

Sharing (The Workload) Is Caring (for The Work)

Ethical and Effective Strategies for Preserving Magnetic
Media Collections of Community-Engaged Archives



The project: “Expanding Access to the Videotaped Record of 1970s-Era Experimental Theatre.”

- Funded by a \$100,000 grant from the the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (**NHPRC**) (2017-2019).
- A **post-custodial** video digitization/preservation project between La MaMa, WCFTR, and BAVC.
- Core outcomes:
 - **reformat** 248 half-inch open reel videos documenting performances on La MaMa’s stages in the 1970s.
 - **create multiple access points** for users to discover this collection, including on La MaMa’s digital collections portal, the DPLA, WCFTR’s catalog, WorldCat, & Wikipedia.

Who We Are

The Archives of La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club

-Rachel Mattson
-Sophie Glidden-Lyon

Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research

-Amy Sloper
-Jesse Hocking

Bay Area Video Coalition

-Morgan Morel

Still from: "Sissy" (1972).

La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club



Ellen Stewart, with performers at La MaMa, 1966 (photo: H. Gloaguen)

An experimental theater **founded by Ellen Stewart in 1961** in a basement in NYC's East Village. An important site of theatrical experimentation, critical to the development of **queer, African American, Asian American, Native American, & Latino theater forms, & experimental theater practices** of various kinds. Has presented 4,000+ productions by artists from 70+ nations. Now a multi-sited, int'l organization with 4 theaters, 3 rehearsal studios, a dorm for visiting artists, and a 5000-square-foot archives.

La MaMa's Archives



Ozzie Rodriguez, Archives Director



80,000+ unique items (from 1962 - present):

programs,
posters,
correspondence,
photographs,
costumes,
puppets, film,
magnetic media,
born-digital



Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research

- Administered by the University of Wisconsin-Madison
- Large research collection of manuscripts, moving images, sound recordings, and photographs and other graphic materials concentrating primarily on American film, broadcasting, and theater history
- Promotes the understanding of the history and culture of film, theater, and television



Bay Area Video Coalition

- BAVC was incorporated as a non-profit in 1976 with a grant from Rockefeller to provide space and equipment to Bay Area local video producers
- BAVC Preservation started in 1994
- Focused on provided preservation services to museums, artists, activist, documentarians, and cultural heritage institutions
- Mellon funded Preservation Access Program (PAP) allows us to provide significant discounts to individuals and smaller organizations
- We take a boutique approach to digitization, using 1:1 transfer methods to work with materials that may not fit with factory-stye digitization methods



bav**c**
BAY AREA VIDEO COALITION

Motivations

The Archives of La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club

- Performing arts organization with no digital preservation infrastructure capacity, limited financial resources, and a desire to retain control of its archival content.
- Rare, valuable, degrading documentation of performances by a range of experimental artists on the 1/2 open reel format.
- Overall institutional goal of expanding access to collections.

La MaMa's 1/2 inch open reel video collection

256 unique reels, 170 productions
(1970-1978)

Includes documentation of performances & work by:

The Native American Theatre Ensemble

The Pan Asian Repertory Theatre company

The Playhouse of the Ridiculous

Third World Institute of Theatre Arts Studies

Harvey Fierstein, Candy Darling, Winston Tong,
Elizabeth Swados, Tom Eyan, Aaron Bell, Jimmy
Wigfall, Julie Bovasso, Adrienne Kennedy, Ching
Yeh, Valda Setterfield, Tricia Brown, Ahmed
Yacoubi, Cecil Taylor...& many more.

LA MAMA PRESENTS THE AMERICAN INDIAN
THEATRE ENSEMBLE PRODUCTION OF
NA HAAZ ZAN
AT ROUGH ROCK DEMONSTRATION SCHOOL
3/73



La MaMa's digital infrastructure

- ★ 1 Linux server + 1 NAS + harddrives
- ★ Total of 12 TBs of server space (which is backed up to Amazon cloud services)
- ★ assorted pcs and macs (most advanced = donated mac mini)
- ★ Palante Tech Cooperative



Motivations

Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research

this collaboration represents an opportunity to ensure the long-term preservation, encourage historical studies, and improve access to resources for theater research... Further, it allows WCFTR to strengthen relationships with outside collecting organizations and leverage resources for the benefit of endangered audiovisual collections.

