

## Researching at the Theatre Museum

### Brief Overview of Core Collections

**Summary of holdings:** *The Theatre Museum is the National Museum of the Performing Arts and is a branch of the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). The founding collection was given to the V&A in 1924 by Gabrielle Enthoven, and since that date a large number of other major collections have been added. The Theatre Museum continuously acquires material through gift and purchase, and systematically collects programmes from over 200 UK theatres as well as daily reviews. The Museum's collections are now the largest of their type in the world, and are made accessible not only through the Study Room but also via its website, changing exhibitions, gallery displays, study days, workshops and other educational activities.*

#### General Summary of Collections

The collections form two groups, the Core Collections and the Special Collections (see below). Core Collections, the most popular and heavily used collections are routinely accessed through the Study Room. They include the following: Library Collection (Printed Books, Periodicals), Manuscripts and Prompt books, Designs, Photographs and negatives, Autograph Letters, Playbills & Programmes and Prints, Videos. These Core Collections incorporate a large number of major acquisitions within the appropriate sections: the Gabrielle Enthoven Collection, the Harry Beard Collection (mainly books and prints), the libraries of the Society for Theatre Research, the Vic-Wells Association, the London Archives of the Dance, the Critics' Circle and the former British Theatre Association; the libraries of many private collectors such as Antony Hippisley Coxe (circus), Professor Arnold Rood (Edward Gordon Craig), Cyril Beaumont (ballet) and Robert Eddison; the design collections formerly owned by the British Council and by the Arts Council of Great Britain; photographs by Gordon Anthony, Houston Rogers, Anthony Crickmay and Lisel Haas. The special collections consist of more specialised collections (usually archives) which focus on a specific theatre, company or individual.

#### Material Relating to Black Performance

**Production Files** Material on black theatre is represented throughout the Core Collection -- from playbills for nineteenth-century black Shakespearean actor, Ira Aldridge's appearance at the Royal Coburg, Surrey and other theatres, to programmes and reviews for the 1980s Black Theatre Forum seasons at the Arts Theatre. Material is filed according to theatre and date and indexed by production title so researchers must know this information in order to find material on key productions by or featuring black writers or performers.

**Library** The library contains a range of books on black performance as well as published and unpublished scripts. Up to 1999 the majority are catalogued on cards (card catalogue in the Study Room). Items acquired after 1999 are catalogued on the computer catalogue. (<http://ipac.nal.vam.ac.uk>).

Staff can advise on holdings with specific reference to black performance.

See also the bibliography *Black and Asian Playwrights in Print* by Susan Croft in this Guide.

The Theatre Museum also holds the library of the former British Theatre Association. This includes plays published up to around 1988. The catalogue is not publicly accessible but staff can advise on holdings.

**Miscellaneous Files** These cover a range of subjects such as Circus, Puppetry, Festivals, and include general topics like Asian Theatre and Performing Arts, Notting Hill Carnival, Black Theatre, Black Actors, Black Actors in Shakespeare. Relevant material can also be found under Theatre Buildings e.g. Roundhouse, Westminster Theatre.

**Companies Files** The Museum holds Companies Files on theatre and dance companies such as Ballets Negres, Tara Arts, and many others. Articles relating to the general policy or work of a company and flyers for a whole season's work are likely to be contained in these files, reviews and playbills relating to a particular venue are likely to be in Production Files (see above).

**Biographical or Personal Files** These contain articles, interviews, obituaries on individual performers, playwrights, directors etc. They include a wide range of black performers and other individuals from the nineteenth century to the present.

**Photographic Collection** There are several major photographic collections in the Museum. The main collection includes photographs of black performers and relevant shows, past and contemporary. There is no list but they are

filed alphabetically by name of individual or show. The Museum also holds photographs of Royal Court productions which include a number of shows by black writers. Among collections in the Museum's copyright are photographs by Houston Rogers and Graham Brandon. The latter in particular includes a number of shows featuring black performers or by black companies or writers including shows by Dance Theatre of Harlem, Tamasha, Man Mela, Ilbjerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Co-Op and Talawa Theatre.

**Design Collections** There is a limited amount of relevant material in the design collection, essentially some designs for shows which featured major black performers or by black writers e.g. Loudon Sainthill's design for Barry Reckord's *Flesh to a Tiger* and James Pryde's for *Othello* with Paul Robeson (1930). There is a list of Design Collection holdings and staff can assist in finding items.

**Paintings and Print Collection** There are 2 portraits of Ira Aldridge in the Paintings Collection (for which there is a published catalogue: *Catalogue of Paintings at the Theatre Museum, London* by Geoffrey Ashton, edited by James Fowler, V&A Museum/Society for Theatre Research, 1992).

Aldridge also features in the Beard and other Print Collections. There is a handlist to the large prints in the Beard Collection and a card index to Enthoven Collection prints.

**Special Collections** These comprise around 300 collections of a more specialised nature, relating to a single topic, person or business.

Examples relating to black performance include:

- the Temba Theatre Company and Black Theatre Collection
- Alfred Fagon Archive (scripts, manuscripts and notebooks)
- Roehampton South Asian Dance display collection.
- Black Mime Theatre archive

There is also relevant material in:

- the archive of the Arts Council of Great Britain
- the archive of Unity: the Workers' Theatre.

Both are catalogued or listed. The Museum also holds the archives of:

- the English Stage Company / Royal Court Theatre (cataloguing is in the process of completion. Additional material on Royal Court productions listed in Key Productions charts may be in the archive)
- Akademi School of South Asian dance
- the Roundhouse archive
- the Open Space archive
- Tricycle Theatre archive.

These are in the process of being listed or catalogued. Contact staff for availability.

For details of accessible collections please see collections descriptions on [www.backstage.ac.uk](http://www.backstage.ac.uk).

This information is regularly updated so as new collections become available for research they will be listed on Backstage.

**Other Information** See entries on Blackgrounds and Theatre Museum in *Companion to Contemporary Black British Culture* ed. Alison Donnell, (Routledge, 2001)

Detail from 'Strolling Actress Dressing in a Barn' by Hogarth (1750)

