

# How to catalog 100,000 playbills

(give or take a few thousand)

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Digital & Archival Approaches to Theater History  
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Hello! It is wonderful to be here; many thanks to Laura for organizing this conference, and to the NEH for funding it and her very cool Philadelphia Playbills project.

Today, I'll give a brief overview of the retrospective conversion effort that I've worked on over the last few years with the Folger Shakespeare Library's playbill collection, and the hybrid form it's taken during that time. I'll discuss some of the major challenges it has faced, explain its current status, and of course share some pictures of playbills!

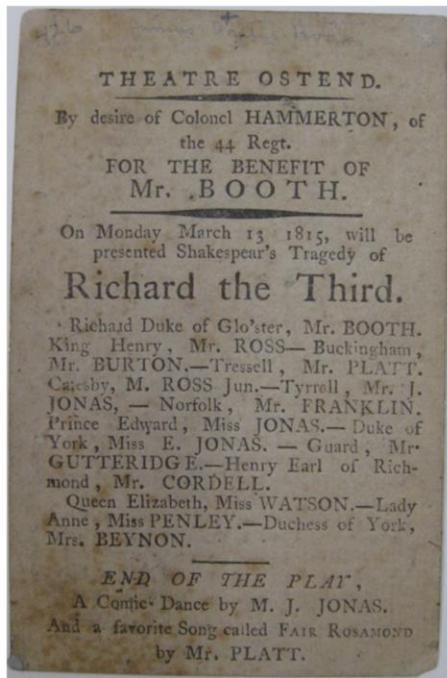
## Playbills (AAT)

Programs or posters announcing a theatrical performance.

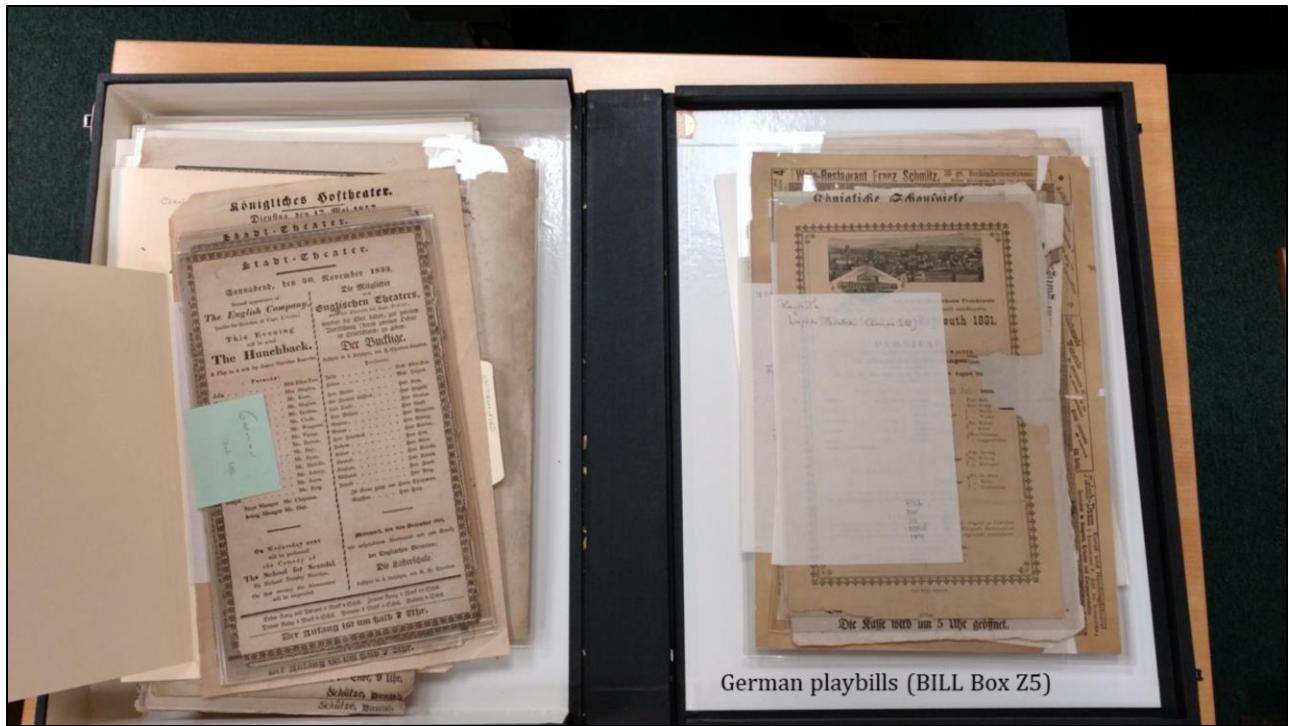
## Playbills (RBMS)

