

“All the World’s a Stage” The Austrian Theatre Museum

by **Ulrike Dembski**

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A major problem for theatre museums as well as for theatrical research is that individual events in the performing arts are not transmissible. The tangible elements remaining from a performance – such as stage design, costumes, models, reports from a performer, prompt books – do not speak to us, as works of fine art do. These tangible elements are only the most basic ingredients for the historical reconstruction of a single theatrical event. Yet they nevertheless allow us to identify specific cultural connections, to show historical developments and to make key terms of the performing arts accessible.

> The Austrian Theatre Museum was founded in 1923 as part of the Austrian National Library in Vienna. Today, it has approximately 1.6 million items in its depots: costumes, stage designs, models, photos, posters, props and many other objects from the world of theatre. Its permanent exhibition displays a sample of its treasures. In the basement, the museum has a space for children, where they can learn about the theatre hands-on, while other rooms are devoted to temporary exhibitions.

> The most important thing for specialist museums, like theatre museums, to recognise is that they are special and that they exist to attract a particular public of

their own. Theatre museums have to mount exhibitions in such a way as to appeal to visitors who are used to seeing staged performances in the theatre. This means that we have to do more than hang pictures on the walls! We have to use all modern audiovisual techniques available to put ideas and atmospheres across to our visitors, in order to rouse their curiosity and give them a glimpse of what goes on behind the scenes, showing them things they never had the possibility of seeing before.

> One of our most important goals is to enlarge our range of contacts and reach out to theatres and theatre groups. Additionally, we have to keep abreast of theatre programming, so that we can react rapidly and present background information and the historical aspects of a particular performance while it is running. Another of our tasks is to undertake conservation work, research and documentation, to be used not only by students but also by stage designers, directors, stage managers, and other theatre professionals.

> Lastly, it is important that there be a balanced exhibitions policy, where form and content are in harmony and where the displays are accessible to different sorts of visitor. As regards objects not on display, their care and preservation should not be sacrificed to the trend of multiplying exhibitions and loans. We must recognise that, today and in the future, it is the original, authentic art object capable of telling a story around the intangible theatre event, which is the key element for curators and visitors alike.

Performing Arts Museums in Australia

by **Richard Stone**

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Four museums in Australia specialise in the performing arts. Their collections include costumes, elements of sets, properties, designs, models, and photographs, as well as paper-based items (eg. manuscripts, programmes, ephemera). In addition to the museum collections, there are many significant collections of paper-based, pictorial and audiovisual materials in libraries, archives and galleries around the country, constituting a distributed national collection of performing arts heritage resources.

> Performing arts are among the most ephemeral of human creations. A performance event takes place in a very particular

place and time, the result of a unique combination of elements. These include tangible elements such as text (or composition), sets, costumes, props, and a venue. Clearly evident, but less tangible, are the contributions of the human creative teams at all levels and in all areas. Finally, there are the audience members and their individual experiences of the event.

> With the event over, the contributing elements are dispersed or altered. The audience’s experience remains in individual memories, but the creators move on, maybe to another event and the venue remains to be transformed again through another performance. The text or composition probably survives either in a published or manuscript form. The printed products such as advertising ephemera and programmes are quickly dispersed, although reviews remain accessible in newspapers and journals. A film or video recording of a performance may remain, as well as audio tapes of voices and music, but sets, costumes and props, the tangible artefacts from the event, face a most uncertain future – possibilities include recycling for another production, re-use on a commercial hired basis, storage and being forgotten, destroyed or maybe collected and preserved by a heritage institution.

> This phenomenon of dispersal presents a formidable challenge to all custodians of performing arts collections. Moreover, once acquired, collections of objects from the performing arts immediately pose a series of challenges. They are mere samples from the original multi-faceted event and often do not stand alone as items of intrinsic artistic or cultural interest. The challenge in displaying these objects is met by the staging of a new event in the form of an exhibition. In order to document the performance, the exhibition might attempt to represent or partially reconstruct it, using a combination of objects, paper and audiovisual materials. However, when the objects, and therefore the event, are placed within other contexts by adding narratives of personal careers, theatre companies, theatre buildings, theatre genres, etc., an extra dimension not present at the time of the original performance is added. The exhibition may even succeed in giving rise to an intangible, ephemeral experience comparable to the original performance event.