Acquisition of the Steppenwolf Theatre Archives by the Chicago Theater Collection at the Harold Washington Library Center, Chicago, IL

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INFO 520
Grant Proposal
6/6/2010
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Due to space limitations, the Steppenwolf Theatre Company is no longer able to house documents from their early years as a troupe. They have offered these documents to the Chicago Theater Collection at Harold Washington Library Center (HWLC), a branch of the Chicago Public Library. The Chicago Theater Collection proposes to acquire, catalog, and preserve these documents, creating the Steppenwolf Theatre Company Archive, in order to make them available to the public and preserve this important company's historic record. They will also be used to enhance an upcoming exhibition organized by the Chicago Theater Collection, Capturing Chicago Theater: 35 Years of Photography by Lisa Howe-Ebright (1974-2009) in March of 2011. The library seeks six months funding of $32,350 for the project from August 1, 2010 to December 31st, 2010.

SETTING

The Chicago Theater Collection

Just outside of the HWLC's stunning Winter Garden is a theatrical treasure, the 1995 Joseph Jefferson Award-winning Chicago Theater Collection. The collection provides a unique insight into the history of theater in Chicago through an extensive holding of programs and scrapbooks from plays performed before the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, through the 1950s. In the 1970's a new form of theater, the provocative “Chicago style” was born. To document and preserve the records of this movement the Chicago Public Library began acquiring the records of the Goodman Theatre and the St. Nicholas Theater Company in 1986. Since that time, the
collection has grown to include records from Victory Gardens, Organic, the Body Politic, and Bailiwick Repertory.

The contemporary collection focuses on records that capture how these theaters chose the plays that made up successful seasons, and all that went into creating the production from audition and director's notes to the stage manager's prompt to playbills. `They give an inside view into inner workings of Chicago theater. The St. Nicholas Theater Company Archive illustrates David Mamet's powerful relationship with his actors and designers, the Goodman Theatre Archive features the efforts of award-winning directors like John Reich, Gregory Mosher, Robert Falls, Frank Galati, and Mary Zimmerman. A similar insight into the early days of the Steppenwolf Theatre Company would be a valuable addition to this collection.

**The Harold Washington Library – Division's Reading Room**

The Chicago Theater Collection is part of the Special Collections Unit which is an element of the Special Collections and Preservation Division, established in 1975, to collect, preserve, and provide access to rare and unique materials of the Chicago Public Library. Patrons access these collections via the Division's Reading Room on the 9th floor of the HWLC. The balance between access to the materials and protection of the materials is carefully maintained. The Reading Room is open to all, but materials may only be used in the Reading Room and patrons are asked to sign-in, complete a registration form, and present a valid photo ID before handling materials. Author Ira Nadel used the Reading Room to access the St. Nicholas Theater Company Archive to research his 2008 biography of David Mamet, *David Mamet: A Life in the Theatre.*
Special Collections Staff

The Special Collections Unit currently has 11 employees, the Special Collections Department Head, a museum specialist, a conservator, three librarians, two archivists, a full time clerk, a part time clerk, and a graphic designer. The Division also has a Preservation Unit which is responsible for protecting the Division's collections. The Harold Washington Library Center houses a state of the art conservation lab which can safely preserve the Steppenwolf Archive.

STATEMENT OF NEED

Before I myself began to benefit personally from the existence of Steppenwolf, in what for me was emotionally a great big way, a welcome home, I liked all I heard and occasionally saw of Steppenwolf. It was so organic, as spiritually indigenous as a Prairie House by Frank Lloyd Wright. Steppenwolf was and is Chicago, and nowhere else. It was and is what theater used to be in ancient times, a part of the soul of a special community (Vonnegut, 2000, p. 68).