Use for single-sheet items advertising plays, usually announcing the cast.

Playbill from the Theatre Ostend, Belgium  
(BILL Box Z5 O3to 1815)



(Since you're here, you may already have some familiarity with playbills.) As defined by the Art & Architecture Thesaurus, playbills are "programs or posters announcing a theatrical performance." The Rare Book & Manuscript Section describes them as "single-sheet items advertising plays, usually announcing the cast." All but a handful of the playbills in the Folger collection fit both of those definitions, but we try to use AAT terms whenever possible. (The one on screen could actually be considered a handbill as well, it's only 12 cm in person.)



German playbills (BILL Box Z5)

The majority of the Folger's playbill collection - the 250,000 items I'll be discussing today - were acquired by Henry and Emily Folger before the library opened in 1932. (Another 7,188 playbills were acquired as part of the Henderson collection by the Folgers in 1900, and 453 were acquired as part of the Craven collection in the 1990s. These are considered distinct groups, and not part of the main playbill collection.) The majority of the collection is from British and American theaters. Much of it is Shakespeare-related, but not all. Some of the bills advertise circuses, musical performances, balls, or tableaux vivant-style events. Some playbills are encased in sleeves and bound in volumes, mainly runs for the larger London theaters. The rest are stacked in archival boxes, separated by layers of tissue. Many are delicate and flaking at the edges or permanently folded, although some have additional protective

housing, and some are surprisingly sturdy, for items that were never meant to last two centuries or more.



Call number	Geographic grouping	In Hamnet?
BILL Box G2	London theaters	yes
BILL Box G3	English provincial theaters	in progress
BILL Box G4	Edinburgh theaters	yes
BILL Box G5	Other Scotland theaters	yes
BILL Box G6	Ireland theaters	no
BILL Box G7	Channel Islands and Isle of Man theaters	no
BILL Box G8	Canada theaters	no
BILL Box G85	Australia theaters	no
BILL Box G9	Wales theaters	no
BILL Box U4	New York theaters	in progress
BILL Box U5	Boston theaters	no
BILL Box U6	Philadelphia theaters	no
BILL Box U7	Other United States theaters	no
BILL Box Z5	Foreign theaters	yes

The playbills are organized by geographic area. It's a very logical system, provided that you take the 18th and 19th century London theatrical scene as the center of your universe, and work your way outwards. They are described and accessible through two card catalogs: a shelflist (organized by call number) and a main entry file (organized by location and then theater name). The geographical organization and the creation of the catalog cards seem to have happened in the 1950s and 1960s, based on internal documentation. In the mid-1970s, printed census lists were also created for some subsets of the collection, mostly London theaters in the early nineteenth century. For the last several decades, these catalog cards and printed lists were the main method of access to the collection.

