

# Spotlight: What's New at the Theatre Collection



Opens 12 December 2024

## ***Spotlight: What's New at the Theatre Collection***

### **Introduction**

This exhibition unveils a selection of recently acquired and never-before-displayed material from the University of Bristol Theatre Collection. From 2018 to 2024, more than 400 additions have been made to the Collection through a rigorous process known as accessioning – the formal act of acquiring and incorporating material into an archive or museum's holdings.

This ongoing effort is central to preserving the rich history of British theatre and live art. While every item in the Theatre Collection holds great value, those featured in this exhibition have been chosen for their embodiment of the Collection's core mission: *to curate a world-class archive that reflects the diversity of British theatre and live art, offering unique insights into their creative processes and wider cultural contexts.*

The featured collections include: the archive of Thomas Baptiste, a renowned actor, opera singer, and equality advocate; the papers of theatre producer Ross Taylor; the Robert Stansbury Miniature Stage Lighting Archive; and our most recent addition, the Forkbeard Fantasy Archive

### **Panel 1: Ross Taylor (1929-2017)**

Ross Taylor was a British theatre producer, dancer and choreographer who called himself 'the first working-class impresario.' Born in Stockport during the Great Depression, he was raised by his father, a cotton mill worker. Passionate about show business, Taylor left school at 14 to become an apprentice carpenter.

In 1946, after seeing *The Gang Show*, he pursued dance, commuting to Manchester for ballet classes while working in construction. By 1948, he had joined Mona Inglesby's International Ballet, but realising he would not become a ballet star, he transitioned to musical theatre, dancing in productions such as *Call Me Madam* and *Brigadoon*. He also appeared in films such as *Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* (1955).

In 1954, Taylor began choreographing for musicals, revues and pantomimes, and later worked in television. He co-wrote the successful musical *Charlie Girl* (1964) which ran for over 2,000 performances. Throughout the 1960s and 70s, he worked with variety stars including Adam Faith, Ken Dodd, and Jimmy Tarbuck, and staged major TV performances.

In 1973, he produced the musical *The Water Babies*, and in 1977 designed productions for the John Curry Theatre of Skating. In 1979, Taylor brought *The King and I*, starring Yul Brynner, to the London Palladium and followed this with a successful *Sound of Music* revival in 1981. After the latter's success, Taylor retired to travel, settling in Australia, where he died in 2017.

The Theatre Collection acquired the Ross Taylor Archive in 2018.

## Gallery 1

### Wall Above Case 1

**1. Costume designs for 'Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid' and 'Mrs Doasyouwouldbedoneby' for the production of *The Water Babies*, Royalty Theatre, Kingsway, London.**

Cynthia Tingley  
1973  
Pen, ink wash and gouache  
BTC167/P/4

Based on Charles Kingsley's children's novel, written in 1862-3, *The Water Babies* was adapted for the stage and directed by Ross Taylor. The story follows the journey of Tom, a young chimney sweep who escapes his harsh life with the cruel Mr. Grimes. Tom embarks on an adventure to a magical realm inhabited by underwater creatures and fairies, where he seeks to be transformed into a pure water baby.

### Case 1

**2. Costume designs with dedication, for characters in the pantomime *Goody Two Shoes*, Alhambra Theatre, Glasgow.**

Peter Rice  
1959  
Gouache and pen  
BTC167/P/4

*Goody Two Shoes* was an eighteenth-century children's morality tale about a poor but virtuous girl, who succeeded in life through education and good deeds. Popular as a Victorian pantomime, it has been rarely performed since.

**3. Photograph of cast with Ross Taylor (5th from left) and director Freddie Carpenter (6th from left), *Goody Two Shoes*, Alhambra Theatre, Glasgow.**

1959

Black and white photographic print

BTC167/P/4

**4. Costume design for male dancer in the pantomime *Goody Two Shoes*, Alhambra Theatre, Glasgow.**

Peter Rice

1959

Gouache and ink wash, with fabric swatch

BTC167/P/4

**5. Costume designs for musicians (boy and girl dancers) in the pantomime *Goody Two Shoes*, Alhambra Theatre, Glasgow.**

Peter Rice

1959

Gouache with pen and pencil annotations

BTC167/P/4

## **Panel 2: Thomas Baptiste (1929-2018)**

Thomas Baptiste, a talented actor and singer, was born in British Guiana (now Guyana). He relocated to Britain in the late 1940s, where he pursued music studies at Morley College in Lambeth, followed by scholarships to the National School of Opera and the Royal Academy of Music. Baptiste became a member of Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop during its early years.

