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Launching the NRLA Video Archive

The NRLA Video Archive, part of the Theatre Collection at the University of Bristol, was formally launched on 10 December 2008. The following text formed part of that launch.

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The NRLA Video Archive is launched today at the University of Bristol, but has been in formation in various guises and as part of a collection known as the Live Art Archives for nearer 30 years, directly traceable in its earliest form to 1978.

It's absolutely fine that this digitized video archive has an immediate value for artists, students and researchers but its real longer term value to me is the promise, the possibility, that it will 'leave a trace' of the varied and extraordinary work of this period – 30 years worth – as artists, practitioners and performers found new ways to investigate their beliefs, their personalities, their fears and politics, their very existence. It is because this work generally is not recorded through the standard means of published text that this collection is set to become a unique and priceless record of activities and beliefs 1978-2008.

I have told this story many times but hopefully it's worth repeating one last time; when I started what has become 'The Live Art Archives' it was NOT with any thoughts of archives or documentation or records or longevity but more simply one of survival in the workplace as a lecturer in performance ('drama')... Students were understandably interested in the new work of the 1970s and then the 1980s, but at that time there was virtually nothing published about it (no far-reaching instant Wiki or Internet Google...) and so the obvious source of information (or so they mistakenly thought...) was ASK BAZZA....

Bazza could at least guide them to cardboard boxes that he'd amassed over the years full of letters asking for gigs, handbills, press cuttings, anything that seemed useful at the time ... In time so many cardboard boxes were becoming filled with this material that some ordering/indexing became essential. This was the period of LOCOSCRIPT, if anyone today recalls that early word-processing contraption, that came complete with a new and wondrous (at the time) SEARCH FACILITY! And subsequently of course the ability to develop THE DATABASE... and then THE INTERNET..... and then DIGITIZATION ! These were magical times.

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The record is now secure, safe in the hands and under the jurisdiction of one of the leading theatre archive collections in the country. The Theatre Collection, University of Bristol, holds a unique place in Europe and is known throughout the interested world for its wealth of testimony and performance archives within which this video collection now takes its place.

As the collection is now as safe and as secure as it's ever going to be so we can move on. If you've seen the announcements you'll be aware that Nikki Milican herself is, as always, moving on too as the current annual NRLA simply becomes New Territories: 'The name NRLA will culminate in 2010 and its 30th anniversary.... We move on....' Exactly right! And I for one am pleased that the NRLA collection will become a fixed and certain entity because, *as an archive*, it will gain considerably from that, for having a beginning, and an end, a recognisable entity over a period of extraordinary developments. I wish the new archives - and all who sail in her, all who use her and benefit from her - the very fondest of farewells.

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As I recalled these events for the launch of the digitized NRLA Video Archive, I realized that several thanks were due to various folk and the more I thought about it the more expansive and elaborate became those thanks. It started with two groups, which became three groups, which became five... eight... twelve...! Time to stop counting and list some of them:

1. ARTISTS AND PRACTITIONERS SINCE 1978... to 2009+ together with their essential supporting groups of technicians and administrators. Of course they are the prime group, the real originators, celebrated in the archive record.
2. THE MIDLAND GROUP NOTTINGHAM and in particular for me personally a memory of Steve Rogers, first director of the Performance Platform in 1979, and all subsequent directors and programme organisers including Nikki Milican and assistants at that time and still key contributors such as Lois Keidan and Paul Hough .
3. ARTS COUNCIL (ACGB and ACE) for initial database funding.
4. Arts and Humanities Data Services (AHDS) staff for database assistance... and the tireless work of the first person to devote real time and energy to preparing the record, Mrs. Sally Phillips.
5. NOTTINGHAM TRENT POLYTECHNIC. It's now 30 years almost to the day since I started work at the then 'Trent Polytechnic'. I can recall going to one of the Midland Group's first performance events in 1978 – there was still rubble on the floor as the building was incomplete – and the audience comprised four people – myself, two interested students that I'd taken, and the director! The development over the years is extraordinary – for example, now every week I receive the Franklin Furnace New York listings of live art events which usually run to about 17 pages of listed participants and events happening *every week around the world*.
6. At this time Robert Ayers was appointed as Professor and Departmental Chair and the move was made of staff and organization (most noticeably the Powerhouse venue) from the Clifton Site of the University to the City Site (Victoria Studios in Shakespeare Street, Nottingham).
7. And it is at this point that this current project really gets started under the guidance of such key administrators as Sally Phillips, Becky Turnock, Bex Carrington, and Stuart Simpson.
8. NTU Research Funding and hidden figures such as Professor Ray Cowell (Vice Chancellor) and Professor Richard Joyner (a chemist heading up the University's research effort) are well deserving of a mention as stalwart supporters of all our efforts.
9. The Arts and Humanities Research Board – which subsequently became a 'Council' - was steadfast in supplying essential funding beyond all the complications that arose in later stages.

The complication was that changes in personnel at Nottingham Trent in the early years of the Twenty First Century (including for example the Vice Chancellor, the Head of Research and the Chair of the Art Department) resulted in a significant change of circumstances and conditions: what had been supportive became decidedly hostile. Whilst hostility is not an unknown circumstance for anyone involved in Live Art it became apparent that it was going to become essential to find a new home for the Live Art Archives including the NRLA video collection. Enter the new group of Bristol Heroes:
10. Professors Baz Kershaw and Simon Jones, and Jo Elsworth (Keeper of the Theatre Collection, University of Bristol). And not to overlook the extraordinary Professor and Dean of Arts Bob Fowler who oversaw this complex move from the Executive perspective, nor the tireless groundwork of Bex Carrington who organized the move - including herself, home and hearth – from Nottingham to Bristol.
11. And once in Bristol the project staff appointed expressly to carry out the digitization of the NRLA Video Archive: led by Dr Barry Parsons, and involving all the technical competences and guidance of Stephen Gray and all the administrative back-up support, including the crucial one of securing copyright permissions, by Clare Thornton.
12. And my twelfth and final group today is YOU! The researchers, the interested, the supporters... (which would rapidly give rise to another 12 groups...) Thank you.