(playbills shown are London and English provincial theaters)

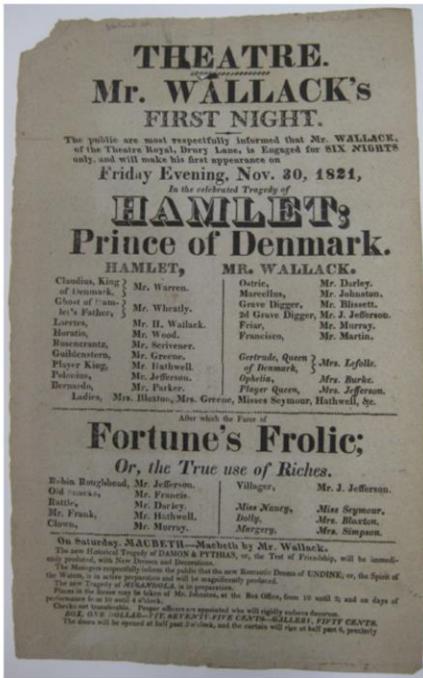


In 2016, the decision was made to start adding MARC records for playbills to the Folger's electronic catalog, Hamnet, through an in-house retrospective conversion process, i.e., a cataloger would create records directly from the catalog cards, without looking at the materials. Why start then? For one, on a recent staff survey of cataloging priorities, the playbills were identified as one of the highest priorities. They represented a known collection of underdescribed materials, with good estimates of its parameters, making it seemingly easy to plan for. While we worried somewhat about the condition of the materials, we decided that the benefits of increased access outweighed the risks of circulation. (Additionally, at the time, we were also expecting to bring on a Curator of Shakespeare and Performance, for whom theatrical ephemera would be directly in scope and who could provide additional guidance for

the project. Ultimately, this position was not filled.)

Initially, this was to be a very straightforward recon project, with a few embellishments. I would create collection-level records from the cardfiles, using a constant data template in OCLC's cataloging software Connexion, developed in consultation with my colleagues. As I went along, I would establish authorized name headings for as many of the theaters as I could. I would consult the playbills as little as possible to save both time and wear and tear.

While planning for the project, we looked at as many other playbill collections as we could find, and consulted the documentation that was available for them. (I'd like to shout out "So Many Playbills, So Little Time" here, an article published in *RBM* by several librarians from Harvard, detailing their approach to the Harvard Theatre Collection.) Many other playbill collections were organized and described in archival finding aids, although collection-level MARC records were by no means uncommon either (and of course those two can exist in parallel). We made the choice to create MARC records mainly due to greater staff knowledge and experience with that standard, reasoning that a parallel finding aid, or finding aids, could be developed at a later time if that became more appropriate.



Playbill from the Walnut Street Theatre  
(BILL Box U6 W16 1821)



Playbill from the Adelphi Theatre  
(BILL Box G2 A23 1821)

To start, I performed a test run, creating collection-level records for London's Adelphi

Theatre and Philadelphia's own Walnut Street Theatre, which I estimated to be around the median in terms of numbers of playbills. I reviewed the records with my colleagues, approved the constant data template, and estimated that the time to complete records for the full collection would be about eighteen months.

Having tested and cleared the process, I proceeded to dive straight into the project, working on it a few afternoons per week. Since the collection is sorted and classified by geographic location, I started with theaters in the city of London - thanks to the tens of thousands of playbills from the Theatres Royal at Covent Garden and Drury Lane, this is by far the physically largest portion of the collection, and I wanted to get it out of the way as soon as possible.

