

# UTILIZING TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE HERITAGE IN DOCUMENTING THE HISTORY AND WORKS OF SPLINTERS THEATRE OF SPECTACLE

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The objective of the research is to develop and implement a methodology for collecting, preserving and making accessible the tangible and intangible heritage elements of the history and works of a unique Canberra artistic endeavour, Splinters Theatre of Spectacle. The company's meteoric rise through the early 1990s and dispersal by 1998 deserves to be documented and shared with the community that nurtured it, and made available for overdue critical analysis. Splinters' works and methods have long been acknowledged as significant, but the dispersal of the key players and of the company's records and artefacts meant few records of the company had entered collecting institutions. As a first step, an archive has been created at the ACT Heritage Library.

The unique features of the company present many challenges for the archivist, conservator and curator: that over a thousand people performed with the company; the many unique theatrical props and art works of note; and crucially, the presence of a number of photographers and video and sound artists in the company. There are interesting technical problems to be explored, such as the location of and access to the resulting collection(s), possibly split amongst several institutions due to the range of media, as well as questions of intellectual property deriving from a collective. Finally, theatre—particularly experimental work—is the poor relation of arts heritage collection and serious questions remain about what is required to properly represent it.

The paper will discuss these issues and outline an innovative approach to bringing the material together and presenting it for the Centenary of Canberra program in 2013.

## BACKGROUND

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Splinters Theatre of Spectacle, founded in 1985, was arguably the most remarkable truly home-grown artistic treasure Canberra has produced. It grew from the local (counter-) culture, and arose in and around the national government, cultural institutions and the embassies of many nations the city was designed to serve. The company's meteoric rise to national prominence in the early 1990s and dispersal by 1998 deserves to be documented and shared with the community that nurtured it, while its astonishing works and techniques should be made available for overdue critical analysis.

The dispersal of the key Splinters players and of the company's records and artefacts after 1998 meant, however, that no proper record of the company's

works was entered into collecting institutions or the realm of academic study. In theatre terms, Splinters was one of several important experimental performance companies that arose around Australia in the 1980s and introduced a vast array of new techniques and approaches (Findlay 2009); however, scant academic research on companies of this period has been completed to date. On this basis alone, proper documentation of Splinters' work would be welcomed by arts practitioners.

The impact and spirit of Splinters is still strongly felt in Canberra, even though almost all its core members have left to pursue careers elsewhere. Tragically, one of the company's founders, David Branson, died in a car accident on Anzac Parade in December 2001. His legacy was recognized by the ACT Government through a tribute delivered by the Minister for the Arts in the Legislative Assembly

(Hansard 2002), and subsequently the naming of a street after him in the suburb of Dunlop.

Fortunately for posterity, David kept everything: reviews, scripts, production notes, posters and handbills, photographs, videos, office records. An extensive archive, the David Branson Papers (HMSS0233), has been created at the ACT Heritage Library, which presents a unique opportunity to make accessible the work of a group that had an immense impact in Canberra both in terms of theatre practice and the broader cultural life of the city.

## APPROACH

When I started thinking about this project in 2009 it wasn't with a PhD in mind. It was simply driven by a deep personal need to ensure this amazing legacy was not lost. With an undergraduate degree in music, and 20 years as a performer and manager of arts organizations, including for two years of Splinters, I followed my instincts as a performer and production manager and began by thinking about the end product and the audience: how could I make sure that the information collected is made accessible and then used to convey the power of the original experience as strongly as possible?

The first step, clearly, was locating and collecting of Splinters artefacts and ensuring the material was properly and safely stored. I was fortunate to be interviewed about the project by the Canberra Times, and was subsequently contacted by Ms



**Figure 1** | David Branson as *Baal*, The Street Theatre Studio 1998. Photo by 'pling.

Antoinette Buchanan of the ACT Heritage Library, who was aware of the significance of the material and offered the opportunity to create the archive there. Her guidance has been invaluable. Also invaluable has been the work of Mr Joel Swadling, a friend of the Branson family who is writing a biography of David and continues to put in many hours in the arrangement and description of the Branson Papers.

Around the same time, I published two articles

in *RealTime*, Australia's critical guide to international contemporary arts, about Splinters and its milieu. Equally fortunately, the articles caught the eye of Ms Robyn Archer, who published an article in response. Robyn is of course Creative Director of the 2013 Centenary of Canberra but had also commissioned one of Splinters' most memorable works, *Guardians of the Concourse*, for the 1993 Festival of Australian Theatre. I put it to her that it would be tremendous to be able to bring Splinters and the many other expat Canberra artists back for the Centenary celebrations. It turned out she had the same idea. I am now exceptionally honoured to have Robyn as one of my PhD supervisors.

