75 years of the Theatre Collection

10 October 2026 – Spring 2027



Exhibition guide

University of BRISTOL
Theatre Collection

Celebrating
75 years of the Theatre Collection

The University of Bristol Theatre Collection was founded in 1951 as an integral part of the recently established Department of Drama, which was the first of its kind within a British university. The Theatre Collection was *'designed to be a working collection… to serve scholars and practising theatre artists alike'* and to support the development of Theatre as an academic discipline. It has since grown to become one of the world's leading collections relating to the history of British theatre and live art, always as a *working collection* supporting learning, research and engagement, both within and beyond the university. This exhibition, marking the Theatre Collection's 75th anniversary, highlights items from the collections and the ways in which we continue to work with them.

Today, the Theatre Collection cares for over 500 separate collections stored across 5 kilometres of shelving and 100 terabytes of data. It has been awarded Accredited Museum and Accredited Archive status, and in 2020 the collections were officially 'Designated Outstanding' by Arts Council England in recognition of their cultural importance and for *'what the artform can tell us about wider society'.* The designation also recognised the *'effectiveness of the research, innovation and partnership work'* undertaken by the Theatre Collection.

The items on display reveal the creative processes and broader cultural contexts of making theatre and performance; everything from script writing, set and costume design, rehearsal schedules, stage management, and publicity through to the performance itself.

We hope you enjoy the exhibition.

Exhibition Room 1

WALLS

11. Portrait of Charles [Edmund?] Kean as King Lear by William Etty, early C19th

Purchased in 1957 by the University for the Theatre Collection as its first 'prestige' item with the aim of raising the Theatre Collection's profile and attracting public attention.

26. Costume design for *Tess,* 'Walking Dress' (Acts II and III), Bristol Old Vic Company, Guy Sheppard, 1946

Written by Ronald Gow the play is based on the novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy.

27. Set design for the Bristol Old Vic Company's production of *Tess,* 1946

36. Dorothy Jordan as Cora in *Pizarro,* by Samuel de Wilde, C18th

37. Ben Jonson, portrait by Abraham van Blyenberch, c.1617

This oil painting of English playwright, poet and actor, Ben Jonson is one of the oldest items cared for at the Theatre Collection. A contemporary of William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson is known for his satirical plays such as *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*. The painting originally arrived with a large tear, and was conserved with the support of the Friends of the Theatre Collection.

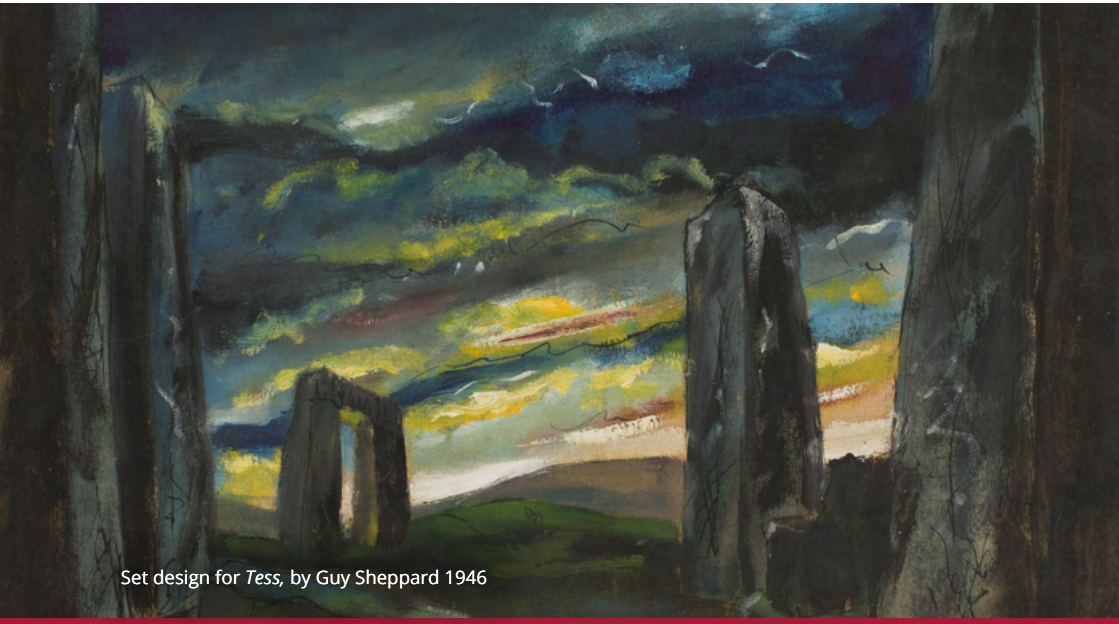
85. Costume design for Eurydice in Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underground,* by Percy Anderson, 1911

Purchased for the Theatre Collection by the Friends Association.

Monitor

Slideshow of Theatre Collection highlights

Further selected highlights from the Theatre Collection appear on the sequence of images displayed on the monitor.



Set design for *Tess,* by Guy Sheppard 1946



Dorothy Jordan as Cora in *Pizarro,* by Samuel de Wilde, C18th

CASE 1

Establishing the Theatre Collection and a new Studio Theatre

In 1947, Glynne Wickham founded a Department of Drama at the University of Bristol. It was the first university in the United Kingdom to offer Drama as a degree-level subject.

Four years later, at Wickham's instigation, the Rockefeller Foundation provided funding to support the Department's work, including the establishment of a Theatre Collection. From its inception, Wickham intended it to be a 'working collection', designed 'to serve scholars and practising theatre artists alike'.

This ethos remains central to the Theatre Collection's mission today: 'to curate a world-class collection relating to the history of British theatre and live art, and their creative and cultural contexts.'

1. Department of Drama prospectus, 1969

The close connection between the Department of Drama and the Theatre Collection is evidenced within this early prospectus, which notes that the Department 'has built up a special Theatre Collection of original designs, posters, programmes, photographs, and other graphic material illustrating the history of the theatre…'

The Theatre Collection continues to work closely with the Department of Theatre, regularly hosting seminars and workshops for undergraduate and postgraduate students as part of the taught curriculum. The Theatre Collection also regularly welcomes students from other schools and departments in the University, as well as other institutions, including the University of the West of England and the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School, for archive-based workshops and individual research.

