RW3112: The Riverina Theatre Company

Charles Sturt University Regional Archives Scholarship (2018)

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Introduction

The 2018 Charles Sturt University Regional Archives (CSURA) scholarship is a fantastic opportunity and compliments the archives and records management specialisation of the Master of Information Studies. It provided a practical archival work experience opportunity in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, and I undertook the scholarship for six weeks between November and December 2018. While I thought I would be undertaking a project relating to a collection from a community agency or the emergency services, the project I completed turned out to be far more interesting than I could have imagined.

The Riverina Theatre Company (RTC) operated from 1976 until 2009, and was the longest-established regional touring theatre company in Australia (Riverina Theatre Company (RW3112/IT0207), n.d., p. 1; Riverina Theatre Company - General Information (RW3112/IT0208), n.d, p. 1). Two donations were made to CSURA; the first in 1997 when the bulk of their records were deposited. This collection was tackled by Sarah Ind during the 2009-2010 Summer Scholarship and her report is available on the CSURA website (Ind, 2010, p. 2). That donation was given the accession number RW1780. The second donation was made in June 2014. Given the accession number RW3112, this was the donation I processed. Extending to just over 20 linear metres, this unprocessed material ranged from financial documents to meeting minutes, production files to photographs, CD's to floppy disks, and uniforms to trophies.

The Riverina Theatre Company (RTC)

The Riverina Theatre Company started out as the Riverina Trucking Company in August 1976 (Riverina Theatre Company (RW3112/IT0207), n.d, p. 1). Their first production 'Hamlet on Ice' was held in an auditorium belonging to the Riverina-Murray Institute of Higher Education (Riverina Theatre Company - General Information (RW3112/IT0208), n.d, p. 1). In 1983 they changed their name to the Riverina Theatre Company, and in 1987 the Riverina Playhouse was opened, a joint undertaking between Charles Sturt University and the RTC (Riverina Theatre Company (RW3112/IT0207), n.d, p. 1). Between 1995 and 2006, there were over ninety individual productions, some of which ran more than once. Unable to secure funding, the company was placed into liquidation in 2009 (Grimson, 2009, p. 1).

I had never heard of the Riverina Theatre Company prior to arriving in Wagga Wagga. Having grown up in Western Australia, I wasn't even sure where the Riverina was, prompting some research. Yet, as the weeks went by, I became captivated with the RTC. I perused meeting minutes and became engrossed in the different matters dealt with over the years. I read letters of support and thanks, and a couple of letters of complaint. I learnt about the first computer that was purchased, the troubles people had sending emails; I flicked through photos of productions, and read grant applications. I also developed an appreciation not only for the RTC but also theatre in general. There were the quint essential renditions of Macbeth, Hamlet, and Alice in Wonderland (to name a few), but the RTC did not shy away from confronting material, such as a c1999 production called *State of Shock* which dealt with race relations in Australia (Australian Plays, 2018 , para. 3). I am not an expert on the RTC, but I acquired an insight into this fascinating organisation and its productions.

Writing the following section detailing the processing of RW3112 was much harder than I anticipated. On reflection, I realised the issue was I was attempting to apply structure and order to

what was in essence a chaotic process. The rigid nature of what I have written does not reflect the reality of the situation. Tasks bled into each other to the point I sometimes wondered which task I was actually working on, and why. A painting might be more appropriate, one where swirls of colour mix into each other until you are not sure where one strand starts and the other finishes. This specific task, my task, did have a starting and a finishing point and it is between these two rigid points I have attempted to list each step of the process I undertook. Though I've written the steps I took and when, this was an organic task that grew as my understanding of the process grew, and as I learnt more of the RTC. Therefore, know that as you read this report, you are not reading the whole truth, but a semblance of a truth. Reality is always a little more chaotic and complex.

The Process

The first task was to ascertain where the items that consisted RW3112 were located. The bulk of materials were housed in 99 Type 1 archive boxes, located in two different areas within the CSURA. There were also two larger boxes containing uniforms, and a map drawer full of posters to contend with.

The next task was to remove all the items from these boxes. Most of the records were housed in individual manila folders and fortunately, several rows of shelving in the repository were empty. It was into these all the folders were placed. However, this process was a little more complicated as it was at this point several other tasks mixed into this one, such as the sorting.