I proposed to Robyn that I would work with others to produce an exhibition and documentary film in time for the Centenary, as well as to try to bring former Splinters artists to perform again in their hometown alongside the exhibition. It was then in the matter of preserving video and audio that I sought advice from Dr Jeff Brownrigg at the Donald Horne Institute of the University of Canberra, and of course formerly the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA), who

fortunately for me saw the potential of the project and offered me the opportunity to undertake a PhD in Cultural Heritage under his guidance.

As the literature review phase of the research has unfolded, it has become apparent that this project sits at the intersection of several exciting and rapidly evolving fields of research. The definition by UNESCO of Intangible Heritage in 2003 is of course primarily aimed at the preservation of indigenous cultures that have limited written records, but crucially places the performing arts at the centre (UNESCO 2003). New media is revolutionizing museum studies by questioning the primacy of the object, and the role of historians and curators in guiding the interpretation of what is represented and the ways it can be viewed, with a hugely increased potential for enriched experiences of heritage (Cameron 2007). At the same time it has opened up myriad new possibilities for utilizing the recollections and responses of the participants and viewers. The field of digital humanities is just in the infancy of evolving new tools that allow never before conceivable ways of organizing heritage and other humanities data (Cohen 2011).

## The Intangible in Theatre

This brings us to the issue of how to deal with the intangible heritage of theatre: what are the best ways to best communicate the power of this ephemeral medium and the impact it has? The challenge of the intangible in theatre is well articulated in the opening remarks of the 2005 Nobel

Prize acceptance speech by the great playwright Harold Pinter:

*Truth in drama is forever elusive. You never quite find it but the search for it is compulsive. The search is clearly what drives the endeavour. The search is your task. More often than not you stumble upon the truth in the dark, colliding with it or just glimpsing an image or a shape which seems to correspond to the truth, often without realizing that you have done so. But the real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art. There are many. These truths challenge each other, recoil from each other, reflect each other, ignore each other, tease each other, are blind to each other. Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost.*

(Pinter 2005).



**Figure 2** | *Guardians of the Concourse*, Canberra Theatre Centre forecourt, 1993. Photo: Katherine Pepper.

This passage conveys what is important and unique about theatre compared to other artforms. The truths also have the potential to become the foundation of *shared experiences of meaning*. These are an extension into the audience of the truths, where the words and movements and feelings conveyed by a performer reach out and, together with the

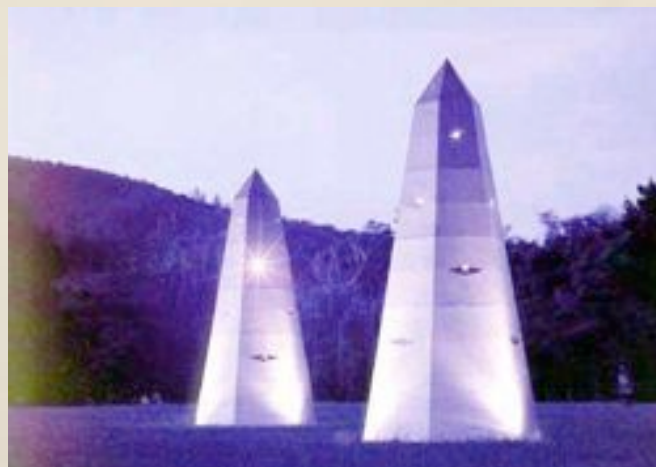
audience, make an intangible thing that has a unique meaning for that group of people sharing the same place and time. Film can't do that; the actors are not there with the audience. Music and dance do something similar, but abstract, the meaning not as clear.

What Splinters was amongst the first to do, and which it explored to great effect, was to take this even further by dissolving the separation between performers and audience, by taking theatre out of conventional spaces, by making the performance space their own, by performing in and among the audience and at its most powerful, by making physical contact with them. Splinters called this Crowd Theory—physical manipulation of audiences. It was highly confronting—sometimes even literally making audience members being sick—and hugely exhilarating: in a landmark performance *Flowers of Gold/Bezerkii Carnivale* in 1992, in the old Kingston Bus Depot, the musicians struck up a mad waltz and the 60-odd performers suddenly turned, grabbed an audience member each and began waltzing with them. The theatre critic from the Canberra Times, aghast, backed against a pillar and wouldn't dance.

What Splinters ultimately created was a *community of shared meaning*, a most powerful intangible cultural heritage. In thinking about how to capture and present this heritage, I have been especially drawn to the recent description by Rogiers and Truyen of a threefold framework for more meaningful and nuanced representation of complex historical subject matter through digital media: the traditional approach of



**Figure 3** | *Flowers of Gold*, Old Kingston Bus Depot 1992. Photo: Katherine Pepper



**Figure 4** | Clint Hurrell, *Light Crystals*, set for *The Oracle*, Weston Park 1995, Photo by 'pling.

locating objects in time and space is now able to be combined with a third dimension of *community*: as they put it, “Historical actors cannot be understood in isolation from ... their role in the cultural practice of a certain group” (Rogiers & Truyen 2008).