2. Theatre Collection Reading Room, early 1970s

Scholars, students, creative practitioners and independent researchers are amongst those we welcome to the Reading Rooms to see items from the Collection. The Reading Room in this photograph is from when the Theatre Collection was located at 29 Park Row, on the corner of Woodland Road. There are now three Reading Rooms, reflecting significant growth in teaching and research and the increased use of the collections. In 2015/16 we recorded 723 Reading Room visits; in 2025/26 it was 2,348.

3. 10th anniversary of the founding of the Friends of the Theatre Collection, 1986

Ann Brooke Barnett (right) and Christopher Robinson (left) - the Theatre Collection's first Archivists, known professionally as 'Keepers', with actress Claire Bloom.

Founded in 1976, the Friends Association raises public awareness of the Collection and its importance, while strengthening links with cultural, theatrical and educational organisations.

THE STUDIO THEATRE AND PINTER'S *THE ROOM*

The Rockefeller Foundation also supported the creation of a Studio Theatre in the Wills Building. It was conceived by scholar and theatre designer Richard Southern as a highly adaptable platform for the work of 'aspiring young playwrights', including the premiere of Harold Pinter's first play, *The Room.*

Henry Woolf, the University of Bristol student who produced the play, had asked Pinter to write it so he could fulfil requirements for his postgraduate degree in theatre direction. Pinter would go on to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005.

4. Richard Southern explaining models of his design for the Studio Theatre to university staff, 1950s

Richard Southern (left), with technical expert, John Lavender; Head of Department, Glynne Wickham; University Bursar, Col. Singer, and Professor James from the Department of English.

Southern was a theatre technician, designer, historian, collector and lecturer who had both a scholarly interest in theatre history and professional expertise in theatre architecture. He went on to hold a lectureship in theatre architecture and scenic design at Bristol until his retirement in 1969. His archive is a testament to his contribution and commitment to theatre studies and reveals how his practical, scholarly and collecting activities established significant research resources that continue to support the Theatre Collection's mission today.

5. Programme for *The Room,* 15–16 May, Department of Drama Studio Theatre, 1957

6. Production photograph for *The Room,* Department of Drama Studio Theatre, 1957

7. Photograph of Thomas Baptiste, c.1950s

Thomas Baptiste was a Guyanese-born British actor and singer who moved to Britain in the late 1940s, studying at the National School of Opera and the Royal Academy of Music. He became known for his acting roles including those in Noël Coward's *Nude with Violin* (1956), Pinter's *The Room* (1960) and as the first Black character on *Coronation Street* (1963).

8. Thomas Baptiste's personal copy of *The Birthday Party and Other Plays,* including *The Room,* signed by Harold Pinter

Generously purchased by the Friends of the University of Bristol Theatre Collection.

9. Letter to Thomas Baptiste from Harold Pinter, 28 December 1959

In 1960, *The Room* was restaged at the Hampstead Theatre Club and subsequently at the Royal Court Theatre. The following year, it was broadcast as an episode of ITV's *Television Playhouse.* Pinter purposefully sought out actor Thomas Baptiste for the role of Riley - a blind man who arrives to deliver a mysterious message after supposedly waiting in the basement throughout the play.

10. Thomas Baptiste's personal photograph of The Royal Court Theatre, 1960

Piran Round

Perranporth Cornwall

Souvenir Programme

GW/AC/419/1



July 1969

Programme for *The Cornish Ordinalia*, 1969

CASE 2

Piran Round, London Old Vic, Bristol Old Vic and Herbert Beerbohm Tree

THE CORNISH ORDINALIA

The Cornish Ordinalia consists of three plays: *The Creation of the World,* the *Passion of Christ,* and the *Resurrection of our Lord.* Known as 'Mystery Plays' and telling Biblical stories, they date from the 14th century and are among the oldest surviving plays in Great Britain. Designed to be staged in an amphitheatre, they were intended to be performed by a single community over a three-day period.

Bristol University Department of Drama Director Glynne Wickham produced *The Cornish Ordinalia* at the Piran Round amphitheatre in Cornwall to mark the 21st anniversary of the Department. The production revived three medieval Cornish mystery plays, the first time the plays had been performed at the Piran Round Amphitheatre in over 300 years. For Wickham, the revival was the realisation of a long-held ambition and a fitting way to celebrate the Department of Drama's 'coming of age'.



Devil from *The Cornish Ordinalia,* 1969

12. Scrapbook featuring material relating to *The Cornish Ordinalia,* 1969

The scrapbook was donated by Jan Wells (née Rhodes), a student at Bristol from 1967-1970. Jan performed the roles of 'Eve' and 'Mary'. The image on the top left features the first of the mystery plays, *The Creation of the World,* in which you can see God's crown.

13. Two photographs of *The Cornish Ordinalia*, 1969

14. Programme and leaflet for
15. *The Cornish Ordinalia* performed by the Bristol Department of Drama at the Piran Round Amphitheatre, Cornwall 7–20 July 1969

16. Crown for the character of 'God' from *The Cornish Ordinalia,* 1969

Costumes and props from productions are created for use on stage rather than with long-term preservation in mind. As a result, objects often arrive at the Theatre Collection showing signs of wear, alteration, damage and may not always survive in their original form. There may originally have been a third crown at the top of the egg shape, which is now missing.

17. Photographs of devils from *The Cornish Ordinalia,* 1969

In the 1969 staging, the mouth of Hell - complete with grotesquely costumed devils - was at ground level and on the opposite side of the amphitheatre to Heaven, a raised structure where God's throne was surrounded by angels.

