

The LIFT Living Archive: Plunging in and bouncing off; working with co-explorers

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ABSTRACT

LIFT, the London International Festival of Theatre, founded in 1981, had a huge impact on the theatre world, bringing extraordinary performances from around the world to London, and opening up the city with performances in cellars, stations and in the docks. The archive of the first 20 years of the bi-annual Festival is housed in the Special Collections at Goldsmith's College. I will describe and reflect on the series of participatory projects, designed both to open up access to the archive and to explore ways of working with it, which took place in partnership with the MA in Applied Drama at Goldsmith's. Participants plunged in, bounced off and entered into dialogue with the archive. What was learned about access, about detective work, and about ways of encountering an archive? What are the benefits of opening up the access beyond an academic audience ?

Out there somewhere the show starts

And though sometimes it happens differently most likely it's a matter

of dimming the lights in one place and raising them up in another.

a shift of emphasis - one part of the room you are in losing focus so the other then

burns bright

and persons enter the stage, speak, move

and time passes

but

it burns bright also

in the afterwards

for example aftermath of a firework

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scratched on a sky seen from London and persons cross the stage of re-memory

or else the audio

echoes long after a sound

voices singing

[...]

strong what people remember

delicate and strong what people remember

delicate and strong and strange what people remember

strong what they forget

the look of eyes and touch of hands

sweat of bodies on a stage

or in an auditorium with many persons watching waiting

a city needs a festival,

and the echoes that follow

and the ripples that spread

who you sat with

and spoke with

before or whispered during

and afterwards

what the whole thing brought to mind

what it changed in you and others

what it left behind

a fax conversation with Ramallah arranging performances – do you remember faxes?

A contact sheet bearing photographs of Red Pilot/ Neue Slowenische Kunst – do you

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remember contact sheets?

a list of props that are needed by guys coming from South Africa.

Letters back and forth also

typewritten letters

an unbelievable nostalgia

you know the ones I think

where the letters of certain words have been typed over to correct mistakes

and where accents for those Hungarian names have been added in, using pencil

back when writing was not pixels

when it had materiality

An archive makes the traces visible

Tangible

Even as it knows they are gone

This is an extract from a performance lecture written by Tim Etchells for the launch of the LIFT living archive in June, 2009

LIFT was founded in 1981 by Lucy Neal and Rose Fenton. LIFT's archive at Goldsmith's represents the first twenty years of the biannual Festivals, the journeys, the planning, and the discussions. This paper reflects on the programme of work to engage non academic users with it. This is a personal account for two reasons. Firstly, because I led on the creative work of the most recent phase of LIFT's 'Living' archive, and continue to work on it, and secondly because the first twenty years of LIFT coincide with the first 20 years of my professional life. I have seen many of the shows represented in the archive, and my own work, both as an artist and as an educator, have been hugely influenced by LIFT. LIFT has been and remains a pioneering producer of audacious theatre and performance, and initiator of thoughtful and engaging participatory and learning opportunities.

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In what I am going to say today I am indebted to my colleague Dr Caoimhe McAvinchey, of Queen Mary College, whose report on the programme of creative engagement is available online from the LIFT website. I am also indebted to the Library staff at Goldsmith's, for their openness and enjoyment of the collaborative process.

One of the participants in the engagement project was asked, at the end of the project, if he would recommend a visit to the archive to his friends. 'No', he said, 'because I thought it be more dusty and Egyptian'. We know he had enjoyed himself, but we know too that he had thought archives were more like 'A night at the museum'. He didn't expect to find post-its archived. So, we know it's an archive that didn't live up to the stereotype. What's in it?

This is an archive that reflects all aspects of the life of a major Festival, the nitty gritty of negotiation and budgeting, the complex communication, the beautiful photographs and reviews. It's a collection of more than 300 boxes of documents, 4,000 photographs, 100 Festival programmes and leaflets, 700 hours of video documentation and 60 hours of audio recordings. There is also a hand knitted Union Jack thong, but we'll come to that later.

In their book, *The Turning World*, LIFT's founders, Rose Fenton and Lucy Neal choose to tell, with others, thirty key stories about the first 25 years of the organisation, but state clearly that there are one thousand and one stories that could be told. Fenton and Neal sought out and brought to London theatre from all over the world, theatre that pushed boundaries, opened up new possibilities, told old stories in new ways, and new stories that brought the political and cultural realities of other lives up close. UK artists were commissioned too, to transform London through extraordinary work. In the early years this involved enormous amounts of travel, difficult negotiations in a variety of languages, and an endless search for funding. The struggles and the triumphs, as well as the sheer detail of administration are evident in those boxes. Once the archive was known to be coming to Goldsmith's, LIFT approached Caoimhe McAvinchey, at that time the Convenor of the MA in Applied Drama at Goldsmith's, to see if we could collaborate on a programme of creative engagement with schools and community groups. LIFT wanted to find out

- How could the archive be made accessible to educational and community groups?