In 1975, three energetic young actors, Jeff Perry, Terry Kinney, and Gary Sinise formed an ensemble they named Steppenwolf, after the novel by Hermann Hesse. The initial group included Laurie Metcalf, Moira Harris, Alan Wilder, John Malkovich, Nancy Evans, and H. E. Baccus, soon to be joined by Joan Allen in 1977. Steppenwolf's first performances were held in the basement of the Immaculate Conception School and from the beginning embraced the gritty, emotionally charged style that would come to define Chicago style Theater. Theater critic Richard Christiansen remembers his first experience at Steppenwolf in 1976, “It was so
convincingly terrifying I was sure that when they had finished messing with him (the hapless Baccus), they were going to come after me and the rest of the audience” (2004, p. 223).

A few years later, in 1980, Steppenwolf moved to the Jane Addams Hull House Center, its first Chicago home. It was here that the Steppenwolf ensemble portrayed two of its most noteworthy productions, Lanford Wilson's *Balm in Gilead* (1980), and Sam Shepard's *True West* (1982). *Balm in Gilead* captured Steppenwolf's true strength, real, energetic, no holding back ensemble performance. The show was successfully remounted off-Broadway at the Minetta Lane Theatre, cementing Steppenwolf's reputation as a troupe of immense talents. *True West*, directed by Sinise with Perry and Malkovich portraying two feuding brothers, was another long-run hit in Chicago, and once again attracted off-Broadway producers. As Richard Christiansen observed, “*True West, ...scored the kind of sweet success that only a New York hit can have. It catapulted Malkovich into a movie career, it made Steppenwolf a hot item in theater circles, and, as Sinise says, 'The door was open’ ” (2004, p. 229).

Steppenwolf continues to draw upon this early legacy of theater excellence. The ensemble, both individually and as a whole, have received numerous Tony Awards, and in 1998 became the first theater troupe ever awarded the National Medal of Arts, which was presented to the ensemble by President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hilary Rodham Clinton in a White House ceremony. This success has helped mark Chicago as a center for great theater:

Steppenwolf's spectacular ascent to stardom forever changed the playing field of resident theater in Chicago. There had been earlier breakout success stories, from *Grease* to David Mamet, but it was the tale of this bunch of scraggly youths who
had emerged as rich and famous stars that dramatically stamped Chicago as a
booming theater town (Christiansen, 2004, p. 235).

Steppenwolf recently contacted the Chicago Theater Collection regarding the acquisition
of documents from the early years of this prestigious troupe. Due to space constraints,
Steppenwolf is no longer able to house these documents. Sarah Zimmerman, the librarian in
charge of the Chicago Theater Collection, visited the collection and has submitted a report
(Appendix B) regarding the contents of the collection, as well as recommendations for
organization, cataloging, and exhibition. This initial report indicates that the collection includes
documents from Steppenwolf's first summer in a school basement, John Malkovich's staging
notes for *Balm in Gilead*, and Gary Sinise's notated *True West* script. These documents provide a
vital look at the productions of this important stage in Chicago theater history, and should be
preserved for future generations.

**PROPOSED PROGRAM**

The Chicago Theater Collection proposes to acquire, catalog, and preserve Steppenwolf's
early production documentation making it available to the public through the Division's Reading
Room. In addition, these documents will be used to enhance the upcoming exhibition *Capturing
Chicago Theater: 35 Years of Photography by Lisa Howe-Ebright (1974-2009)*, which includes a
number of images from Steppenwolf productions.

**Acquisition**

The records that will become the Steppenwolf Theatre Company Archive are currently at
the Steppenwolf facility at 1650 N Halsted St. As part of her initial report, Sarah Zimmerman completed a preliminary sort of the materials offered and estimated that the relevant documents will take up approximately 60 linear feet of shelf space. The first stage of this program will be moving the documents, under Sarah Zimmerman's supervision, to the HWLC. This will require a full day of packing at Steppenwolf, and a day for transport, including truck rental, loading of the truck, and unloading at HWLC. HWLC has agreed to lend two members of their maintenance staff for two days to help with this process which will begin in August 2010.