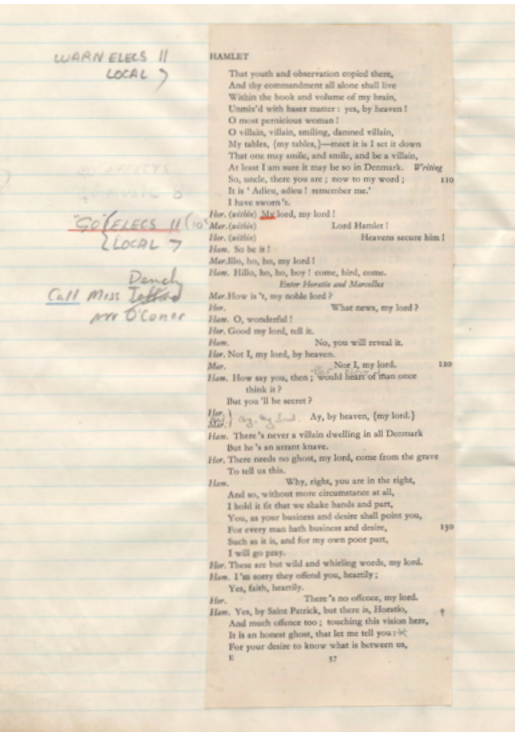


Crown for the character of ‘God’ from *The Cornish Ordinalia,* 1969

LONDON OLD VIC

Originally founded as the Royal Coburg Theatre in 1818, the Old Vic in London underwent many name changes in the C19th, including the Royal Victoria Theatre and the Royal Victoria Hall Coffee Tavern – the latter influenced by the management of social reformer Emma Cons. After Cons' death in 1912, the running of the theatre was continued by her niece Lilian Baylis, who established it as a home for Shakespeare productions.

In the 1980s, the Theatre Collection acquired the Old Vic archive, one of the most significant accessions of that decade. Documenting the theatre's history from its origins through to the 1960s when it became the first home of the National Theatre, the archive has become an important resource for academic researchers and the cultural and creative industries.



Prompt book for the Old Vic Company production of *Hamlet,* 1957

18. Lilian Baylis in academic ceremonial robes, c.1920–1930s. Photograph by Angus McBean

Baylis was awarded an honorary Masters degree from Oxford University in 1924 and frequently chose to wear her academic gown for official photographs.

19. Tortoiseshell glasses belonging to Lilian Baylis, c.1920–1930s, and a miniature portrait of Emma Cons, early C19th

The miniature portrait was owned by Lilian Baylis

20. Judi Dench as Ophelia in *Hamlet,* Old Vic Theatre, 1957. Photograph by Angus McBean

21. Prompt book for the Old Vic Company production of *Hamlet,* 1957

Dame Judi Dench made her professional stage debut, aged 22, in this production. Barbara Jefford was originally cast as Ophelia but was taken ill early in the rehearsal process. Dench had auditioned for the company and was brought in to play the role for its initial tour and London production. The prompt book is the working text for the production and includes text cuts and alterations, sound and lighting cues and actor calls. The changed casting is reflected in the pencilled annotation where 'Call Miss Jefford' has been crossed through and replaced with 'Call Miss Dench'.

BRISTOL OLD VIC

The relationship between the University and Bristol Old Vic is one of the most enduring creative industry partnerships within the city. In 1946 the Theatre Royal on King Street became home to the newly formed Bristol Old Vic Company and University Vice-Chancellor Sir Philip Morris became its Chair – a post he held until 1971.

In 1960 Bristol Old Vic placed their archive on long-term loan to the Theatre Collection. Fully catalogued by the Theatre Collection as part of Bristol Old Vic's 250th anniversary heritage project, the archive provides an incredible insight into the working life of the theatre, capturing the efforts of designers and makers, actors, writers and directors, and those managing the theatre as a business at the heart of Bristol's cultural life.



Peter O'Toole and Wendy Williams in *Hamlet,* 1958. Photographer Desmond Tripp

22. Photograph of cast members in *An Inspector Calls,* Bristol Old Vic, 1946

Left to right: Kenneth Connor as Eric Birling, Meriel Moore as Mrs Birling, John Bailey as Gerald Croft, Rosalie Crutchley as Sheila Birling and Norman Claridge as Mr Birling.

23. Letter from J.B Priestly to Hugh Hunt, 24 October, 1946

Priestley's letter to the theatre's artistic director Hugh Hunt shares unique information about the author's intentions for how the play should be staged, including casting advice and tips for the actor playing Inspector Goole to get into character.

24. Peter O'Toole as Hamlet, and Wendy Williams as Ophelia in *Hamlet,* Bristol Old Vic, 1958. Photograph by Desmond Tripp

Peter O'Toole joined the Bristol Old Vic company between 1956 and 1958, appearing in productions from Shakespearean plays to pantomime, as captured by resident photographer Desmond Tripp.

25. Bristol Old Vic Season Programme, 1946–7

In its first season, Bristol Old Vic Theatre staged *An Inspector Calls* by J.B Priestly and *Tess,* a new adaptation of Thomas Hardy's novel, T*ess of the D'Urbervilles.*

THE BUSINESS ARCHIVES OF HERBERT BEERBOHM TREE

In 1972, with the assistance of a grant from the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Theatre Collection was able to purchase Herbert Beerbohm Tree's archive of over 10,000 items. It covers Tree's management of the Haymarket Theatre and Her/His Majesty's Theatre in London, from 1897 until his death in 1917.

The archive's arrival widened the research audience for the Theatre Collection, attracting a greater number of international scholars, at a time when theatre history research was becoming much more engaged with the business practices of theatres.



Costume for Oberon, 1900

28. Photographic portraits of Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Langfier Ltd., 1915

29. Printing Order Book, 1919–1921

Contains detailed accounts and receipts for orders, including playbills and programmes.

30. Letter to King Edward from Herbert Beerbohm Tree and other theatre managers, 1912

Herbert Beerbohm Tree and other theatre managers petitioned the King for greater theatre censorship to prevent the presentation of 'undesirable plays', and the potential disruption to performances which would 'render the conduct of theatres most irksome'.

31. Costume design by Percy Anderson for Titania (Mrs Tree) in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* Her Majesty's Theatre, 1900

32. Prompt book for *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* 1900

33. Prop list for *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* 1900

Tree continued the Victorian theatrical trend for spectacular and lavish productions of Shakespeare's plays. In this production, staged at Her Majesty's Theatre, the properties or 'props' included a range of items for the woodland setting – including real rabbits!

34. Costume design by Percy Anderson for Oberon (Julia Neilson) in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* Her Majesty's Theatre, 1900

35. Souvenir programme for *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* Her Majesty's Theatre, 1900

CASE 3

Mander & Mitchenson – Doubling our size and impact

In 2011, the Theatre Collection undertook its largest acquisition, the Mander & Mitchenson Collection. The collection is the result of the lifetimes' work of Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, who collected archives and ephemera of Britain's theatrical history, including 1,400 reference boxes covering theatre venues, performers and writers. To facilitate the transfer, the University funded the refurbishment of a large, specialised off-site store at Langford to house the expanded collections. Mander & Mitchenson has been transformative in terms of the quality and richness of the Theatre Collection's holdings and is the Theatre Collection's most requested collection by researchers and students.