Motivations

Bay Area Video Coalition

“My personal reason is that La MaMa is very dear to my heart; I have a past life as an off-off-broadway theatre artist. Couple that with my in-the-trenches understanding of the shelf life of 1/2" open reel video and there was no way we were not going to be in love with that project.” - *Kelly Haydon, former Preservation Manager at BAVC*



Project Methods

- Post-custodial partnership
- MOU
- Diversified metadata work

postcustodial theory of archives

Relationships

Related Term:

[custody](#)

[noncustodial records](#)

n. ~ The idea that archivists will no longer physically acquire and maintain records, but that they will provide management oversight for records that will remain in the custody of the record creators.

Notes:

The postcustodial theory shifts the role of the archivists from a custodian of inactive records in a centralized repository to the role of a manager of records that are distributed in the offices where the records are created and used.

archivists.org/glossary/terms/p/postcustodial-theory-of-archives

Terms of the partnership:

La MaMa:

- retains possession of the physical video reels
- holds access-level copies of the digital files only.
- retains ongoing control over the intellectual content of the digital video materials.

WCFTR

- responsible for ongoing preservation of the digital masters
- holds access-level copies that it can make available for research purposes in its reading room

Agreement must be reviewed and renewed by staff at both institutions every 10 years.

Video Work: Documentation of "Sissy" (1972)

Description: This video documents the 1972 production of "Sissy" at La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club. The production was directed by John Vaccaro, written by Seth Allen, and performed by the Playhouse of the Ridiculous (a resident La MaMa company). Music for the production was written by Allen and Michael Meadows, arranged by Richard Weinstock, and performed by Paranoia. Much of the sound in this footage is obscured by a 1972 radio program recorded on the same reel. This video was originally shot using a Portapak camera, and camera originals are spread across four separate half-inch open reels (numbered B50, B51, B52, and C12 in La MaMa's collection).

Researchers interested in viewing this material should contact La MaMa's Archives at archives@lamama.org.

Recording date: November 1972

Language: English

Identifier: OBJ.1972.0002

Measurements: 7 minutes (container capacity) x 7 minutes (document duration)

LCSH Names Authority: [La Mama Experimental Theatre Club](#)

[Allen, Seth, 1941-1986](#)

LCSH Subjects: [Off Off-Broadway theater](#)

[Audio-visual materials](#)

[Gay theater](#)

[Theatrical companies](#)

Related Entities

[David Adams](#) (contributor)

[Danny Adams](#) (tech)

[Babafumi Akunyun](#) (performer)

[John Albano](#) (performer)

[Seth Allen](#) (author)

[Michael Arian](#) (performer)

[John Bauch](#) (performer)

[Chip Beef](#) (performer)

[Rose Beef](#) (performer)

[Chuck Beef](#) (performer)

[Amnon Ben Nomis](#) (contributor)

[Spots Bradigan](#) (performer)

[Gordon Bressac](#) (performer)

[Cricket Crocket](#) (performer)

[Jaime DeCarlo Lotts](#) (performer)

[Marsha Dimes](#) (performer)

[John Dodd](#) (designer)

[William G P Edgar](#) (performer)

[Otto Erotica](#) (performer)

[Jim Gallo](#) (contributor)



Wilford Leach [edit]

College in 1958.^[3] He





After moving to New York City, Leach became the artistic director of La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club for much of the 1970s. At La MaMa, he frequently collaborated with [John Braswell](#)^[4]. They directed the ETC Company, a resident company of La MaMa, in a repertory that included adaptations of *Carmilla*^[4], *Demon*^[5], *The Only Jealousy of Emer*^[6], *Renard*^[7], and *Gertrude*^[8].