Books	962444204	Held by UXG - No other holdings					
Type	a	Rec stat	c	Entered	20161112	Replaced	20180621192813.6
Elvl	I	Srce	d	Audn		Lang	eng
Blvl	Form	Conf	0	Blog		MRec	
	Cont	QPub		LITF	0	City	enk
Desc	Ills	Fest	0	DS1	k	Dates	1819 , 1856
040		UXG #b eng #e rda #c UXG #d OCLCO #d OCLCF					
043		e-uk-en					
090		#b					
049		UXGA					
110 2		<a href="#">Adelphi Theatre (London, England)</a> , #e issuing body.					
245 1 0		Collection of playbills from Adelphi Theatre, London, #f 1819-1856.					
264 1		[London?] : #b [publisher not identified], #c [1819-1856]					
300		1 box (approximately 321 items) + #e 3 volumes (approximately 719 items)					
336		text #b txt #2 rdcontent					
337		unmediated #b n #2 rdamedia					
338		sheet #b nb #2 rdacarrier					
338		volume #b nc #2 rdacarrier					
500		Title devised by cataloger.					
500		This record contains unverified data from catalog cards and may contain incorrect or incomplete text. Please consult Curator for assistance. #5 DFO					
520		Collection of playbills from the Adelphi Theatre (London), for theatrical seasons ranging from 1819-1820 to 1855-1856.					
610 2 0		<a href="#">Adelphi Theatre (London, England)</a>					
610 2 7		Adelphi Theatre (London, England) #2 fast #0 (OCoLC)fst00722969					
650 0		<a href="#">Theaters</a> #z London.					
650 7		Theaters. #2 fast #0 (OCoLC)fst01149370					
655 7		Playbills. #2 rgenr					
751		London (England), #e event place. #2 naf					
752		Great Britain #b England #d London. #2 naf					

Each theater for which we hold more than two playbills is coded as a collection-level record (which, yes, seems odd for "collections" of only two or three playbills). The record is given a devised title, with a note indicating its source. The number of items in the collection is recorded (this can be anywhere from 2 to over 10,000), and a summary of the contents is entered in a free text note. I try to add as many structured data elements as possible: publication and performance locations are recorded in 752 and 751 fields, and are duplicated in abbreviated form in the 008/15-17 and 043 fields. I add the name of the theater as a subject heading and, when appropriate, in the main heading field as the entity responsible for the creation of the playbill. I add a broad subject heading for "Theaters" and the city, and a genre heading for "Playbills". (Much of this information is baked into the template I created, so that I don't forget to

add any of it.) I also add access points for any former owners, and transfer any notes recorded on the card (for instance, if any of the playbills are facsimiles, duplicates, or made of silk). To finish off, I record call numbers and accession numbers, plus an advisory statement warning users that this is unverified data from cards.

 details brief view MARC view

Main name: [Adelphi Theatre \(London, England\), issuing body.](#)

Title: Playbills from the Adelphi Theatre, London, 1819-1896.

Published: [London?] : [publisher not identified], [between 1819 and 1896?]

Description: approximately 321 items + 4 volumes (approximately 893 items)

Notes: Title devised by cataloger.

This record contains unverified data from catalog cards and may contain incorrect or incomplete text. Please consult Curator for assistance.

Summary: Collection of playbills from the Adelphi Theatre (London), for various seasons between 1819-1820 and 1897-1898.

Associated names: [Fitzgerald, Percy, 1834-1925, former owner.](#)

Subjects: [Adelphi Theatre \(London, England\)](#)

[Theaters --England --London.](#)

Related place: London (England), event place.

Associated place: Great Britain --England --London.

Genre/Form: [Playbills](#).

URL for this record: <http://hamnet.folger.edu/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?BBID=348709>

Call number: BILL Box G2 A23 (see card catalog for specific dates)

Location: Vault (Deck C)

Call number: BILL Vol. G2 A23 (see card catalog for specific dates)

Location: Shelved in Vault (Deck C)

Status: Not Charged

Call number: Bd.in BILL Vol. G2 N42 (see card catalog for specific dates)

Location: Shelved in Vault (Deck C)

Status: Not Charged

Item note: Approximately 174 playbills from the New Adelphi Theatre (or Theatre Royal, New Adelphi), as the theatre was known from approximately 1858-1867.

I also add access points for any former owners, and transfer any notes recorded on the card (for instance, if any of the playbills are facsimiles, duplicates, or made of silk). To finish off, I record call numbers and accession numbers, plus an advisory statement warning users that this is unverified data from cards.



cards for Surrey Theatre (BILL Box G2 S96 and BILL Vol. G2 S96)

playbill from Tavistock House (BILL Box G2 T19 1855)



If we have only one playbill from a theater, it gets an item-level recon record - generally the same information as above, but the bibliographic level is coded as a monographic item rather than a collection. For these records, I do try to search in Connexion by date and theater name. If some other library has already cataloged a playbill for that theater and date, I would then proceed to check our physical item to see if it's a match. This has only happened a few times, however: once for a bill advertising a play put on by Charles Dickens at his home, and once or twice for playbills that were meant as political satires rather than genuine theatrical ephemera.