- What approaches would support group's exploration of the archive?
- What kinds of support, preparation and mediation of materials need to be considered when inviting people to enter the archive?
- How much do groups need to know about LIFT to get something from the archive?
- What can be learned from the groups who come about what's in the archive?

Our first area of exploration was with the MA students. They are artists, educators and activists, many with experience in participatory arts work, aged between early twenties and 50. Few of them knew the work of LIFT. With the full student group we explored the notion of archive, the LIFT archive, and then, with a smaller group, we reflected on what might fruitfully happen with visiting school and community groups.

Some key points emerged from this period of research

- We could understand why academics, theatre professionals and researchers would want to come and consult the archive, or to access it online. But we weren't sure why anyone else would. We felt we needed to be clear exactly what we were offering and what they would gain. However, as we moved towards refining our offer, another thought emerged.
- We were not inviting people only to come and learn, but rather to become co-explorers with us of the archive. We were going to invite them to come and help us discover what it had to offer and how best to make it more accessible. The learning would be mutual.
- It was clear that the desire to make these archives widely accessible was closely linked to LIFT's ethos. How could we make what we did with people when they came to visit reflect the audacity, imagination and joyful qualities of much of its contents? We began to plan a series of creative activities that connected to and enhanced the experience of reading, looking and listening.
- At the time of this period of preparation I was working as external evaluator to a family learning project in National Trust properties. On this project I was beginning to develop a way of articulating different

ways of engaging with historic buildings and their histories, as I observed them in this project, London Voices. With their permission I borrowed the definitions for the LIFT Living Archive, and they became an important part of our vocabulary.



(concept Sue Mayo illustration Alice Bird).

- Plunging in means delving deeply into the archive, learning all the information that you can glean about a particular moment or show from the many sources available there.
- Bouncing off means using an encounter with one image, piece of text, or idea to inspire a new and original piece of creative work
- Exploring means setting off with your own question or theme, and making your own trail through the archive in order to answer this
- Dialogue means entering into a discussion, whereby what you have to say is shedding light on what you discover in the archive, and what is in the archive is illuminating your own experience.

With these things in mind, we were ready to embark on our exploration.

We invited four groups to work with us; one secondary and one primary school, one creative writing group for older people, and one Youth theatre group. We held an Inset day for the Schools, where the teachers could come and explore the archive for themselves, and help us to think about how best to work with their students. Two things we learned stand out for me. We were using a useful list of questions compiled by the National Archives to help people systematically reflect on a document in order to build up an informed bank of information. One of the teachers introduced us to an approach used in her Primary School, Philosophical Enquiry, developed by the educationalist Robert Fisher. She suggested that we ask the students to develop their own questions, asking themselves, 'What is it that I need to know about this?' What do I already know, or can I guess? This approach released energy in the participants, and increased the range and nature of questions asked. It also helped us not to assume knowledge or lack of knowledge in the participants. The second gem from the Inset concerned what the one teacher described as Box Envy.

As part of the Inset day we brought out a series of archive boxes for them to explore, working in pairs. The teachers told us that everyone else's boxes always looked more interesting, and that anything with pictures always looked more interesting than text.

This helped us, in the subsequent workshops, to devise activities where there was some kind of parity of materials, and also helped us to begin to understand what kind of mediation might be helpful for the written materials.

The engagement with these groups was conceived as short projects. With the Schools we met them first at School, then spent a day at Goldsmiths with the archive materials, and then went back into School to continue our work. The adults' writing group worked to a similar pattern, and the Youth theatre group was an enjoyable, but short lived project as only one person managed to make it! There was something important about having the opportunity to build up a relationship with the groups. We learned more from them by spending time together, and they did not feel rushed in their explorations. While people did look at documents alone, the work was characterised by dialogue and conversation, a reflection perhaps of the dialogic nature of the art form captured in the archive.

I spoke earlier about wanting to infuse our way of working with some of the spirit of the LIFT events. What none of us could have foreseen was how much the projects were enlivened by the necessary protocols of handling the archive. Wearing the appropriate gloves, using pencils, recording the movements of documents, and turning the wheels of the stacks became an important but also highly enjoyable part of the process. These rituals continually reminded us that however ordinary something might look, it was special. It had been made special. And I think that it made the participants feel special too.