**Organization and Preservation**

The second stage will begin as soon as the documents have arrived at HWLC. Sarah Zimmerman, with the help of Project Archivist, Sue Smith, will organize the collection in archival quality materials, and create an index to be placed in the Division's Reading Room. It is anticipated that this process will take 6 months. Estimates for materials needed during this part of the project are based on Sarah Zimmerman's Report. Any documents deemed fragile or in need of repair will be sent to the Preservation Unit at HWLC which has agreed to repair any damaged documents for a small fee (please refer to the Budget for specific amounts).

**Public Access**

An important aspect of the Chicago Theater Collection is its availability to the public. Our goal is to have the archive ready for public access in January 2011 through the Division's Reading Room. At that time, the index will be completed, and all documents will be cataloged and in retrievable storage.
Exhibition

Lisa Howe-Ebright captured Chicago theater on film for 35 years. Her work includes images from productions at The Goodman, Steppenwolf Theatre, and Shakespeare Repertory Theater, to name a few. Many of these photos were donated to the HWLC Special Collections Unit in 2009. An exhibition showcasing these photos and documents from the Chicago Theater Collection is planned for March 2011. The Steppenwolf Archive will be a welcome addition to this exhibition, allowing patrons to see the notes and thoughts that helped create the productions captured in Howe-Ebright's photos.

Program Staff

This project will be carried out by two members of the HWLC staff, Sarah Zimmerman – Librarian and Joe Devonport – Archivist, and one Project Archivist hired for the six months this project will require.

Sarah Zimmerman, Librarian, has been in charge of the Chicago Theater Collection for six years during which time she has completed many projects of this nature including the acquisition of the Lookingglass Theater Company Archive. She has a MLS from the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. Ms. Zimmerman will supervise this project from start to finish. She will participate in the cataloging and storage of the Steppenwolf Theatre Company Archive, and work with the Lisa Howe-Ebright curator to chose appropriate materials for the exhibit. She will spend about 30% of her time on this project.

Sue Smith, Project Archivist, is recommended by the HWLC, and the Special Collections
Unit. She earned her MLS at Columbia University, has 15 years of experience, has assisted with
projects at the HWLC in the past, and has worked with the Art Institute and Field Museum on
archival projects. Ms Smith will start on August 1st, 2010 and will finish December 31st, 2010,
devoting 100% of her time to this project.

Joe Devonport, Archivist, has been on staff at HWLC for 10 years. Mr. Devonport also
earned his MLS at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana and will work with the
Preservation Unit to track all documents sent for repair and/or treatment. It is estimated that Mr.
Devonport will spend 5 hours a week on this project.

Program Evaluation

This program will be considered a success when the following deadlines are met:

• The public will have access to the Steppenwolf Theatre Company Archive by January
  2011.

• The Lisa Howe-Ebright exhibition will be held in March 2011.

CONCLUSION

As Sam Shepard (2000) reflected, “'Guts' is the perfect term and may in fact come the
closest to characterizing Steppenwolf, not just as a company of actors but as a whole mode of
theater they have challenged us with” (p. 60). The Steppenwolf Theatre Company is an essential
element of contemporary theater in Chicago. They created the gritty, energetic style that has
come to embody Chicago theater. The opportunity to add these records to the Chicago Theater
Collection's already impressive holdings must be taken advantage of in order to preserve this unique insight into the early days of energy and genius at Steppenwolf.

Appendix Materials

A. Resumes for key project personnel
B. Sarah Zimmerman's Report on documents at Steppenwolf
C. Example Index from Goodman Theatre Archive

**BUDGET**

**Program Staff**
Project Archivist – 6 months $ 21,000.00

**Supplies and Materials**
Truck Rental $ 100.00
Archival Bankers Boxes $ 4,000.00
Archival Legal-sized Document Storage Boxes $ 500.00
Archival Folders $ 5,000.00
Binders for Index $ 150.00

**Preservation**
Use the Preservation Unit at HWLC $ 1,000.00

**Misc Costs**
Office Supplies $ 400.00
Printing of Index $ 200.00

Total $ 32,350.00
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Christiansen, R. (2000). And it all happened in the theater. In V. Skrebneski (Ed.). *Steppenwolf theatre company: Twenty-five years of an actor's theater* (pp. 7-8). Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc.