Baptiste's stage career flourished when in 1956 he appeared in Noël Coward's *Nude with Violin*. He performed alongside John Gielgud, Patience Collier, and Kathleen Harrison, first in Dublin and later in London's West End.

In 1960, Baptiste played the role of Riley in the first professional production of Harold Pinter's *The Room* for which Baptiste was specifically cast. The production was adapted into an episode of ITV's Television Playhouse, which aired in October 1961. In 1963, Baptiste made history as the first Black actor to appear in *Coronation Street*, portraying a bus conductor who is wrongly dismissed after a racially charged incident with Len Fairclough. In 1978, Baptiste also portrayed the legendary Paul Robeson in *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?* at the Birmingham Rep – a role that reflected his deep admiration for Robeson.

A committed advocate for Black actors in Britain, Baptiste co-founded an advisory committee within the British Actors' Equity Association during the 1960s to address the challenges faced by Black performers. In a 1992 interview, he reflected on the ongoing struggles for Black actors, noting that the difficulties in launching their careers had only intensified over the previous four decades.

The Theatre Collection acquired the Thomas Baptiste Archive in 2023.

## **Case 2**

### **Top shelf (left to right)**

The material on this shelf relates to Thomas Baptiste's work with Equity.

#### **6. First part of Thomas Baptiste's interview with *Red Letters* on the topic of integrated casting.**

Undated  
Print  
BTC354/19

#### **7. Portrait photograph of Thomas Baptiste .**

c.1950s  
Black and white photographic print  
BTC354/13

#### **8. Production photograph featuring Thomas Baptiste (right) and Norman Beaton in *Remembrance* by Derek Walcott at the Tricycle Theatre, London.**

1991  
Black and white photographic print  
BTC354/13

#### **9. Press cutting from *The Stage and Television Today* regarding diversity in casting.**

08/12/1983  
Print

**10. Copy of *Black and White in Colour – Black People in British Television since 1936* from Thomas Baptiste's personal library.**

Jim Pines (editor), British Film Institute Publication/Bloomsbury  
1992  
Print  
BTC354/5

**Middle shelf (left to right)**

This material primarily focuses on Thomas Baptiste's early life and work as a singer.

**11. Thomas Baptiste's souvenir pamphlet from a trip to New York from when he was a young man.**

c.1940s-50s  
Print  
BTC354/3

**12. Snapshot of Thomas Baptiste In New York.**

c.1940s-50s  
Black and white photographic print  
BTC354/13

**13. Poster for a recital by Thomas Baptiste at the New Shakespeare Theatre, Liverpool.**

1958  
Print  
BTC354/13



**14. Programme for a recital by Thomas Baptiste under the auspices of the British Guiana Music Festival Committee.**

1958  
Print booklet  
BTC354/13

**15. Portrait photograph of Thomas Baptiste.**

c.1980s  
Black and white photographic print  
BTC354/3

**16. Flier for a Chamber Concert in the Holst Room at Morley College, London, featuring Thomas Baptiste as a baritone singer.**

1958  
Typed on coloured paper  
BTC354/13

**17. Photograph of Thomas Baptiste leaning on a piano.**

c.1950s  
Colour photographic print  
BTC354/13

**18. Letter addressed to Thomas Baptiste from the Church of England Children's Society, asking if he would sing at a concert in aid of the charity.**

1965  
Typed on headed notepaper  
BTC354/13

### **Bottom shelf (left to right)**

This material centres on Thomas Baptiste's acting career.