38. **Laurence Olivier in**
39. ***The Entertainer,* 1957**

Gloves worn by Laurence Olivier in *The Entertainer* at the Royal Court Theatre in 1957. Written by John Osborne, the play starred Olivier as Archie Rice – a failing, washed-up music hall performer, whose downfall was thought to symbolise the decline of postwar Britain. The gloves were autographed by Olivier.

40. **Programme for *London Calling!* Duke of York's Theatre, London, 1923**

This programme is one of many in the Mander & Mitchenson collection annotated by John Gielgud (later Sir John Gielgud, one of the most important British actors of the C20th). He notes where he sat ('Alone in the Pit') and provides detailed, and sometimes harsh, critiques of the productions.

41. **Prop 'Bible' used in a production of *Hamlet* c.1890–1901**

Used by actress Constance Benson in her portrayal of Ophelia – very possibly in one of the productions staged by her husband Frank R. Benson – the book is in fact a heavily annotated edition of the religious tract, Satan's *Fiery Darts Quenched* dating from 1643. As such it is one of the oldest items in the Theatre Collection.

42. **Handbag used by Vivien Leigh in *A Streetcar Named Desire,* 1949, together with photograph by Angus McBean**

Vivien Leigh starred as Blanche DuBois in this production at London's Aldwych Theatre. Directed by her then husband, Laurence Olivier, the play was well received and ultimately led to the film adaptation, in which Leigh reprised her role alongside Marlon Brando.

Exhibition Room 2

Innovation & Impact

The 1990s and 2000s saw the Theatre Collection expand its collecting remit to encompass more radical practice, including archives of live art, and to extend its work with creative industry partners. This reflected developments in teaching and research, including the influential MA in Cultural Performance at the University of Bristol (delivered in partnership with performance company Welfare State International), and the five-year research project *Practice as Research in Performance.*

The acquisition of the archives of the prestigious National Review of Live Art festival was accompanied by Arts and Humanities Research Council funding for research projects. This supported the development of expertise in the long-term preservation of and access to digitised audio-visual content. An award from the Wellcome Trust enabled the cataloguing and conservation of the archive of pioneering artist Franko B, known for his body-based performances of extreme endurance.

Generous bequests made possible the establishment of two annual awards for industry professionals – the Kevin Elyot Award for new writing and the Forkbeard Fantasy Award for new performance – supporting creative engagement with the Theatre Collection's archives and inspiring new work.

The Theatre Collection was also shortlisted for *Best Use of Digital* at the Museums + Heritage Awards in 2023 for its collaborative project *Making A Scene,* an educational 'workshop in a box' that uses Augmented Reality to explore the behind-the-scenes roles in theatre. *Making A Scene* was funded by UK Research and Innovation and delivered in partnership with Bristol Old Vic and Bristol technology company Zubr.

WALLS

43. Monitor: Compilation of video clips from the collections.

This short compilation of video clips gives a glimpse into our extensive collections of audio-visual recordings. Many of these recordings are on obsolete formats and have required digitisation for preservation and access.

The Wild Wigglers,
featuring Liz Aggiss, Ian Smith and Neil Butler, 1984.
1 min 22 secs

Milk and Blood,
Franko B, 2015.
Performed at Toynbee Studios.
Filmed by Stefano Teodori.
1 min 5 secs

The Travels of Lancelot Quail (Silent),
Welfare State International, 1972.
32 secs

Offshore Rig,
Bow Gamelan Ensemble, 1987.
1 min 51 secs

Invasion of the Bloopies,
Forkbeard Fantasy, 1991.
1 min 23 secs



Rough – A Passion, by Bodies in Flight, 1992

55. *Eyes on Stalks, not Bums on Seats*, Welfare State International, c.1982

John Fox, one of the artistic directors of Welfare State International used this slogan as a call to participatory, imaginative action in the arts. 'May your eyes wobble in their sockets, your creative juices boil over and your bum never ache'.

56. *Unfurl* by Clare Thornton, 2011. Photograph by Zoe Childerley

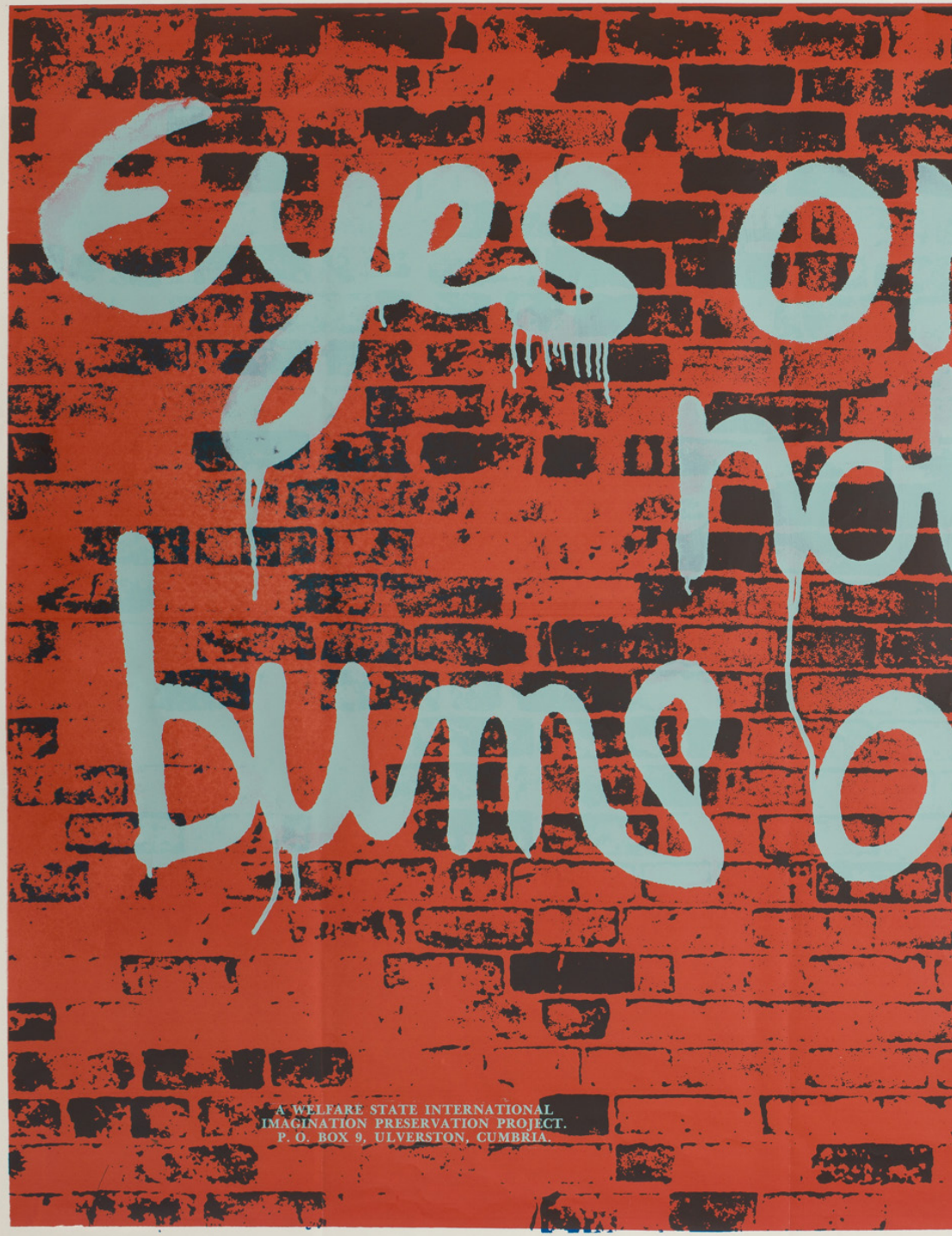
Supported by the Friends of the Theatre Collection, Clare Thornton was the Theatre Collection's inaugural artist-in-residence in 2011, which led to the performance and installation *Unfurl* at the Red Lodge Museum. *Unfurl* explored the aesthetic and philosophical concept of the fold, a central motif in Thornton's work.