This is far from the ideal array of information about a set of playbills - our recon records don't include specific dates, plays, or actors, which unfortunately tend to be

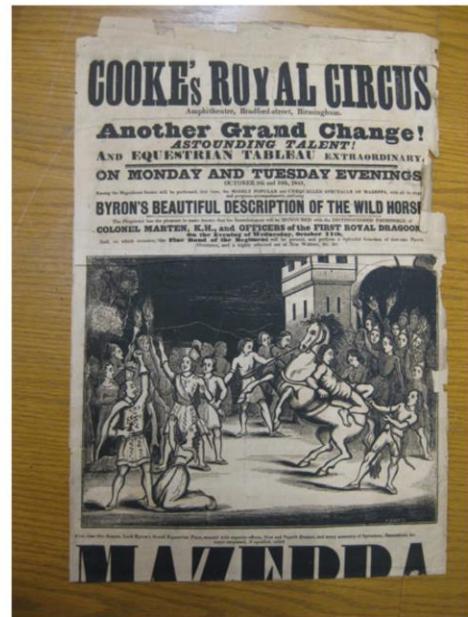
what researchers look for. But it's a starting point, and it's more structured data than was available to users before!

After completing the playbills for London, I then moved northward to Edinburgh, and from there to the rest of Scotland. After Scotland, I took a break to travel the world by cataloging the "foreign playbills", i.e., everything outside of the British Commonwealth and the United States. Then, feeling confident, I decided to attempt the English provincial theaters portion of the collection.

I'm making it sound as though it was all smooth sailing - but in fact, the problems began almost immediately.



Playbill from Cooke's Royal Circus,  
Edinburgh (BILL Box G4 C77 1846)



Playbill from Cooke's Royal Circus,  
Birmingham (BILL Box G3 B53cc 1843)

The first challenge to rear its head was that of establishing authorized name headings for all theaters. I was surprised, although I probably should not have been, to realize that the name of the theater on the catalog card did not necessarily match the name of the theater on the playbills themselves; the previous cataloger made an executive decision and consolidated several variations under a single name; and the previous cataloger also chose the name that would fit on the 3" x 5" catalog card most concisely. All valid decisions at the time - however, under the current cataloging standard RDA, major name changes of the theater would each need to be established as a new entity. While there is some guidance on determining what constitutes a "major" name change versus a "minor" one, it can be difficult to apply in

practice, and it is not really possible to determine what the preferred name would be today based on the catalog cards alone. Finding reference sources for theaters outside of large cities such as London and New York can also be difficult.

Once you've decided on the correct name for the theater, and found enough information to confidently create a useful name authority record, there's the decision of whether it should go into the Library of Congress Name Authority File, or whether it should in fact become a Library of Congress Subject Heading.

This led to some very intense conversations in the cataloging department. According to the Subject Headings Manual (H 405) maintained by the Library of Congress, theater buildings should be established as "subject authorities," and theater companies should be established as name authorities. However, there's an exception for subject authorities needed for use as descriptive access points, which allows them to be established in the name authority file, and we took advantage of that. (We also had several discussions centered around whether a theater-as-organization was conceptually distinct from a theater building and a theater company, and how so.)