#### **19. Programme for *Twelfth Night* at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, in which Thomas Baptiste played the character of 'Duke Orsino'.**

1989

Print booklet

BTC354/23

#### **20. Items relating to Thomas Baptiste's performance as Riley in Harold Pinter's *The Room* (left to right):**

##### **First night programme for performance at the Royal Court Theatre, London.**

1958

Print booklet

BTC354/23

##### **Photograph of the front of the Royal Court Theatre.**

1958

Colour photographic print

BTC354/23

##### **Letter from Harold Pinter to Thomas Baptiste regarding the script and rehearsals.**

1959

Typed on notepaper

BTC354/23

We are very grateful to the Friends of the Theatre Collection who purchased the items relating to *The Room*, for our Thomas Baptiste Archive.

**21. Items relating to Thomas Baptiste's production, *Talk Shop* (left to right):**

**Programme for *Talk Shop* at the Institute of Contemporary Art and Drum Arts Centre, London as part of a double bill with Michael Abbensetts' *Sweet Talk*.**

1975  
Typed folded leaflet  
BTC354/13

**Production photographs of *Talk Shop*, Institute of Contemporary Art and Drum Arts Centre, London.**

1975  
Black and white photographic prints  
BTC354/13

**Wall space next to Case 2**

**22. Poster for *A Service by Candlelight* at Emmanuel Church, Lyncroft Gardens, London, featuring Thomas Baptiste.**

c.1950s  
Print  
BTC354/13

## **Back wall**

### **23. Drawing of Mary Martin as Peter Pan, gifted to Ross Taylor by Mary Martin.**

Ronald Thomson  
Pencil with pen and pencil annotations  
1988

Mary Martin played Peter Pan in the musical of the same name on Broadway. The show opened at the Winter Garden Theatre in 1954 and Martin was awarded a Tony Award for her performance.

## **Stairwell**

### **24. Costume designs for the characters 'Polly', 'Rosie', 'Lizzie', Freda' and 'Jessie' in *Strike a Light*, Piccadilly Theatre, London.**

Robin Pay  
Watercolour, gouache and pencil with assorted fabric swatches and pencil annotations  
c.1966  
BTC334/6/1

*Strike a Light* was a musical based on the story of the 1888 strike by women and girls working for the Bryant and May match firm, who were demanding better pay and working conditions. The show was co-directed and choreographed by Ross Taylor.

### **Panel 3: Robert Stansbury miniature stage lighting**

The items on display once belonged to Robert Stansbury, who taught stage lighting to theatre design students at Wimbledon College of Art from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s.

Before the advent of computer technology, designing and testing stage lighting on a full scale was a difficult task. For Stansbury, creating functional miniature stage lighting for use with set models provided the ideal solution. Subsequently, Stansbury sold his miniature stage lighting to clients across the country.

The display includes examples of his equipment: tiny glass bulbs, hanging lamps, and a standing spotlight. Other photos illustrate the effectiveness of the lighting—Stansbury crafted models of actors from wire and fabric to replicate the figures in each scene.

The Theatre Collection was given Robert Stansbury's archive in two donations. The first accession was donated by Keith McLaren, a former technical theatre worker who had purchased Stansbury's miniature lighting equipment from a former general manager of the Everyman Theatre in Cheltenham.

Keith kindly agreed to visit the Theatre Collection to demonstrate how the equipment worked. This was documented and a blog about this process was posted by the Theatre Collection and can be read on our website at

<https://theatrecollecion.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/2023/02/20/miniature-stage-lighting-demonstration/>

The second accession came as a wonderful surprise – one year after posting the blog about Keith's visit we were contacted by Robert Stansbury's daughter who generously donated some more of her father's material.

