

Archiving Dance in and After a Pandemic

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As a CLIR Fellow from September 2017 to May 2018, I conducted dissertation research at archives across Great Britain and in New York City. A historian of dance and European politics, my dissertation - titled *Ballet Imperial: Dance and the New British Empire after 1945* (now my book project) - explored how classical ballet became a “national” British art and a tool of British soft power over the course of the twentieth century. I’m tremendously grateful for the support of this fellowship, the CLIR team, and the pre- and post-fellowship workshops, which enriched my dissertation research and my broader scholarship in countless ways.

Today, I’m going to talk briefly about the COVID-19 pandemic’s uneven impact on dance archives and original sources related to dance. Since 2020, two contrasting trends have emerged. First, repositories for dance and the performing arts - typically underfunded and understaffed even before the pandemic - contended with further pressures that, in some cases, jeopardized their futures. At the same time, the constraints of the pandemic prompted contemporary dance artists to create new digital content and participate in archiving projects that will enhance the historical record moving forward. In future, I hope that investment in dance and performing arts archives will accurately reflect the significance of these institutions, which are valued by researchers, arts communities, and the general public. I also hope that dance artists will continue to document their work, protecting their legacies, expanding the archive, and further underscoring the broader historical and cultural importance of dance.

The challenges performing arts archives faced in the pandemic hit home for me in March 2021, when I received a distressing email from a colleague about the fate of the Theatre and Performance Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London. Like many

cultural institutions, the V&A lost significant income during the pandemic.¹ The museum's Director was proposing a cost-cutting restructuring plan that involved letting go of staff and reorganizing its holdings chronologically and geographically.² The Theatre and Performance Department - with its extensive collections of national and international records, managed by archivists with terrific knowledge of the materials - was in danger. As a CLIR Fellow, I spent months examining administrative records, printed reviews, costume and set designs, and photographs at this archive. This experience, along with my conversations with the V&A's brilliant dance curator, fundamentally shaped my dissertation (and made it possible).

Evidently, I was not the only person dismayed by this proposal. The Society for Theatre Research issued a statement voicing "great alarm" and deep concerns about the plan.³ The Society of British Theatre Designers declared its support for the Theatre and Performance Department.⁴ The International Association of Libraries, Museums, Archives and Documentation Centres of the Performing Arts (SIBMAS) created and began circulating an online petition in protest.⁵ By April, over 18,000 people had signed this petition.⁶ Identifying themselves as scholars, archivists, performers, stage managers, designers, drama teachers, arts critics, students, and members of the general public, some wrote impassioned comments defending the Theatre and Performance Department, calling it "a national treasure" - its closure, some said, would be a

¹ Gareth Harris, "V&A confirms it will keep its focus on materials - but workforce will be reduced by 15% to cut costs," *The Art Newspaper*, 19 May 2021, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2021/05/19/vanda-confirms-it-will-keep-its-focus-on-materials-but-workforce-will-be-reduced-by-15percent-to-cut-costs>

² "V&A walks back planned cuts to National Arts Library Staff," *Artforum*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.artforum.com/news/v-a-walks-back-planned-cuts-to-national-arts-library-staff-85315>

³ "V&A: Closure of the Theatre and Performance Department," Society for Theatre Research, 17 March 2021, <https://www.sfr.org.uk/va-closure-of-the-theatre-and-performance-department/>

⁴ "V&A Theatre & Performance Collections and Staff Support Statement," Society of British Theatre Designers, 18 March 2021, <http://www.theatredesign.org.uk/news-story/va-statement/>; Also see: Geraldine Kendall Adams, "Reprieve for some V&A teams but former staff warn of 'brain drain,'" Museums Association, 18 March 2021, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2021/03/reprieve-for-some-va-teams-but-former-staff-warn-of-brain-drain/#>

⁵ "Save V&A Theatre & Performance Department," Change.org, https://www.change.org/p/save-performing-art-heritage-at-the-v-a?recruiter=1183668119&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=share_email_response&recruited_by_id=7b9d6230-7b64-11eb-be93-4d8b86fe6b76; Also see: Alan Jones, "The V&A is proposing to close its Theatre & Performance Department!", SIBMAS, March 4, 2021, <https://www.sibmas.org/2021/03/04/the-va-is-proposing-to-close-its-theatre-performance-department/>

⁶ Alan Jones, "News on restructuring of the V&A Theatre & Performance Department," SIBMAS, 6 April 2021, <https://www.sibmas.org/2021/04/06/news-on-restructuring-of-the-va-theatre-performance-department-06-april/>

“catastrophic loss,” a “national disaster.”⁷ Further spreading the word, British media - *The BBC*, *The Guardian*, *The Stage*, *The Daily Mail* - covered the V&A’s plans, and celebrity actors such as Vanessa Redgrave joined the chorus of criticism.⁸

Ultimately, the V&A decided not to close the Theatre and Performance Department.⁹ Although some remained concerned about the museum’s future plans - SIBMAS wrote that it would “be looking out for how things progress”¹⁰ - the collective rallying around this performing arts archive nevertheless proved effective, with the public outcry attesting to widespread appreciation for performing arts repositories.