I want to talk now about some of the ways in which we worked with the different groups and what we learned from them.

Pen Friends is a creative writing group of older people from Tower Hamlets. Wanting to set the context of the twenty years reflected in the archive, we set up a timeline, and asked people to write up both personal life events they were willing to share, and significant national and international events they could remember.

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This exercise was not about LIFT or Festivals or archives. It was about the group of participants. Out of this we all got an extraordinarily rich picture of 2 decades, the miner's strikes and the Space Shuttle Discovery, births and marriages, first kisses and the demolition of the Berlin Wall. One of the men walked from Glasgow to London looking for work in the same year as another participant began life as a diplomat's life. When the group set the development of LIFT against this timeline they taught all of us facilitators a great deal about why it came into being when it did, and what kind of impact it had. As we had hoped, the learning was mutual. Another interesting piece of learning was the way in which the group were able to provide information for one another. Occasionally we did help with the detective work by providing information and context, but often the group helped each other, translating a letter from the French, identifying a town in India. The group loved the way in which their own time life lifelines connected with the 20 years in the archive, but what they had come for was provocation and stimulation, and they took away ideas and images to fuel their creative writing for the rest of the term. There were poems about purple latex gloves as well as one about Lucy Neal's trip to India.

The boys from Forest Hill School came to explore. They wanted to find out what the elements were to mounting a piece of performance. We gave each of the boys one document from the 1999 production, *Urban Dream Capsule*, and they had to piece together schedules, letters, memos and scribbled notes, relating to the arrival of chef Ainsley Harriot at a department store in Wandsworth. The first stage of the research meant really interrogating what was in front of them – what sort of document was this – what sort of paper was it on? Who were the people involved? Initially working alone or in pairs, they sifted evidence, guesswork and imaginative leaps, eventually checking them out with each other to complete the picture as far as they could. I was aware that they were, in a sense, learning about learning. They could see very clearly the process of taking bits of information, examining and interrogating them, and then putting them together to make a fuller picture. The trail led them to four performers living in the shop window of Arding and Hobbes, one of whom was knitting a thong.

Understandably, the thong proved a bit of a distraction, but the boys were fascinated by a show in a shop window. As we explored further in the archive, the question of who was audience and who performer emerged. We read about people coming every day to the window, sometimes to entertain

the men inside. Back at School, the boys created two fascinating sound pieces, one as though inside the window, and the other outside. In this process historicity was irrelevant. It didn't matter to them when Urban Dream capsule was performed. The trail led them to a vivid connection with an intriguing piece of theatre and led them into new performing territory themselves.

In both the examples given above it is clear that material was pre-selected. While wanting to allow a sense of exploration it always seemed important to mediate the experience of the archive by making some preselection. We looked for material that would intrigue, for themes that would reward, and for shows that made their presence felt through the archive. But it would be interesting to see whether these groups, had we continued to work with them, would want to navigate more independently. This they could do initially by using the online archive, but our project reminded us that direct contact with the materials makes a significant impact.

As Kerstin Mercer, then the Coordinator of the LIFT Living Archive noted

There are so many metaphors for working with the archive...we are detectives, adventurers, historians: the archive is a treasure; the archive is to be unlocked and uncovered. But no words or images can do the experience justice – it must be experienced by each one for him or herself, for half the experience is about your own connection to the material found there in.

This period of action research with our education and community partners challenged any sense of the archive as monologue – the archive simply as a record of someone else's experiences. The creative engagement with the archive was a living dialogue, which allows it to be called the LIFT Living Archive.

I will finish with the words of Elizabeth Williams, librarian responsible for the LIFT archive at Goldsmiths', (with apologies to the young man who wanted more dust in his archives).

Perceptions have changed and 'special collections' are no longer the preserve of the selected few. The ethos behind LIFT the archived collection extended from that of LIFT the organization, and is precisely about bringing the visual and cultural arts to the people. I think the fundamental long term usefulness of any collection is reflected by

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how successfully one can attract usage from a broad range of enquirers.. What these students bring to the process of research and exploration and the fascinating activities that spring from engaging with the archive can be hard to evaluate, however the expressed desire to return to the collection and even bring others is one clear indicator that dust will not be forming on these archives!

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Refs:

www.liftfest.com/living-archive

Dr Caoimhe McAvinchey's report, 'Making an invitation' is available to download from

www.liftfest.com/living-archive/making-an-invitation