### **Case 3**

#### **25. Photograph of Robert Stansbury with a set model.**

c.1950s  
Black and white photographic print  
BTC334/6/1

#### **26. Miniature light equipment (left to right): bulbs, standing floodlight and hanging lights.**

c.1950s  
Metal and glass  
BTC334/3/4/3, BTC334/3/4/6, BTC334/6/2

#### **27. Photographs of maquettes posed within a set model rigged with miniature lighting.**

c.1950s  
Black and white photographic prints  
BTC334/6/1

### **Screen above Case 3**

#### **28. Photographs of Keith McLaren, the initial depositor of the miniature stage lighting, visiting the Theatre Collection to demonstrate how the equipment worked and could be used.**

2023  
Digital images  
BTC334

## **Gallery 2**

### **Panel 4: Forkbeard Fantasy**

Forkbeard Fantasy was established by Tim and Chris Britton in 1974. They were later joined by Penny Saunders, creator and designer, and Ed Jobling, technician and actor. Forkbeard's work used absurdist theatre to deal with serious topics, performing in a range of venues as well as creating street theatre, exhibitions and installations, incorporating unusual and imaginative props and costumes.

The items on display come from a 1997 production called *The Barbers of Surreal*, a satire looking at the extremes of the cosmetic industry. The set design (28) shows the barber shop in which genetic engineering was used to grow 'organic' hairstyles. The window was a projection screen which enabled those on stage to interact with others on film, thus 'breaking the celluloid divide' (a Forkbeard speciality).

*The Barbers of Surreal* featured a seven-foot tall, chain-smoking rabbit who had recently escaped from a laboratory. He was played by either Tim or Chris at various points. Our display case is not large enough to show the whole, seven-foot costume, but the head and designs are shown here, along with a preliminary explanation of the rabbit's character.

The Theatre Collection acquired this archive in 2023, and work has now begun to catalogue its contents.

## **Left hand wall**

### **29. Set design and notes for *The Barbers of Surreal*.**

1997

Pencil and crayon with annotations

2023/43

## **Screen**

### **30. *The Barbers of Surreal* video (extract).**

1997

2023/43

*The Barbers of Surreal* was a satire about genetic engineering. The play included references to *Alice in Wonderland*, with the rabbit acting both as the White Rabbit and as an example of the extremes of genetic engineering.

The rabbit costume is designed for a human to fit inside, even though the character costume is seven feet tall. Penny Saunders, the designer, had a lot of trouble making the rabbit's knees look realistic, since its knees are in a different place to human knees. The solution was to make the rabbit larger than human size to make sure the knees were in the right place.

## **Costume case**

### **31. Rabbit costume (head) for *The Barbers of Surreal*.**

1996

Penny Saunders

Artificial fur, wadding, satin lining and latex

2023/43



### **32. Scale pattern pieces for Rabbit costume**

1996

Penny Saunders

Paper with pen annotations, mounted on card

## **Wall**

These designs continue the display of items from the Ross Taylor Archive, and are representative of his involvement with variety stage acts in Britain in the 1960s-70s.

### **33. Costume design for Eartha Kitt, for *Stars in Your Eyes*, at the Opera House, Manchester.**

1971

Berkeley Sutcliffe

Gouache and silver glitter with pencil annotations

BTC167/P/3

### **34. Costume design for Eartha Kitt, for *Stars in Your Eyes*, at the Opera House, Manchester.**

1971

Berkley Sutcliffe

Watercolour, pen and pencil

BTC167/P/3

*Stars in Your Eyes* was a variety show produced by Ross Taylor. These designs by Berkley Sutcliffe are for Eartha Kitt, who guest starred as a co-host to Jimmy Tarbuck on the 30th December 1971. Other performers included Peter Gorden and his dancers, Kenny Lynch, The Mistins, The Baker Twins and The Tarby Singers and Dancers.

**35-37. Costume designs for dancers in the Paul Raymond spectacle *Royalty Folies*, at the New Theatre, Kingsway, London.**

1974

Cynthia Tingey

Pen, watercolour and gouache

BTC167/P/3

*Royalty Folies* was produced and directed by Ross Taylor.



Cover Illustration: Costume Design by Cynthia Tingey for a dancer in *Royalty Folies*, directed by Ross Taylor at the New Theatre, Kingsway, London, 1974.

University of Bristol Theatre Collection,  
Vandyck Building, 21 Park Row, Bristol BS1 5LT  
Tel: 0117 331 5045

Email: [theatre-collection@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:theatre-collection@bristol.ac.uk)  
Website: [www.bristol.ac.uk/theatrecollection](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/theatrecollection)