While placing some dance archives at risk, the pandemic prompted an unexpected boom in digital dance content and archiving projects. From the start of the pandemic in New York City, one of America’s dance capitals, artists faced unemployment and significant financial losses. As rehearsal and performance spaces closed, many adapted by shifting their focus to virtual programs and digital creations. The enormous digital output that resulted led Dance/USA, a major national organization for dance, to update its website with resources for how to manage and safeguard this material.¹¹

Indeed, Dance/USA reports that the pandemic has “increased awareness in the dance field of the value and currency of archives and archiving practices”¹² - perhaps prompted by

⁷ See comments section, “Save V&A Theatre & Performance Department,” Change.org petition

⁸ Further media coverage: “V&A’s Theatre and Performance archive ‘at risk of becoming a dead collection,’” *ArtsProfessional*, 25 May 2021, <<https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/vas-theatre-and-performance-archive-risk-becoming-dead-collection>>; Giverny Masso, “V&A Theatre Museum collection ‘in jeopardy’ under proposed staffing cuts,” *The Stage*, 2 March 2021, <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/va-theatre-museum-collection-in-jeopardy-under-proposed-staffing-cuts>>; David Chadderton, “Theatre Museum collection may be threatened again by V&A cuts,” *British Theatre Guide*, 4 March 2021, <<https://www.britishtheatreguide.info/news/theatre-museum-collection-may-12925>>. See: *The Guardian*; *BBC Radio*; *The Guardian (on the National Art Library)*; *Vanessa Redgrave & The Stage*; *Vanessa Redgrave & The Daily Mail*.

⁹ “V&A walks back planned cuts to National Arts Library Staff.”

¹⁰ Alan Jones, “The V&A museum announced the end of its internal consultation process,” SIBMAS, 28 May 2021, <<https://www.sibmas.org/2021/05/28/the-va-museum-announced-the-end-of-its-internal-consultation-process/>>. In May 2021, the journal *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* printed an editorial protesting the closure of the Theatre & Performance Department: Jim Davis, Janice Norwood, Patricia Smyth, and Sharon Weltman, “Editorial: Theatre and Performance Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum Under Threat,” *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, 48/1 (2021): 3-5.

¹¹ For analysis of COVID’s impact on the U.S. dance community, see: Shakira Segundo, “Dance Comeback: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Dance Field and the Future of Dance,” *Dance/USA*, 13 August 2021, <<https://www.danceusa.org/ejournal/2021/08/13/dance-comeback-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-the-dance-field-and-the-future-of-dance>>

¹² “Archiving During the Coronavirus,” *Dance/USA*, accessed 16 May 2022, <<https://www.danceusa.org/archiving-during-coronavirus>>

unexpected downtime, or the realization that online content has not only allowed dancers to keep working, but also increase their visibility and reach. Some organizations have joined individual dancers and companies in this effort. The New York Public Library's Jerome Robbins Dance Division, for example, started the "COVID-19 Dance Worker Narratives Project," facilitating the creation of interviews documenting the experiences of members of the dance community across the U.S.¹³ The Chicago Dance History Project created "Dancing Under Quarantine," an initiative that compiles submissions of digital content, recordings, and written reflections.¹⁴ For scholars and researchers, dance will be a vital medium for understanding the past two years.

Moving forward, I hope that dance and performing arts archives - already so few and fragile - will be properly valued and appreciated by funders as well as the larger organizations that they are part of. I also hope that dance artists continue to document their creations and experiences, even as many return to live performance, and that archives will support them in these endeavors. Such efforts not only protect dancers' works and legacies - expanding the archive, they further underscore the larger historical and cultural significance of dance.

¹³ "COVID-19 Dance Worker Narratives Project," Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, accessed 16 May 2022, <<https://www.nypl.org/about/locations/lpa/covid-19-dance-worker-narratives-project>>

¹⁴ "Dancing Under Quarantine," Chicago Dance History Project, accessed 16 May 2022, <<https://www.chicagodancehistory.org/dancing-under-quarantine>>