Preservation Through Collaboration:
Preserving Magnetic Media in a Post-Custodial Model
The project: “Expanding Access to the Videotaped Record of 1970s-Era Experimental Theatre.”

- Funded by a $100,000 grant from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) (2017-2019).
- A post-custodial video digitization/preservation project between La MaMa, WCFTR, and BAVC.
- Core outcomes:
  - reformat 248 half-inch open reel videos documenting performances on La MaMa’s stages in the 1970s.
  - create multiple access points for users to discover this collection, including on La MaMa’s digital collections portal, the DPLA, WCFTR’s catalog, WorldCat, & Wikipedia.
Who We Are:

Bay Area Video Coalition
Morgan Morel

The Archives of La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club
Rachel Mattson, Sophie Glidden-Lyon, Kate Philipson

Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research
Amy Sloper, Jesse Hocking
La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club

An experimental theater founded by Ellen Stewart in 1961 in a basement in NYC’s East Village. An important site of theatrical experimentation, critical to the development of queer, African American, Asian American, Native American, & Latino theater forms, & experimental theater practices of various kinds. Has presented 4,000+ productions by artists from 70+ nations. Now a multi-sited, int’l organization with 4 theaters, 3 rehearsal studios, a dorm for visiting artists, and a 5000-square-foot archives.
La MaMa’s Archives

80,000+ unique items (from 1962 - present):
- programs,
- posters,
- correspondence,
- photographs,
- costumes,
- puppets,
- film,
- magnetic media,
- born-digital

Ozzie Rodriguez, Archives Director
Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research

- Administered by the University of Wisconsin-Madison
- Large research collection of manuscripts, moving images, sound recordings, and photographs and other graphic materials concentrating primarily on American film, broadcasting, and theater history
- Promotes the understanding of the history and culture of film, theater, and television
Bay Area Video Coalition

- BAVC was incorporated as a non-profit in 1976 with a grant from Rockefeller to provide space and equipment to Bay Area local video producers
- BAVC Preservation started in 1994
- Focused on providing preservation services to museums, artists, activist, documentarians, and cultural heritage institutions
- Mellon funded Preservation Access Program (PAP) allows them to provide significant discounts to individuals and smaller organizations
- Boutique approach to digitization, using 1:1 transfer methods to work with materials that may not fit with factory-stye digitization methods
La MaMa’s ½ inch open reel video collection

256 unique reels, 170 productions (1970-1978)

Includes documentation of performances & work by:

The Native American Theatre Ensemble
The Pan Asian Repertory Theatre Company
The Playhouse of the Ridiculous
Third World Institute of Theatre Arts Studies

Harvey Fierstein, Candy Darling, Winston Tong, Elizabeth Swados, Tom Eyen, Aaron Bell, Jimmy Wigfall, Julie Bovasso, Adrienne Kennedy, Ching Yeh, Valda Setterfield, Tricia Brown, Ahmed Yacoubi, Cecil Taylor...& many more.

https://pushcartcatalog.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/halfinchvideosv31.pdf
La MaMa’s digital infrastructure

★ 1 Linux server + 1 NAS + harddrives
★ Total of 27 TBs of server space (which is backed up to Amazon cloud services)
★ assorted pcs and macs (most advanced = donated mac mini)
★ IT support: Palante Tech Cooperative
Motivations

The Archives of La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club
- Performing arts organization with no digital preservation infrastructure capacity, limited financial resources, and a desire to retain control of its archival content.
- Rare, valuable, endangered documentation of performances by a range of experimental artists on the 1/2 open reel format.

Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research
- This collaboration represents an opportunity to ensure the long-term preservation, encourage historical studies, and improve access to resources for theater research... Further, it allows WCFTR to strengthen relationships with outside collecting organizations and leverage resources for the benefit of endangered audiovisual collections.
postcustodial theory of archives

Relationships

**Related Term:**
custody
noncustodial records

n. – The idea that archivists will no longer physically acquire and maintain records, but that they will provide management oversight for records that will remain in the custody of the record creators.

**Notes:**
The postcustodial theory shifts the role of the archivists from a custodian of inactive records in a centralized repository to the role of a manager of records that are distributed in the offices where the records are created and used.
Terms of the partnership:

**La MaMa:**
- retains possession of the physical video reels
- holds access-level copies of the digital files only
- retains ongoing control over the intellectual content of the digital video materials

**WCFTR**
- responsible for ongoing preservation of the digital masters
- holds access-level copies that it can make available for research purposes in its reading room

Agreement must be reviewed and renewed by staff at both institutions every 10 years.
Challenges (and creative solutions)

Getting institutional buy-in

- At La MaMa: it took some work to explain the nature of the partnership & get administrative leadership on board with a project that would give another institution the ability to share La MaMa’s videos with researchers.
- At the WCFTR: this project required staff to write, and get approval for, a special inter-institutional memorandum of understanding vs regular donor agreements.

Staffing changes

- At La MaMa: 2 successive project managers and 2 successive interns
- At BAVC: 2 successive preservation managers
- At the WCFTR: Moving Image archivist leaves for new position, no formal replacement
Multiple Access Points!
Challenges (and creative solutions)

**Metadata**

- Reconciling diverse information from La MaMa & BAVC
- Properly describing shows from the ‘70s, with little to no contextual information
- Determining which relationships are important for back-end management and for user context;
  - What is possible with CollectiveAccess?
- DPLA timeline - became sooner than expected to submit data, when METRO ceased acting as the Empire State Digital Network Service Hub
- Unable to use actual video files as objects for DPLA - adjusted to link static program images to represent productions
Challenges (and creative solutions)
Challenges (and creative solutions)

Technical digitization difficulties (BAVC)

Luma levels

Tracking errors, head clogs
Lessons and...

La MaMa
- Creative strategies necessary for the preservation of a diversity of community-engaged collections.
- Personal networks are important!
- Don’t give up when granting agencies turn you down; revise.

WCFTR
- Collaboration in practice requires different workflows and might challenge existing institutional policies but is worth the effort.

BAVC
- The strengths and weaknesses of specific decks and TBCs became very apparent when dealing with problematic tapes.
- Learned the limits of some of the equipment.

...Outcomes

La MaMa
- Expanded access to at-risk materials, and enriched network for both the archive and its researchers.

WCFTR
- New ways of thinking of collection development and rethinking the kinds of donor agreements that collecting institutions use.

BAVC
- This project created a strong impetus to revamp workflows in order to clear bottlenecks, invest in new equipment, and improve baking methods.
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