57. *Rough – A Passion,* by Bodies in Flight, 1992. Photography by Ed Dimsdale

Bodies in Flight are a performance company led by Emeritus Professor of Performance, Simon Jones. *Rough – A Passion* featured a 22-year-old Simon Pegg who had graduated from his Theatre, Film and Television course at the University of Bristol the previous year.

58. Promotional postcards from *How to Shop, Cook Dems* and *Displaying the Sunday Dinner* by Bobby Baker c.1990s. Photographs by Andrew Whittuck

This material relating to the multi-disciplinary artist, Bobby Baker is from The Record of Live Art Practice archive, a unique research resource of over 200,000 records of marketing, publicity and press relating to live/performance art from the 1990s and 2000s.



Eyes on Stalks, not Bums on Seats, Welfare State International, c. 1982


stalks
seats
SUPPORTED BY THE ARTS COUNCIL
OF GREAT BRITAIN



Mask for a Muse, by Oliver Messel, 1925

TALL CASE

Off Stage: Writers, Designers and the broader cultural contexts

44. Illustrations for *Delightful Food,* by Oliver Messel, 1957

Oliver Messel was a celebrated theatre, ballet and film designer of the first half of the twentieth century, who was also an architect, interior designer and illustrator – creating these playful illustrations for the publication, *Delightful Food.*

45. *Delightful Food* by Marjorie Salter and Adrianne Allen Whitney, 1957

46. *Mask for a Muse,* by Oliver Messel, 1925

This papier-mâché mask was created by Oliver Messel for *Zéphire et Flore* – a ballet choreographed by Léonide Massine and performed at Ballets Russes Monte Carlo in Paris.



Bloopie, Forkbeard Fantasy, 1991

47. *Bloopie,* Forkbeard Fantasy, 1991 (with miniature 3D printed Bloopie, 2026)

A prop from Forkbeard Fantasy's *Invasion of the Bloopies,* a 'nightmare comedy about consumerism gone mad'. In the summer of 2026, a group of MA Immersive Arts students created a temporary exhibition in which they combined props and costumes from the Forkbeard Fantasy archive with Virtual Reality. Inspired by the idea of *Bloopies* queueing behind anyone who stood still, they created a series of 3D printed *Bloopies* to line up behind the original *Bloopie* as part of the exhibition.

48. Letter from Christopher Milne (aka Christopher Robin) to Laurence Irving, together with photographs and press cutting, 1981

Sometimes, quite unexpected items are found amongst the archives. Amongst the family papers of the Irvings, is this letter from Christopher Milne to the theatre designer and historian, Laurence Henry Irving. In 1926, Laurence had been invited to design sets for the musical revue *Vaudeville Vanities,* and he struck up a friendship with the writer of one of the numbers, A.A. Milne. As both men had young families of about the same age, Laurence organised a trip for their children to London Zoo, the highlight of which was the feeding of Winnie, a Canadian Black bear, who had been brought to the UK as a regimental mascot for a Canadian regiment during the First World War, and who had remained in the care of London Zoo. Milne's young son Christopher, after some initial reservations, became fascinated by Winnie and, as the letter reveals, this interaction inspired Milne to create his fictional bear, Winnie-the-Pooh.

49. Kevin Elyot's Olivier Award for Best New Comedy, 1995

My Night with Reg won multiple awards, including the Olivier Award for Best New Comedy and the Evening Standard Award for Best Comedy. Kevin Elyot was a British playwright, screenwriter and actor whose breakthrough came in 1994 with *My Night with Reg*.

50. Kevin Elyot's notebooks for *My Night with Reg,* 1990s

In 2016, the Kevin Elyot Award was established as an annual award given to support a writer-in-residence at the University of Bristol Theatre Collection. It is given in memory of Kevin Elyot – an alumnus of the University of Bristol Drama Department – and the influence he has had on writing and the arts. The award is generously funded by an endowment given to the University by members of Kevin's family.

51. Set model part for *Cinderella,* designed by John Elvery for the Nottingham Playhouse, 1994

John Elvery was a theatre designer who spent much of his career in Bristol. He was Head of Design at Bristol Old Vic for over a decade and taught at Bristol Old Vic Theatre School.