References [edit]

- ¹ ^a ^b ^c [Credits](#). FilmReference.com, accessed May 19, 2009.
- ² ^a [Astroka, Beverly](#) (1991). *Ellen Stewart's Global Pushcart: twenty-six years of internationalism at La MaMa, 1962-1968*. University of Colorado (PhD dissertation).
- ³ ^a ^b ^c [Barron, James](#). "Wilford Leach, Theater Director And Papp Associate, Dies at 59". *The New York Times*, June 21, 1988.
- ⁴ ^a [La MaMa Archives Digital Collections](#), "Video Work: Documentation of 'Carmilla' (1972)". Retrieved March 7, 2018.^[c]
- ⁵ ^a [La MaMa Archives Digital Collections](#), "Video Work: Documentation of 'Demon' (1972)". Retrieved March 7, 2018.^[c]
- ⁶ ^a [La MaMa Archives Digital Collections](#), "Video Work: Documentation of 'The Only Jealousy of Emer' (1972)". Retrieved March 7, 2018.^[c]

La Mama Experimental Theatre Club video collection, 1972-1980

Author: [La Mama Experimental Theatre Club](#).

Edition/Format:  Video  Visual material  Archival Material  Computer File : English

Summary: The collection consists of 256 video files digitized from 12 inch open reel videotapes recorded between 1972 and 1980. Approximately 170 of La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club's Off-Off-Broadway performances were captured, preserving a unique historic record of the artists, companies, productions, communities, and ideas that had a lasting influence on the performing arts landscape. The birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway theatre, La MaMa was founded in 1961 in a lower Manhattan basement by Ellen Stewart, one of the most significant figures in American theater history. Stewart nurtured generations of prolific theater artists and turned La MaMa into a vital New York institution where immigrants, African Americans, LGBT people, and a variety of outsiders could experiment creatively and voice their struggles through art. La MaMa became a remarkable springboard for promising playwrights, directors and actors who went on to accomplished careers both in mainstream entertainment and in the push-the-envelope theater. The collection provides a deeper understanding of the history of artistic experimentation, international exchange, urban life, and the Off-Off-Broadway movement in the late 20th century. The filmed performances shed light on a range of artists' responses to the pressing social, cultural, and aesthetic questions of the time. The works reveal this history through a wide range of lenses, including Native American mythology, immigrant cultures, debates about American identity, poetic traditions, gay and lesbian life, US popular culture, racial conflict, and the Vietnam War. Original order has been preserved

Challenges (and creative solutions)

Metadata

- Reconciling diverse information from La MaMa & BAVC
- DPLA

Getting institutional buy-in

- **At La MaMa:** it took some work to explain the nature of the partnership & get administrative leadership on board w/a project that would give another institution the ability to share La MaMa's videos with researchers
- **At the WCFTR:** this project required staff to write, and get approval for, a special inter-institutional memorandum of understanding vs regular donor agreements.

Staffing changes

- **At La MaMa:** 2 successive project managers and 2 successive interns
- **At BAVC:** 2 successive preservation managers (or 3, if date back to the beginning of the grant-writing process).

Challenges (and creative solutions)

Digitization difficulties (BAVC)

- Low luminance levels
- Camera tube blooming and scarring
- Sticky tape and tracking errors
- Low sync levels
- Native headclogs
- Introduced headclogs from sticky/shedding tapes
- Audio buzz from stage lights

Challenges (and creative solutions)

Digitization difficulties (BAVC)

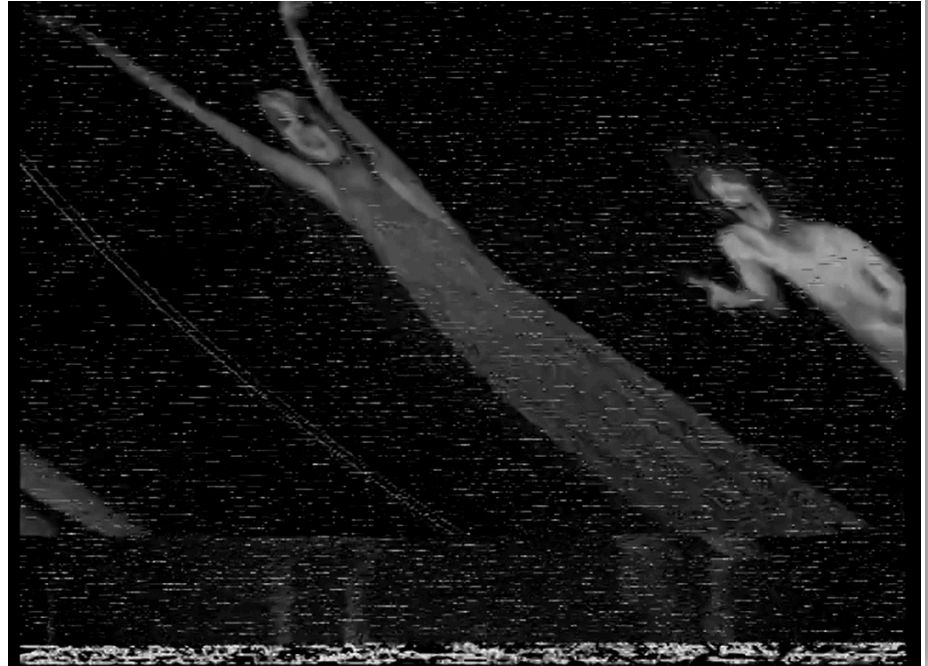
- Native video errors: Luma levels and tube blooming



