

Starting Out Guide for Theatres and Theatre Companies

Looking After Your Records

Guidance Notes from V&A Theatre & Performance

There are many reasons why it makes sense to keep the archives of your theatre or company in good order. Not only do they represent a valuable record of your work from which future generations can take inspiration, but they also provide you with information and evidence that may prove vital to the running of your organisation.

What are the records of your company?

Records are documents created or received within the course of your company's business that have potential value for administrative, legal, financial, accountability, research or historical purposes. Records can be in any medium or physical form, e.g. paper files, databases or e-mail.

Why keep records?

There are three main reasons for keeping records. First, they may contain information which you need in order to run your business. This could relate to any operation including production, marketing, press, staffing, funding or sales.

Second, they may be required as evidence or be kept for legal reasons. In some cases you will keep records which show that you have acted properly, in case of future legal action. In other cases you will keep records in order to comply with legislation (such as accounting and VAT records and those required by Companies House). Some of these records need to be kept for a certain length of

time, other must be retained permanently. In order to ensure compliance with all relevant record keeping legislation you may wish to take legal advice. Funding bodies such as the Arts Council may also require you to keep certain records.

Third, you will wish to keep some records permanently because they are of potential historical interest. These could be kept by your company or given to an archival repository. Records kept permanently are called archives. Your archive would consist of the key records of your organisation and may include production and performance information, minutes, annual reports and accounts, designs, property and premises records, and personnel records. Many of these will have legal value as well as being of historical interest.

How should records be managed?

The most important aspect of keeping a company archive is to make sure that you know what you are keeping and why. So it is a good idea to carry out a survey and get professional advice if you can. Make sure that all your records are in good order, i.e. they are on clearly labelled files arranged in logical systems (and in the case of electronic records, in a clear directory structure).

Keeping archives permanently

Once you have identified the important records that you need to keep permanently, you can think about storing them in a suitable environment. There are commercial records storage businesses which may be able to offer solutions, or you could keep the records on site. If you are doing this, you should ensure that they are kept:

- Securely (under lock and key)
- Safely (not somewhere prone to flooding, excessive heat, rodents, or with flammable materials)

- In a beneficial environment (cool and dry, free from dust and direct sunlight)

Using archival repositories

One solution may be to deposit your archive with an archival repository, such as your local record office or an APAC member. They will usually need to take ownership of the archive (but not necessarily copyright) in order to justify their expense in storing, cataloguing and preserving it. They will usually allow access by the general public to your records, so make sure you tell them about confidential or sensitive records. Giving your archive to an archival repository means that it can be accessed, researched and enjoyed for ever, and that your company's work lives on beyond the life of the performance.

Where to get advice

The National Archives offers a number of advisory services to all custodians of records, including private owners, archivists and anyone with responsibility for caring for archive collections.

Website: www.nationalarchives.gov.uk

For clear practical advice on all aspects of collection care, see the Collections Link website, which provides authoritative information on security, preservation, insurance, copyright etc.

Website: www.collectionslink.org.uk

The Business Archives Council promotes the preservation of business records, conducts surveys of records and issues guidance to businesses on the management of their records. The Council offers an advisory service to provide advice and help for owners and custodians of business archives and current/semi-current records. It also offers training days and workshops on all aspects of archives administration, records management and business history.

Website: www.businessarchivescouncil.org.uk

The Association of Performing Arts Collections (APAC) is the Subject Specialist Network of performing arts collections in the UK and Ireland. Its members – museums, archives, libraries, organisations, and individuals – meet regularly to discuss issues and share ideas and information. APAC provides an email discussion forum, study days on specialist topics, and collaborative projects.

Website: www.performingartscollections.org.uk

This guide is by no means comprehensive and is intended as a brief introduction from V&A Theatre & Performance (www.vam.ac.uk/page/t/theatre-and-performance).

See the companion guide on personal collections for more information about storage, preservation, and rights issues.

Last updated: September 2008