Theatre Kelso.  
FOR THE BENEFIT OF  
*Mrs Wright.*  
By Desire of the WISE and MASTERS, WARDENS,  
and BRETHREN of the  
**BORDER LODGE OF  
FREE GARDINERS,**  
On which occasion the THEATRE will be tastefully De-  
corated with Flowers.  
On FRIDAY Evening, October 15, 1836.  
Will be performed the celebrated Play of the  
**Foundling**  
OF THE  
**FOREST.**  
Cast of Characters.  
From English.  
John, a Gentleman.  
John, his Son.  
John, his Brother.  
John, his Cousin.  
The Falconer, Servt.  
The Falconer, Servt.  
Wife.  
Kinsman.  
From Scotland.  
John, a Gentleman.  
John, his Son.  
John, his Brother.  
John, his Cousin.  
The Falconer, Servt.  
The Falconer, Servt.  
Wife.  
Kinsman.  
END OF THE PLAY.  
Song, "Dame Cared" by MR. WRIGHT.  
A Dance, by MR. ROSS.  
The whole to conclude with an interesting Address, taken from the Waller  
SOTTY's Translation of the French, entitled the  
**Two Drovers;**  
OR A HIGHLANDER'S REVENGER.  
Boxes, &c., PIT, 1/- GALLERIES, 6d.  
There will be three Performances of Half an Hour each.  
ENTRANCE BY PAY, AND SEATED.

**THEATRE, AYR.**

**MR. W. R. COPELAND,**  
**MANAGER OF THE THEATRE, DUMFRIES,**  
And late Manager of the Theatre Royal, Manchester,  
Reservatively announces that the Ayr Theatre is Open to the Public on SIGHTS ONLY.  
LIVE ACTS will be introduced as soon as the season of dull weather has passed over, and the DECORATIONS AND IMPROVEMENTS he has endeavoured to effect in the building will be seen to have secured public patronage and support.

**On FRIDAY EVENING, October 2, 1835,**  
will be performed the Comedy of *Widow of Palermo!*

Colonel Willson, Mr. PHILLIPS. Signor Fiduci, Mr. FISHER. Captain Moore, Mr. HOPE.  
Damey, Mr. FRANCE. Mrs. BEECHER. Mrs. MACAY. Mrs. HALLIDAY. Mrs. HOLLOWAY.  
Gondolier, Mr. COOPER. Signorina, Mrs. HOLLOWAY.

End of the Comedy, a COME-SONG by MR. FISHER.

After intermission a COME-SONG with the Forces of

**PERFECTION.**

By Lawrence Pierrepont, Mr. HIBBLE. Captain Puff, Mr. W. R. COPELAND. Mrs. Mc. FRANCE.  
Thomas, Mr. MACAY. Mrs. HOLLOWAY. Mrs. HOLLOWAY.  
Katy O'Dowd, Mrs. FISHER. Mrs. SIDNEY.

A COME-SONG by MR. FRANCE.

To Conclude with the Forces of

**CAPTAIN STEVENS**

Colonel Stevens, Mr. HALLIDAY. Captain Stevens, Mr. W. R. COPELAND. Harry Baldwin, Mr. PHILLIPS.  
Tom Sturges, Mr. FISHER. Polite, Mr. COOPER. Mrs. SIDNEY.  
Miss Hardaker, Mrs. VERNON. Mrs. HOPE. John Maybagot, Mr. JAMES. Mrs. HOLLOWAY.  
Mrs. PHILLIPS.

**On Saturday evening, FENICE PRESERVED**

Tropic, Mr. W. R. COPELAND. Signor Fiduci, Mr. FISHER.  
Doors to be Opened at half-past Six, and the Performance to commence as soon as precisely  
Annoone—Six—P.M.—Gallerie—  
Tickets and Places for the ~~same~~ to be had of Mr. COOPER, Mr. COOPER's Office,  
RECOMMENDED especially to the Attention of Gentlemen.

**THE GAS FITTINGS ARE ENTIRELY NEW.**

PRINTED AT THE AYR COTTELL OFFICE.

**THEATRE.**  
Man o' War Large Room,  
**GILMERTON,**

The Inhabitants of Gilmerton, and Vicinity are most respectfully informed, that the above Room will open as a Theatre by a party of TRADESMEN OUT OF EMPLOYMENT, for the Performance of Entertainments for this Evening, will merit the countenance and support of a generous and disinterested public.

