories to light from those archives, but what has been particularly notable for us as 'academic' researchers is their ability to access and work with informal local networks that reach far beyond the materials held in the formal archives and repositories. They have

unearthed local enthusiasts and collectors of memorabilia happy to share their collections; realised that their neighbours and friends have been leading lights in the many amateur theatre and opera groups that use the theatre for annual performances, and tapped into social media networks to find, for example, many of the now grown up women who in the past performed with groups from local dance schools in the pantomime chorus.

The digital platform: ourtheatreroyal.org

Our digital platform was designed by external developers using the open source Omeka platform (a platform adopted by both the New York Public Library and by the UK Battersea Arts Centre Digital Archive) to the requirements of the brief that had emerged from focus groups and discussions with our digital volunteers. It is now hosted and maintained with the support of the University of Nottingham, ensuring stable longevity of the still developing collection beyond the lifetime of the HLF funding.

In developing the design and the affordances of the digital interface – in the sense of considering 'what material artefacts such as media technologies allow people to do (Bucher and Helmond 2017, 3), we have sought to mirror the independence of approach that we aimed to enable and facilitate in our citizen scholar volunteers. Within the framework of our key themes that are central to the landing page of the site (see Figure 1 above), our researchers have thus been encouraged to develop their own interests and tell their own stories about the objects and images that they have chosen for sharing on the digital platform, and visitors to the site are invited to make their own journey through the displayed items, rather than being obliged to follow particular narrative arcs. By April 2019 nearly 500 individual items had been uploaded to the site, which can be searched through the four theme headings or via a timeline interface, or

simply browsed in total. As Figure 6 shows, the main page of the site simply presents images of the different items, itself a digital *omnium gatherum* inviting the user to click and explore the objects and their stories, highlighted by the heading 'What's the Story?' that sits below each individual item.

Figure 7. Items in the digital collection

Debra Caplan points out that 'as scholars of a collaborative art form, we are always dealing with relational data, for theatre artists almost never work in isolation' (2016, 560), and highlights the potential of digital tools to 'make patterns that were previously invisible suddenly apparent' (2015, 349). Caplan is writing primarily about 'big data' research projects, but at the smaller scale represented by ourtheatreroyal.org, the digital platform was designed to enable connections to be made between individual objects and stories that illuminate the working life and experience of theatre across the venue's history. Links at the bottom of each item point users to other relevant material where appropriate, which might be directly related to the same performance, or connected across repertoire or role. For example, a video clip of David Hasselhoff advertising his upcoming performance as Captain Hook in the 2013 pantomime *Peter Pan* links to photographs of the launch event which featured a cardboard cut-out of the celebrity performer, as well as to marketing material for a 1912 tour of the play *Peter Pan* with the American actress Pauline Chase in the leading role. A different potential journey links the 1978 designs for the front of house uniforms both to a photograph of staff wearing those uniforms and to a clip from an oral history interview with Rita Burdus, who worked front of house in the theatre in the early 1980s, in which she

recalls just how difficult the long skirts were to work in. However, learning from Nina Simon's concept of the 'participatory website' that is 'built to harness the power of diffuse collections not by refining what's offered, but by making it easy for people to consume exactly the content they want' (Simon 2011:19), our aim is that visitors will find their own paths through the site, perhaps summoning up the memories of their own interactions with the theatre and its history as they do so.

In the six months since the launch of the digital collection in October 2018, 3,000 users have engaged with the site, some of whom have donated further materials to the Theatre as a result. These donations include a long lost playbill for the 1876 Theatre Royal Pantomime, 'The Fair One with the Golden Locks', which the Suffolk Record Office identified as belonging to Nottingham following the publicity around the site's launch: the digital reach of the site means that the history of the theatre is now accessible beyond Nottingham and the East Midlands. Our volunteers recognise the importance of this achievement, commenting 'Now that everything is online, the whole thing is national, not just Nottingham' (workshop, 29 November 2018).