The process of sorting the material as it came out of the boxes was multifaceted. The folder labels contained limited metadata but, combined with a quick glance through the contained documents, enough information was gleaned to make sorting the material into separate piles possible. These piles grew over time but were generally as follows: meeting minutes, financial documents, grant applications, production files, and other. As these individual piles grew bigger and space became an issue, I was able to start separating out different types of documents, such as the budget documents from the taxation. Sticky labels were invaluable during this process as I was able to note additional metadata about individual or groups of files, and I could also use them to signpost collections of folders in the archive shelving. For example, a shelf might have a large sticky label noting a bay of meeting minutes, but the smaller labels would detail individual years. I often ran out of room in one area and would need to move similar files to other areas of the shelving. Without the sticky labels, I would have lost the location of these certain documents or forgot they were there.

In the beginning, surveying the vast number of boxes containing unprocessed materials, it was hard to know where to start. Luckily, a CSURA volunteer had previously started the process by separating and sorting the meeting minutes. This felt like an anchor in the process and gave me my first grouping. I was also aided by the annotations that had been made on the holding boxes which the records had originally been placed in. These annotations were not always accurate but were incredibly helpful as they provided a "rough guess" at what I was looking at. Sorting was an ongoing process through this project but when I had removed the materials from the boxes and had undertaken a basic sort, I moved onto the next step of appraisal and disposal.

Regarding appraisal, Wickman stated in 2000, "It is about 'deciding what will be remembered and what will be forgotten. To ask how we appraise is to also ask for whom, and this is to ask why we

keep archives at all'" (as cited in Bettington, Eberhard, Loo, & Smith, 2008, p. 139). I understood this sentence when I read it as part of my academic studies, but it is different when you have to make the hard decisions surrounded by material in an archive. Do you keep the ticket stubs? Do you keep the ticket stubs with people's names on them? What about the inventory of alcohol purchased for certain shows, giving a fascinating glimpse into what was the beverage of choice for different productions, ranging from soft drink to XXX to red wine? It was fascinating, a little humorous at times, but was it something we needed to remember? Was it something we needed to forget?

Around 4 linear metres of material was disposed of and I would argue the majority of items singled out for disposal were copies, and sometimes multiple copies, of documents, usually financial in nature. For example, the meeting minutes listed all financial transactions meaning individual receipts could be disposed of. This was the largest area of disposals - financial documents - but there were also disposal opportunities regarding double-ups of information. For example, most production files contained statistics which had been recorded across several different documents. As these statistics were taken for every session of every production, this constituted a large swath of paperwork. Luckily, these statistics were also condensed onto one single sheet meaning the additional paperwork could be disposed of.

While undertaking appraisal and disposal, I also started removing metal from the documents. However, while I garnered a large collection of staples on my desk, it soon became apparent this task alone would take all of my scholarship time, ignoring the actual project I had been tasked with. For the sake of the project, I had to abandon this process. I did remove all the documents from plastic sleeves, which also took a rather long time, and all documents from the folders that used metal clips to hold them in. These metal inserts, or clips, then filled another purpose as they helped hold the plastic sleeves together and rather than messily filling a bin, I was able to keep them together with a little order.

At this stage, I undertook a final sort where I not only rearranged the material again, across and within groups as I saw fit, but then I ordered them within their group. For example, the meeting minutes were ordered by year and then by month. I tackled the material I was most confident about first, leaving until last a pile of documents that homes were either found for, based on the additional knowledge I had gained from the sorting, or were added to a miscellaneous series at the end of the collection.

The final stage was then boxing the items. In a perfect world, I would have lined up everything neatly on the archive shelving and transported the items into the boxes as their turn came. Instead, I had a list of what items were to go in what order and these items were often scattered amongst the shelving. Sometimes the boxing was also undertaken alongside the last ordering. For example, after I sorted the items in the meeting minutes and knowing they would be the first to go into the boxes, I boxed them immediately, giving myself more space to work. There were other considerations when boxing, particularly in regards to the multimedia. For example, there were a number of floppy disks I utilised archival sleeves as temporary holders for, which worked rather well. The preservation and digitisation of some of the materials in RW3112 would be a project unto itself and it was one I was unable to undertake during my time at CSURA.