Hand-bells used in *The Bells,* 1871

52. Sketchbook of proposed arrangements of props for John Aubrey's *Brief Lives,* designed by Julia Trevelyan Oman, together with photograph of the finished set, 1966/7

Julia Trevelyan Oman CBE was one of the most celebrated theatre, television, ballet and opera designers of the second half of the twentieth century. Her personal archive covers her entire career and includes her original designs with research files, technical drawings, plans and other material.

53. Costume Design for King Oak, *Babes in the Wood* at Bristol Old Vic by Sue Mayes, 2000

The production archives, costume designs and set models from *Babes in the Wood* were selected for digitisation so that they could be used as facsimiles within the 'workshop in a box' project, *Making A Scene,* created in collaboration with Bristol Old Vic and Bristol technology company Zubr, that used Augmented Reality. *Making A Scene* has been used extensively in workshops with young people, both by Bristol Old Vic and the Theatre Collection.

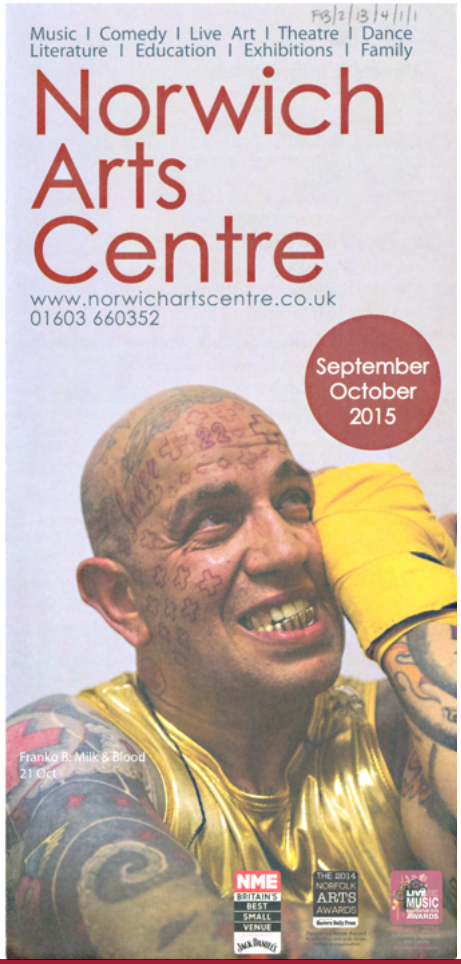
54. Hand-bells used in Henry Irving's production of *The Bells,* Lyceum Theatre, London, 1871

The Bells was the play that cemented Henry Irving's reputation as an actor. These handbells would have been used in the wings of the stage to create the sound of sledge bells.

CASE WITH DRAWERS

Radical performance and live art archives

In 2005, the 'Live Art Archives' transferred to the Theatre Collection from Nottingham Trent University to support evolving academic priorities within the Department. This major acquisition enabled a physical expansion of the Theatre Collection's strong rooms and a new role of Keeper: Live Art Archives, as well as direct involvement in a major research and audio-visual digital preservation project. It also expanded the Theatre Collection's collecting remit, opening new opportunities for academic research projects, funding and partnerships.



FRANKO B

Franko B is a visual artist, curator and teacher who rose to prominence in the 1990s due to his extraordinary body-based performances, performing throughout the UK and internationally. Creating work across performance, video, photography, painting, sculpture and mixed media for over 30 years, Franko B continues to earn international acclaim for his artistic practice.

In 2018, the Theatre Collection was awarded funding by the Wellcome Trust to catalogue, conserve and make accessible the Franko B archive in a project titled 'Challenging Archives'.

59. Boxing gloves and headguard worn by Franko B for *Milk & Blood*, 2015

Both the boxing gloves and headguard feature the number 22 and the cross motifs, which are important symbols in Franko B's work.

60. Leaflet advertising Franko B's performance, *Milk & Blood,* 2015

Franko B performed the endurance piece *Milk & Blood* multiple times between 2015-2018. Using the aesthetics of boxing, the piece explores themes of pain, ecstasy and masculinity, with the performance ultimately acting as a metaphor for social struggle and the ability to overcome adversity.

61. Dentures with gold metal detail on teeth that reads '22 LOVER', designed bespoke and worn by Franko B, c.2015

Leaflet advertising Franko B performance, 2015; photo by Hugo Glendinning

BOW GAMELAN

Bow Gamelan Ensemble was a trio of artists – Anne Bean, Paul Burwell and Richard Wilson - who started collaborating in the late 1970s, working together until 1990. Combining performance art, sculpture, soundmaking and light displays, they created immersive and theatrical experiences using unconventional materials such as scrap metal, explosives, barges and electric motors.





62. Bow Gamelan Ensemble firework scrapbook, c.1983–1990

Bow Gamelan Ensemble worked with a range of artists and groups, including pyrotechnicians such as Wilf Scott of Le Maitre fireworks and El Diablo in Mexico. Fireworks often featured in their performances to create aural and visual spectacle.

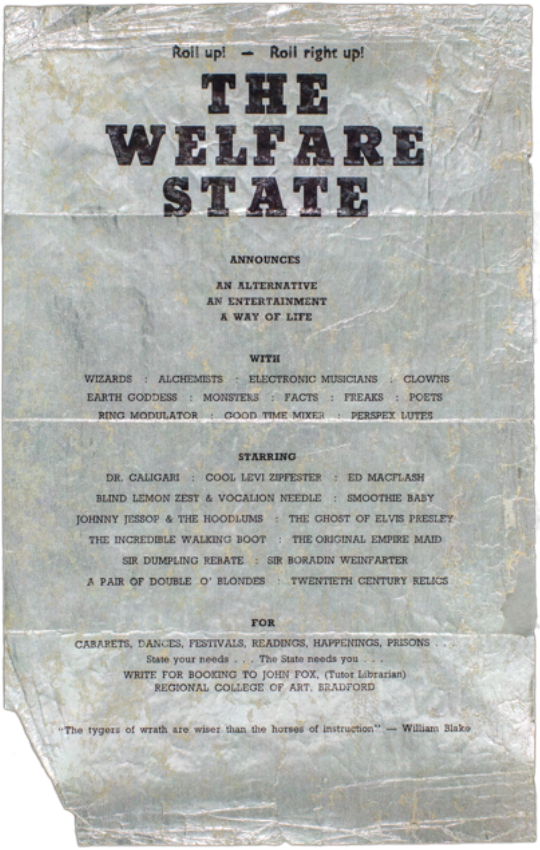
63. LP cover for Bow Gamelan Ensemble, *Great Noises that Fill the Air,* and photograph of *Damned Near Run Thing,* Jubilee Gardens, South Bank, London,1988

Bow Gamelan's album features abstract and experimental compositions created using unconventional materials, including scrap metal, lightbulbs and glass, alongside an eclectic array of unusual instruments, such as percussion tubes and even a pyrophone – an organ in which notes are produced by explosions.