Figure 8 Playbill. 'The Fair One with the Golden Locks', 1876.

Embracing the mess as well as the success: challenges

As the distinction between citizen science and citizen scholarship outlined above aimed to make clear, humanities researchers need to embrace the potential messiness of their research, its side paths, and the possibility of failure. And while the 'supported independence' has worked well for the majority of our volunteer teams, the researchers working on the four thematic areas have found themselves facing such challenges in developing their own research paths and interests. The questions that the volunteers are asking themselves and the project co-ordinators are: 'Am I going in the right

direction?'; 'Is this topic interesting?'; 'Will I be able to find out enough to make this research comprehensive?' The regular meetings with research groups have to some extent provided reassurance and support – in confirming, for example, that the fact that it seems to have been 'business as usual' at the Theatre Royal during World War II is in itself an interesting research finding. Reflecting on the process after a year of working on the project, two of the volunteers from different research groups summarised the challenges of the citizen scholarship model of humanities-based research, and what they had learned:

> If I was to begin a project like this again, I'd hope I would find it easier to get started – that it's okay that most of what you find is not likely to be used directly, but is still relevant to what does get used in the end and how you put that together. In other roles I'd got used to finding complete solutions quickly that could be implemented in a short time frame. (Sarah, Building the Theatre)

> Most challenging for me has been the knowledge that the information I need is out there somewhere, although I am not always able to find it! It's also hard to focus on one thing, when that thing often leads to another - I initially wanted to collect everything personally, whether it was to do with pantomime or not!
> I am learning to be much clearer when asking for information, whether it be in person, or on an internet search, especially if I want to know something specific, because it is so easy to get distracted. Before I started this project I thought 'research' might be a bit frustrating, but now I know it is! (Sarah, Pantomime)

One factor contributing to the uncertainty of the value of the thematic research was perhaps the delay between finding material and seeing it go live as part of the digital platform, in the absence of the obvious progress on deliverable outcomes experienced by the archive, oral history and event organisation volunteer teams. While the volunteers have been able to access and work on the physical archive since the project kick-off April 2017, issues with the design and development of the digital platform meant that it was not until summer 2018 that uploading of material could begin in earnest. Perhaps as a result, the groups which experienced the most drop offs in volunteers were the digital team and the research teams, with attention necessarily being given at the outset to the archive team whose work was needed to facilitate access to material by everyone else – and whose curation of the contents of boxes was a much easier ask at the outset than the creation of digital stories. In addition to the delays caused by reliance on outside developers, it is important to also note that while the collaborative work of volunteers made much of the project possible, at times the constraints on resources of both theatre and academic project co-ordinators still presented challenges to project management and planning: digital technologies, and citizen scholarship, still require project management and are not presented here as a trouble-free panacea to the challenges of preserving, curating and sharing theatre archives.

But although this phasing of the project did present challenges, it also unlocked unexpected opportunities. In the absence of a working digital interface, the project's Facebook page – originally envisaged primarily as a publicity channel for the early stages of the project – developed spontaneously as a forum through which both volunteers and members of the wider public could share findings and memories: with over 350 members, the site has also prompted donations of material, and drawn on

shared knowledge from the wider community about past shows and happenings. Now, with the 'Our Theatre Royal Nottingham' digital platform available online, this Facebook site continues to host news of exciting finds, and drive traffic to the main website, such as with the example post below.

Figure 9. Exploiting the potential of Facebook as an informal site for sharing heritage collections.