Splinters was certainly complex! The features of the company present many challenges for the archivist and curator: the company began as an anarchist collective but even as it became more professionalized retained an open structure, with a community of well over 1000 people performing with the company over the years (Findlay 2009). Several key members were trained

sculptors and painters, meaning that the material and mechanical components of the work, the sets and props and costumes, were artworks of note in themselves. Most crucially, there were photographers and video makers in the company, which meant most of the company did was recorded, while video artworks were an

integral part of many performances.

### Organizing the data

It is this last which will form the centerpiece of the ongoing project. The plan is to digitize and put online all the photographs, video and audio and encourage people to comment and reflect on their

experiences of it, as participants and as audience members. In this way the meaning of the work to people will gradually agglomerate into a significant body of data that can be further explored. Dr David Carlin of RMIT, who is the architect of a similar project for the great Circus Oz, introduced me to the concept of *folksonomy*; that is, providing a freeform language of *tags* that viewers can apply to the online material, which then lends itself to analysis. In addition I am considering the concept Circus Oz is developing of a *taxonomy of performance*, breaking down and labelling the components of performance by types of movement and their context (Carlin 2011).

These kinds of techniques can allow the shared experiences to be joined up once more, and if not able to recreate the community of meaning, at least able to map and describe it.

I have been fortunate to recently be awarded an ACT Heritage Grant for the digitizing process and hope to have this done by the end of 2011, which will allow the project to move into the next phase of preparing the documentary and making a dedicated website that will start to put structure around the visual information. In the interim a Facebook Group page has been created with a limited selection of photos and videos, which has over 180 members and is already proving fruitful for gathering reminiscences and allowing members to post their own photos and scans.

## Technical issues

There are also interesting technical problems to be explored, such as the location of the resulting collection, possibly split amongst several institutions due to the range of media, as well as questions of intellectual property deriving from collectively-made work, for which terrific groundwork has been laid by Mark Seton and Tom Burvill recently for another archive project, that of Sydney's Sidetrack Theatre (Burvill & Seton 2010).

The challenge of working with several institutions will hopefully turn out to be a great benefit. The ACT

Heritage Library is primarily a library for manuscripts and is not equipped at present to deal with the video and larger ephemera. It is likely that in time the collection will be split and these parts rehoused in institutions such as the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) and the Performing Arts Museum in Melbourne. The Finding Aid created by the ACT Heritage Library is already listed in Trove and in time will be fully linked to the Splinters entry in the AusStage database hosted by Flinders University.

This of course aligns with the familiar concept of the distributed collection, however theatre is relatively poorly served overall, compared to other artforms, and so approaching this task in the context of PhD research is intended to establish pathways other companies can use. Ideally, this will lead to an ongoing alliance of institutions prepared to dedicate a few more resources to improving the state of theatre collections and how they are utilized.

## CONCLUSION

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Bringing all of this together for 2013 will be a huge challenge, but here's the beauty of it: just like a Splinters work itself, the intent of the research is to design and facilitate a structure for others to create inside. The exhibition itself will be curated by Mr José Robertson, an early member of Splinters who has worked as a curator at the NFSA and the National Gallery of Australia, and the National Portrait Gallery in London. The documentary will be made by Mr Patrick Troy, a Splinters founder and now professional video editor in Melbourne. Hopefully, we will also be able to arrange for companies led by former Splinters members to perform alongside the the exhibition, such as Snuff Puppets and The Village from Melbourne, and Spectacle Art from Byron Bay. When the curtain finally falls, the material for the thesis will be vastly enriched. And as I and many others hope, a big step forward will have been taken to ensure the unique and remarkable Splinters Theatre of Spectacle finally gets the recognition it deserves.

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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**Gavin Findlay** trained in Hobart as a classical musician, playing with the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra for eight years before moving to Sydney in 1989 to take up the position of Administration Coordinator with The Performance Space, the national centre for research and development of performing arts. He left in 1992 to join Canberra's ground-breaking Splinters Theatre of Spectacle as manager and musician. He helped establish the Australian Choreographic Centre before becoming Director of Canberra Youth Music and undertaking post-graduate studies at the ANU School of Music. In 2002 he joined the Australian Public Service, where he currently works in Indigenous Economic Development, and in 2009 completed a Master of Public Policy degree at the ANU Crawford School of Policy and Government. In 2011 he began PhD studies at the University of Canberra Donald Horne Institute for Cultural Heritage. Gavin continues to perform as a musician in several bands and is Assistant Musical Director of the Hall Village Brass.