DRAWER 1:

Welfare State International & The Dead Good Guides

Founded in 1968 by John Fox, Sue Gill, Roger Coleman and others, Welfare State International was a loose association of freelance artists, musicians, performers, sculptors, engineers, poets and pyrotechnicians. The group sought to bring art out of galleries, performance out of theatres and to provide communities with free access to art, which resulted in hundreds of site-specific, community-led productions made and performed in the UK and abroad between the late 1960s and early 2000s.



Promotional poster, Welfare State International, c.1970s

64. Promotional booklet for Welfare State International's *The Travels of Lancelot Quail,* 1972

The Travels of Lancelot Quail was a month-long pilgrimage performance from Glastonbury to Land's End, retracing a 150-mile Arthurian route with 25 company members travelling in decorated vehicles and staging performances in villages.

65. Promotional poster, Welfare State International, c.1970s

66. Two colour photographs from *The Travels of Lancelot Quail,* 1972

67. Weather Station at the Beach House, c.2010

John Fox and Sue Gill built their own home on the shores of Morecombe Bay called the Beach House. This photographic study was part of a research project with the University of Lancaster exploring the links between ecology, perception and performance.

68. *Pathological Optimists: A Guide to a Dead Good Garden* by Jude Hutchen, 2026

In Spring 2026, the Theatre Collection worked with artist and facilitator Jude Hutchen to collaborate with Alive Gardening Group based at Wellspring Settlement in Barton Hill, East Bristol. The group took part in creative workshops, creating a time capsule to celebrate their activities. This booklet is a memento of the project.

69. *The Dead Good Time Capsule Book* edited by G.P. Gill, 1999

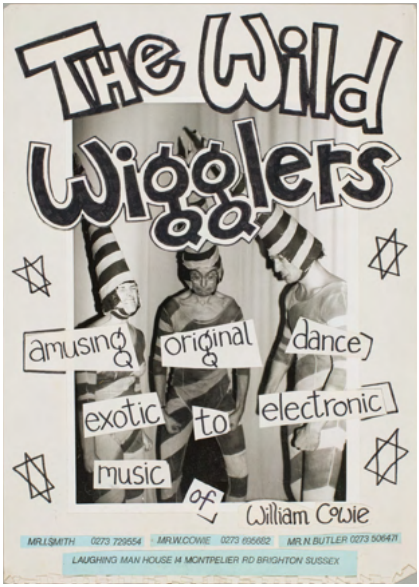
Founders of Welfare State International, John Fox and Sue Gill established the Dead Good Guides imprint in the 1990s to disseminate ideas about rites of passage through performance. This Dead Good Guide offers practical advice on planning and creating successful time capsules.

DRAWER 2:

Ian Smith / National Review of Live Art

Ian Smith was an artist, performer and artistic director, who founded acclaimed Glasgow-based performance company, Mischief La-Bas in 1992 with his wife, Angie Dight. A self-proclaimed 'Art Gangster' and mischief maker, Smith explored a multitude of art forms throughout his career including visual art, performance, street theatre, dance, comedy, cabaret, compering and music. For many years, Ian Smith was the Master of Ceremonies at the National Review of Live Art festival.

The National Review of Live Art was Britain's leading performance festival that ran between 1979 and 2010 in various forms. The archive primarily contains video footage of performances from 1986 to when the festival finished in 2010. Two projects funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council enabled the preservation of the content held on fragile video formats through the digitisation of 1,900 video tapes.



70. Poster for The *Wild Wigglers*, c.1985

Ian Smith was an original member of *The Wild Wigglers* (1982–1990), a cabaret troupe created with artist Liz Aggiss and choreographer and composer Billy Cowie. Inspired by punk pogo dance and music hall acts, the trio would wear yellow and black spiralled conical hats and full body leotards and perform a set of short dances.

71. Painting sketch of performance ideas and concepts for *Project X*, a large-scale performance installation by Mischief La-Bas c.1999

72. Ian Smith's artist passes and badges, collected from events and festivals he performed at from across the UK, 2000–2008

73. Booklet and ping pong ball from *Survival Tactics for the Anarchic Dancer: A Performance Lecture*, Liz Aggiss, 2010

Survival Tactics... was presented at the National of Review of Live Art in 2010. The solo performance was written, choreographed and performed by Professor Liz Aggiss and responded to the relationship between research and live practice.

74. National Review of Live Art 30th anniversary programme & box set publication, 2010

In 2010 the NRLA celebrated its 30th anniversary with a publication featuring essays, reflections and personal anecdotes from over 70 artists who had participated at the festival over its 30-year run, alongside 3 DVDs of highlights of festival performances.

75. National Review of Live Art programme, 1984



Painting sketch of performance ideas and concepts for *Project X* by Mischief La-Bas

FORKBEARD fantasy presents

INVASION OF THE BLOOPIES

Comic theatre, film, and eye-boggling invention



BARCLAYS new stages

London Dance and Performance Award 1990

Time Out

THIRD EYE CENTRE COMMISSION

A/1/68/5/1/1

DRAWER 3:

Forkbeard Fantasy

Forkbeard Fantasy was a theatre and performance art group active between 1974 and 2023. Brothers Chris and Tim Britton were joined by Penny Saunders and later by Ed Jobling. Their work was often surreal and silly, but with a serious message, often focusing on environmental issues, the impact of scientific discoveries, and the effects of capitalism.

After the company closed in 2023, Forkbeard Fantasy donated their archive to the Theatre Collection, and an annual award of £15,000 was established to support ongoing creative engagement with the archive by professional artists.

76. Poster for Forkbeard Fantasy's *Invasion of the Bloopies,* 1991

Invasion of the Bloopies was a play about capitalism, the brainwashing effect of modern media and the loss of personal identity.