Existing research shows that amateur collectors are not often aware of standard cataloguing procedures and metadata creation (Terras 2010); and the social software industry has yet to address the expanding market of online amateur collections with bespoke services, leaving such collectors to adapt by using social media platforms that have not been designed to support composite collections and metadata creation and exchange. The success of the Facebook page 'Our Theatre Royal Nottingham' seems to confirm this trend; as we moved towards uploading material onto the main digital platform, we recognised that a key challenge would be to try to mirror the enthusiasm shown on social media in encouraging our volunteers to 'own' the ourtheatreroyal.org site, access it, and interact with it. We wanted to ensure that the openness and flexibility of approach that we have highlighted as key to the enthusiasm and success of the offline research process was also carried through to the digital sphere. It was in this context that we developed the 'What's the Story?' element for each item, asking our citizen scholar volunteers not just to actively select and curate the content which will be online, but also to themselves generate and share the 'hook stories' which explain the importance and interest of each item from their own perspective. However, recognising the challenge in moving from the informal space of social media to the more formal site of the online collection, we arranged for extra workshops with a community playwright and storyteller in order to help develop the skills which would support volunteers in

telling the story of their researched items in an engaging way on the site itself. Our aim is for our citizen scholars not just to research the history of the theatre, but for their voices to be heard in the curated digital space. In aiming for this outcome, the 'Our Theatre Royal Nottingham' project aims to fruitfully operationalise that 'shift in power relations' called for by Cooke, King and Stark in their 2016 'Experiencing the Digital World' report, enabling both an enhanced mode of participation and the sharing of a history that would otherwise not have been told.

Conclusion

We began this paper by highlighting the importance of enabling theatres and companies to preserve and manage their own archives and histories. However, as with Nottingham's Theatre Royal, such organisations are often short of time and resources to carry out this important work. Through the collaborative 'Our Theatre Royal Nottingham: its Stories, People and Heritage' project, the Theatre Royal and Royal Concert Hall has been enabled to explore, research and preserve their heritage, and to develop a new and innovative approach to presenting their history online. At the same time, feedback from our volunteers make it clear that the work has enhanced both a sense of community and cultural knowledge through engagement with heritage and history and via the acquisition of basic research skills. The project's approach to co-creating and co-curating the archives of a much-loved venue has – by placing the work, memories and stories of the volunteers as central to the research – enabled a way of narrating the theatre's story that registers and records the rich variety of experiences, both onstage and off, that make up that history. In doing so, it offers a potential model for other theatre venues and organisations: one that moves beyond the preservation of archives alone and that draws on the possibilities of the digital space to develop a collaborative storytelling process with audiences and supporters to co-research and co-

curate new histories of theatrical experience and performance.

Acknowledgements

The 'Our Theatre Royal: Its Stories, People & Heritage' is only made possible through the efforts of our citizen scholars and those who have supported them: Dennis Baggarley, Colin Barnard, Andy Barrett, Ben Bedwell, Mark Bentley, Sarah Bird, Gloria Bone, Alan Brabbin, Carol Bramley, Stephen Bray, Andrew Breakwell, Laura Carletti, Lyn Champion, David Chilton, Val Clark, Brigitte Coxon, Mark Dorrington, Sarah Easton, June Ellerby, Roseanna Escobar-Byrne, Heather Fortnum, Liz Gordon, David Hails, Carol Harper, Kelly Hart, Nichola Hebditch, Lucrezia Herman, Pete Hewitt, Angela Holden-Brabbin, Julia Holmes, Barbara Howard, Colin Hyde, Karen John, Diane Jones, Miriam Jones, Reiss Jones, Sarah Jordan, Liz Kaczor, Richard Kaczor, Caroline Kelly, Kate Kiely, Laura Knowles, Ian Littlehales, Margaret Littlehales, Liz Mackenzie, Mavis Moore, Pat Morfett, Courtney Morgan, Lara Phillips, Jo Robinson, Pamelia Robinson, Val Rogers, Mena Severn, Jennifer Sherwood, Stephen Sherwood, Hilary Silvester, Jacqueline Smith, Lynne Smith, Phil Smith, Gill Lane, Sally Smith, Lisa Stevens, Sue Threakall, Dorothy Veitch, June Wall, Ian Webster, Charlotte White, Lynne Whitley, Jackie Wickham, David Winfield, David Young. Thanks also to Tatiana Styliari for help in evaluating the volunteers' experiences.

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