

# Perserving Your Theatre's History

by Marvin Bowman



**Marvin Bowman**  
Aiken Community  
Playhouse  
Board Member  
History Buff

I have had an interest in history, big and small, since I graduated from the historic College of William and Mary in Virginia in the early 1960's. In the many states and several countries where I have lived, I have tried to leave some historical record behind. For example, in Nigeria and Malaysia I made video/film programs and in the mid-1990's, I helped preserve some history of the Athenian Players Theatre (APT) in Athens, OH. At that time, APT was just a few years old and even then we had to search for some "lost" material.

Presently, I am doing theatrical preservation for the Aiken (SC) Community Playhouse (ACP). ACP has a rich history of over 50 years. In 2006, we will present our 275th mainstage play, but the number presented is actually many more when you count our experimental and Garden productions. Like many theatres, we have not always been good about keeping a record of the Playhouse activities. We are not sure who the President was or who was on the Board in many of the first 10 years. Of ACP's first 54 plays (1952-71), we at present have only found 26 that have even one picture and we are missing 21 playbills. It might be understandable to be missing some material from our earliest years, but we haven't yet found a few playbills or pictures of plays we did in the 1990's!

It is so easy for the historical record to slip away, but with the advent of computers and the Internet it is easier than ever to ensure that your theatre's history lives on.

Here are 10 key steps you can take to begin an historical preservation effort at your theatre.

## **1 Ask theatre supporters and staff for help in locating old playbills, pictures, articles and other materials.**

In Fall 2005, with the help of Cherie Moritz, a volunteer and now Board member, the Aiken Community Playhouse began gathering all of the old materials

that we could find. In addition to looking ourselves, we asked the theatre's previous historians to search their personal nooks and crannies. We also called on past officers, lapsed members, directors and actors. And we reached out to audience members, too, through a request in a playbill. As a result of these efforts, we had a few "lost" items trickle in.

## **2 Search the nooks and crannies of your theatre space for materials.**

After we thought we had found everything, one of our former Board members found several boxes of pictures and other materials on top of an elevator shaft housing in our new building. He was crawling around our nooks and crannies looking for something else. This space above the shaft is not easily accessible, and most other people had not even realized it was there. Evidently, those boxes had been moved from the old theater (just in 2002) and "stored" there by some unknown, well-meaning volunteer.

## **3 Invite your audience to participate in developing your history.**

We held a public contest to encourage people to search their attics and submit pictures and playbills. We announced the contest in the local newspaper, via a postcard and on the web. The winner who gave us the most playbills/pictures received four free tickets to plays presented this season. We hoped for more than the few items that limped in.

## **4 Scan the items to create an electronic record.**

Once you have located as many materials as possible, scan them to create a permanent record. The items were scanned at 300 dpi which is a good compromise between our ability to print from the archive and good use of digital space. We scanned thousands of items and stored them on CDs. The items were scanned on a hard drive then organized by season and individual play and burned to digital media.

## **5 Develop a plan for how you'll preserve the information.**

The way we approached our preservation project was to scan the playbill cover; title page; cast page(s); Board of Director

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members; newspaper articles and any associated pictures for all of the plays we have produced.

We had eight CDs almost filled with our 54-year season by season history. We plan to update these CDs at the end of every season; adding the past season and any other material we find during that year. Since you can get so much more on a DVD, the second update done in June/July 2006 was put on three DVD's.

## 6 Plan for how to preserve the CDs/DVDs.

Just as paper records can get lost, so can CDs. To ensure that our history is preserved, we have made four copies of each CD/DVD set. We have stored them with the Office, the President, the Historian and the Marketing Director. This will help guard against the loss of material that occurs when individuals move away or retire.

## 7 Don't forget to archive the current season (tomorrow's history).

Be sure to save your current season material and to keep multiple copies. Thank goodness, most of our current production shots are digital and are being put on CDs as well. Be sure to save your current season's photos, playbills and other information immediately.

## 8 Post your historical items on the theatre's web site.

We are now adding selected items to our web site ([www.aikencommunityplay-](http://www.aikencommunityplay-)

house.com) as a way of communicating our history and utilizing another storage site. Currently we are putting all playbills (title and cast), Board members, and the best one or two pictures (when available). We have had to settle for a grainy newspaper image from microfilm for many of the early plays.

## 9 Develop an oral history to supplement your preserved materials.

Oral history is another way to preserve our theatrical past. David Skeen, a former Board member, has helped to record personal memories. We have recorded 10 people who have been around ACP (volunteers, actors, directors) for at least 15 years. We recorded a lot of different perspectives about the organization, including thoughts on acting, directing, costuming and other areas.

As we began developing our oral history, several people have said, "Oh if only we had recorded 'such and such' before..." Try to record important people involved in your theatre's history before it is too late.

We videotaped one woman who shared some priceless memories of the first meetings to organize ACP in the spring and summer of 1952 and



offered several anecdotes about our first seasons and our early directors. Culled from the two hours of the

ten interviews, we have edited a 28 minute program "Playhouse Memories." This DVD features our history and personal anecdotes of our first 54 years. Then what to do with the remaining 90 minutes we have on disc of all of those other beautiful memories? Be sure to tell your Board about where those unused raw discs are for future reference. Also, you should distribute several copies of the detailed topic outline of the interviewees' comments for a future updated program.

We have used "Playhouse Memories" as an incentive for increasing ones membership level and to show at special Playhouse events.

## 10 Use your archives for multiple purposes.

Historical preservation is enough justification for some, but you can justify preservation to your Board on other grounds as well. Selections of your preserved history can be used for public presentations at community events. They also can be an aid during membership campaigns and can provide valuable information to new Board members. If you seek a grant, the information you need to make a point may well be found in your archives.

Finally, your theatre's history doesn't just belong to the theatre. It is your community's story as well. Steve Walpert, who is currently working to preserve the history at the Fort Gordon Dinner Theater in Augusta, GA, shared the following thoughts about the importance of preserving our theatre history.

"Our experiences in the theatre are an important part of so many lives, both participants and patrons," he noted. "We think it is important that these experiences be chronicled and preserved, not just as pleasant memories, but as a historical record for all those who have made these artistic contributions to our community, and those yet to discover what magic the theatre can hold." ■



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