Challenges (and creative solutions)

Digitization difficulties (BAVC)

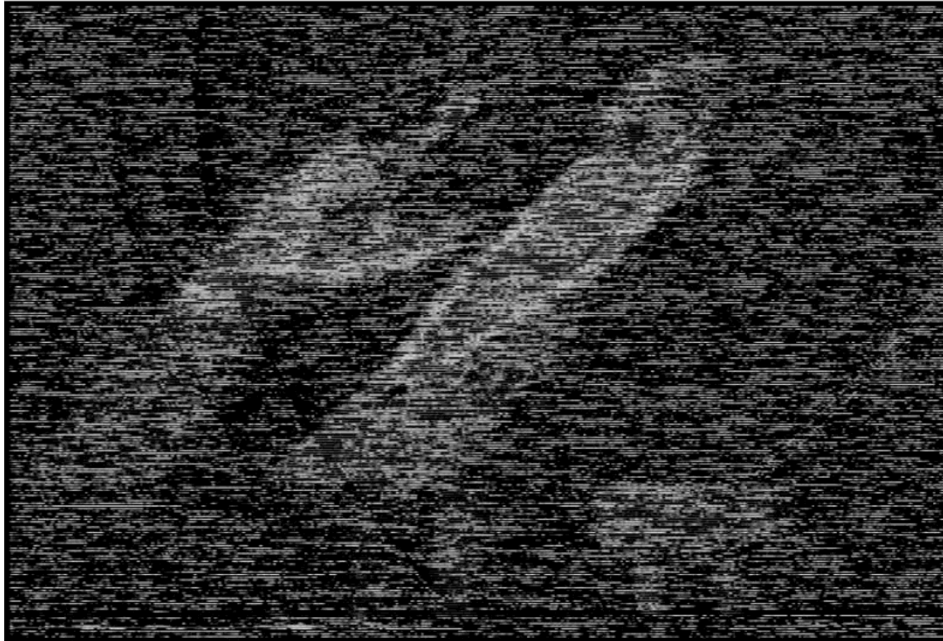
- Native video errors: Tracking errors and sync errors



Challenges (and creative solutions)

Digitization difficulties (BAVC)

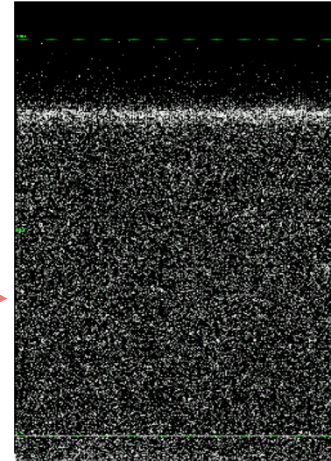
- Native video errors: Native head clogs



Head 1



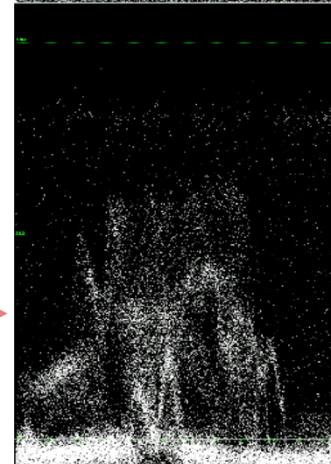
Clogged



Head 2



Cleanish



Lessons and Outcomes

Jesse:

- collaboration/soft skills, tech & metadata skills
- rethinking the kinds of donor agreements that collecting institutions use

Amy:

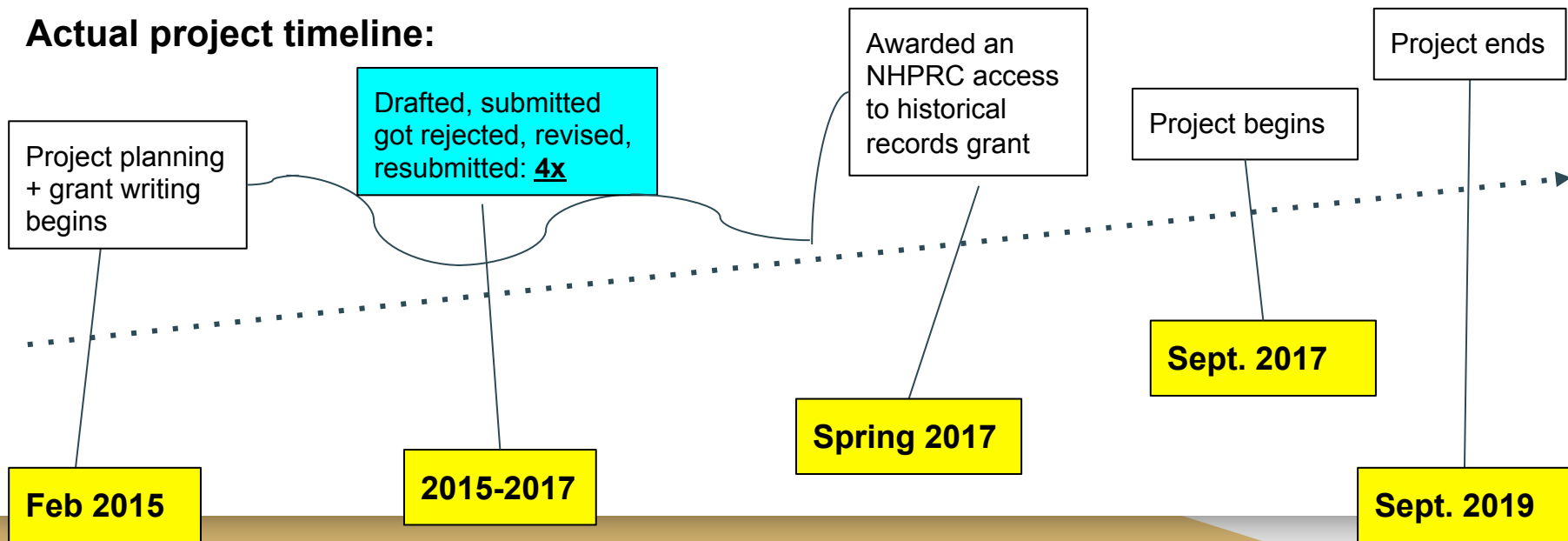
- New ways of thinking of collection development
- Collaboration in practice requires different workflows and might challenge existing institutional policies but is worth the effort

Lessons and Outcomes

Rachel:

- Creative strategies = necessary for the preservation of a diversity of community-engaged collections.
- Personal networks are important!
- Don't give up when granting agencies turn you down; revise.

Actual project timeline:



Lessons and Outcomes

Sophie:

- Expanded access to at-risk materials, and enriched network for both the archive and its researchers.
- Invest in your interns!



Lessons and Outcomes

Morgan:

- Making decisions related to transfer specifications were easily answered by La MaMa and WCTFR due to strong communication channels
- This project gave us a strong impetus to revamp our video patch bay so we could easily switch between decks and TBCs in order to get the best picture
 - The strengths and weaknesses of specific decks and TBCs became very apparent when dealing with problematic tapes
 - Learned the limits of some of our equipment
- Helped identify production bottlenecks and solve them
 - Built more packing decks so we could simultaneously pack and clean
 - Improved and solidified out tape baking methods and schedules



catalog.lamama.org

wcfr.commarts.wisc.edu/

bavc.org/preserve-media

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