The final step within this project was the listing and uploading of the data into Access to Memory (AtoM), an open-source web-based archival description software (Access to Memory, 2015, para. 1-

4). Having previously used AtoM at another academic institution, I was excited to see how it was utilised at CSURA.

At the same time as sorting and boxing RW3112, I could have listed the records into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet in preparation for upload into AtoM. However, I decided against this approach and waited until I had boxed everything before starting the listing from the beginning. There are pros and cons for the process I chose, especially as this method resulted in double-handling. However, I was free to change the ordering of items within and between boxes as I wished, rather than having to also adjust the Excel listing every time I made a change, no matter how big or small it was. Furthermore, I own a 13" laptop which is portable but makes reviewing and changing lines in a spreadsheet difficult.

At the end of this project, RW3112 contained 25 series consisting of 762 folders, 113 CD-ROMs, 93 VHS, 66 Posters, 9 ephemera items, 7 cassette tapes, 6 floppy disks, 5 VHS-C, 4 collections of slides, 4 MiniDiscs, 3 books, and 2 Mini Digital Video Cassettes. There is a total of 1063 items listed in AtoM which will be publically available in the future. 75 storage boxes were utilised, consisting of 73 Type 1 One Boxes, 2 Type OO boxes, and 1 Map Drawer.

Conclusion

RW3112 now sits in the Charles Sturt University Regional Archives, hopefully waiting for an intrepid historical explorer to have a wander through. From knowing nothing about the RTC, or as noted above, where exactly the Riverina region was, I became immersed in this world. There were scripts to pour over and meeting minutes to digest and I would love to work with this collection again, but there are only so many hours in the day, or within six weeks.

I've never thought of a company as a living and breathing thing, but this was the conclusion I drew after working on RW3112. It had its ups and downs. Board members came and went; some productions received tremendous approval and some ended in letters of complaint. And like all living things, it came to an end. You could almost feel the panic coming through the documents as the organisation lost funding. The rush of emails backwards and forwards discussing options and what had to be done. There were bills that weren't paid, or couldn't be, because there was no money. I'd become involved in a company that has been gone for ten years and felt almost a sense of loss when coming across documentation detailing its end. Originally, I wanted to title this report "Watching an organisation die: The Riverina Theatre Company", but it was only in reviewing my experience I realised that was not the truth. The RTC as an organisation went into liquidation in 2009, but the RTC didn't die. It still lives on within the walls of the CSURA, and also in the memory of those who were involved.

I learnt a lot about archiving, in practical and theoretical applications, during the scholarship. I have a new appreciation for appraisal and disposal, a deeper understanding of the practicalities of those decisions, than I did prior to the summer scholarship. Disposal schedules are certainly handy, taking the guess work out of a, at times, confronting situation. I was torn at keeping some items and not others. Even the fact that I knew I did not have the time to remove all the staples but was making the active choice to put the documents, staples and all, back into boxes, leaving the task for another poor soul, was a wrench. Reading about the process of archiving and then undertaking a project are

completely different tasks. Then in trying to describe in a structured manner a chaotic process, which was the processing of RW3112, I had another layer of difficulty. Yet, looking at the unprocessed material and wondering where to start, the project was an incredible memory to look back on at the end, while standing next to the finalised boxes. It was a personal, as well as a professional, achievement.

I highly recommend the Charles Sturt University Regional Archives scholarship to fellow CSU School of Information Studies students. I learnt a lot and really enjoyed my time, not only at the Regional Archives but within Wagga Wagga as well. And I also want to thank everyone that made my scholarship possible; from Dr. Yazdan Mansourian who supported my application to Dr. Jessie Lymn, Wayne Doubleday, Jillian Kohlhagen, Paul O'Donnell, and Dr. Thomas Middlemost who all not only helped and guided me during my scholarship but also made me feel welcome.

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Pictures

Charles Sturt Regional Archives, Wagga Wagga, New South Wales.

Two views of the materials from RW3112 awaiting sorting on archival shelving.

RW3112 materials waiting sorting.

A sample of the metal removed from the RW3112 materials.