77. *Invasion of the Bloopies,* Forkbeard Fantasy's *'The show in brief',* 1991

This summary was prepared by Tim Britton. As is normal for Tim's notes, it quickly turns into cartoons and drawings in place of words. In later years, Forkbeard Fantasy would come to rely on storyboards instead of scripts.

78. *Silicon birds* and *sketch,* Forkbeard Fantasy c.2010

In the 2010s, Forkbeard Fantasy began making animated videos and museum exhibits for various heritage organisations. The first of these was Durlston Nature Park, for whom they created a bird-spotting tour around the park. To allow people with visual impairments to also take part, they created textured versions of various birds that could be felt.

79. Planning notes for *The Barbers of Surreal,* Forkbeard Fantasy, 1998

Inspired by a retired laboratory rabbit, *The Barbers of Surreal* explored genetic engineering and other scientific experiments. The story revolved around a barber shop where the barbers could genetically engineer hair (with limited success). The play inspired 2025 Forkbeard Fantasy award winners, Naomi Smyth and China Blue Fish, to create a new performance about plastic surgery and the lengths people go to appear 'perfect'.

80. Poster for Forkbeard Fantasy's *The Barbers of Surreal,* 1998

DRAWER 4:

DV8 – The Cost of Living

Led by choreographer and Artistic Director Lloyd Newson since its inception, DV8 Physical Theatre was formed in 1986 by a group of independent dancers who were determined to be radical yet accessible.

81. Poster for stage production of *The Cost of Living,* Stadsschowburg, Amsterdam, 2003

82. Review of *The Cost of Living,* published in Xtra! Magazine, October 2004

83. Programme for London Disability Arts Festival, 2005 and Programme for the DV8 Physical Theatre Film retrospective at the Vienna International Dance Festival, 2014

84. Two photographic stills from the film production of *The Cost of Living,* 2004

Based on the stage production *The Cost of Living* (2003), the film was commissioned by Channel 4 and directed by Lloyd Newson. Shot on location in Cromer, Norfolk, the film follows two disillusioned street performers, Eddie and David, who struggle to find work and romance.

Upstairs

Friends of the Theatre Collection

This year our Friends Association celebrates its 50th anniversary.

Founded in 1976, the Friends are a community of volunteer theatre enthusiasts who play a vital role as ambassadors for the work of the Theatre Collection. They raise funds that help preserve the rich history of theatre and live performance in the archives.

The generosity and hard work of the Friends have enabled the Theatre Collection to acquire a number of key artworks, including costume designs, set designs and paintings, some of which are on display. They have purchased bespoke museum cases for our exhibition spaces and have supported conservation and cataloguing projects. The Friends have also undertaken oral history interviews with a range of theatre practitioners and participated in the Theatre Collection's volunteer programme.

To support the Theatre Collection by becoming a member of our Friends Association, please scan the QR code, or contact **theatrecollection-friends@bristol.ac.uk**

Items on display in the Middle Reading Room have been purchased for the Theatre Collection by the Friends Association.

Friends of the University of Bristol Theatre Collection

86. ***The Paint Shop – Jane Cooke making the tree for Uncle Vanya,*** **by Rachel Hemming Bray, 1990**

Bristol artist Rachel Hemming Bray developed close working relationships with local theatres, including Bristol Old Vic and Tobacco Factory. Observing rehearsals and work taking place behind the scenes, Bray offers us a glimpse into the creative processes that bring a theatrical production to life.

87. **Set design for *Beauty and the Beast,* at the Theatre Royal, Bristol, by George Gordon, 1843**

88. ***King Lear – The Storm Scene,*** **woodcut by Edward Gordon Craig, 1923**

Edward Gordon Craig was an actor, director, author, artist and designer whose creative and innovative approach is visible in all aspects of his work. In this woodcut, Craig depicts Lear, who, having turned his back on his two treacherous daughters, is wandering in the storm with the loyal Earl of Kent and the Fool.



89. **Costume design by Yolanda Sonnabend for Miranda, played by Toyah Wilcox in the film of *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare, directed by Derek Jarman, 1979**

90. **Costume design for *Coco*, by Cecil Beaton, 1969**

Sir Cecil Beaton is perhaps best known as a society photographer, but his career also encompassed writing, painting, and set and costume design for theatre and films. This costume design was for the musical based on the life of Coco Chanel, written by Alan Jay Lerner with music by André Previn, and starred Katharine Hepburn as Chanel – her first and only stage musical.

91. **Set design for the transformation scene in *Robinson Crusoe,* by Robert Caney, 1895**

This production was staged at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, London.

92. ***Views of Mr Tree's New Theatre*** **by William Henry Brewer, 1897**

Pencil drawings of Her Majesty's Theatre, London. The actor/manager Herbert Beerbohm Tree raised the funds for the theatre's construction, which later housed the newly established Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

93. **Corresponding with Conflict, limited edition print by Clare Thornton, 2014**

Supported by the Friends of the Theatre Collection, Clare was commissioned to produce this print, based on the designs of early C20th playbills, to commemorate the centenary of the First World War.

Costume design by Yolanda Sonnabend for Miranda, *The Tempest*,1979



The Paint Shop – Jane Cooke making the tree for Uncle Vanya, by Rachel Hemming Bray, 1990

Library

94. Peggy Ashcroft as 'Miss Hardcastle' in *She Stoops to Conquer,* Old Vic Theatre, London, by Walter Sickert, 1933

Originally from the collection of Lord and Lady Attenborough, this painting was donated to the Theatre Collection via the Arts Council of England's Acceptance in Lieu Scheme, which places pre-eminent objects in public museums, archives and galleries.

95. Portrait of Tommy Baptiste, unknown artist, late C20th

In the 1960s, actor and singer Thomas Baptiste co-founded the Advisory Committee of the British Actors' Equity Association, to represent Black actors in Britain.



Portrait of Tommy Baptiste, unknown artist.

About us

University of BRISTOL
Theatre Collection

The Theatre Collection is an Accredited museum and archive service, with its entire holdings Designated Outstanding by Arts Council England. It was founded in 1951 to support the establishment of Drama as an academic discipline in the UK, and has grown to become one of the world's leading collections relating to the history of British theatre and live art.

The University of Bristol Theatre Collection is open Tuesday to Friday 9.30 – 5pm, and entry is free. Everyone is welcome to visit.

www.bristol.ac.uk/theatre-collection

Contact us: **theatre-collection@bristol.ac.uk**