**On Monday Evening, 20th Nov.**

Will be presented Lewis's much admired Drama of the

**Castle  
SPECTRE,**

OR THE  
**Rival Brothers,**

Erie Percy, Mr Winstone, Mrs Dumont, Mr Hope  
Kenne, Mr Dick...Reginald, Mr Bell, Mrs Hassan, Mr Milne  
Father Philip, Mr Allen...Molly, Mrs Grey, Mrs Young  
Angus, Miss Wallace...Allen, Mr Allen...Spectre, Miss Young.

After the Play the following songs  
Comic Song, Mr Dick...Comic Song, Mr Milne  
A Favourite Song, Miss Wallace.

The whole to conclude with the Laughable远 of the

**SCOTCHMAN & IRISHMAN**

In Search of a Master,

Gulliver, Mr Hope...Donald Mcintosh, Mr Allen  
Paddy O'Carroll, Mr Dick...Maguire Muirpoint, Mr Milne.

Doors open at 6pm, and the Performance to commence at half past 8 o'clock.  
FRONT SEATS, 1/- BALK SEATS 6d.  
Children half price.

BILL Box G5 K29kt 1830

BILL Box G5 A98at 1834

BILL Box G5 G42gt

Once we'd sorted out the name vs subject file conundrum, the name authority creation process went fine, if not speedily... up until I started working on the provincial Scottish theaters. Most of the theaters listed on the cards were simply named after their town - for instance, the Kelso Theatre in Kelso, the Ayr Theatre in Ayr, or the Gilmerton Theatre in Gilmerton. I took this for granted until one day, I needed to consult one of the playbills and saw that the theater described on the card as "X Theatre" was listed on the playbill as simply, "theater." Looking at some additional playbills in this subset, there appeared to be a significant amount of variance between established, consistent theaters in towns, and limited run performances at local common areas such as inns or municipal buildings. I realized that previous catalogers had essentially treated both these situations as the same, and described them as "X

Theatre": useful for finding playbills in a card catalog, but not nearly as useful for creating records in an electronic environment, and establishing authorized name headings for theaters!

At this point, I had to concede that the name authorities portion of the project was no longer feasible. I continued to use name headings for theaters when they had already been established in the LC Name Authority File, and tracked the remaining un-established theaters in a spreadsheet, in the hopes that they can one day be created as authorized headings, Wikipedia articles, etc.



Playbills from Okuma Memorial Hall (BILL Box Z5 T7oh 1954)



Playbill from the Theatre d'Atelier (BILL Box Z5 P3tm 1934)

Having sorted that out, it was on to the next challenge!

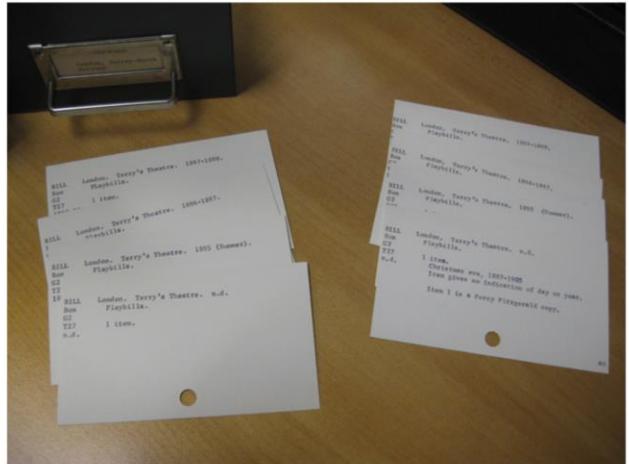
The "foreign" playbills - again, a very inadequate descriptor for "everything outside of the British Commonwealth and the United States" - were initially not a high priority. However, some time into the conversion work, I realized that cards for this set of playbills were absent from the two main card catalogs. While there was a printed inventory, I had reason to believe it was incomplete, and so these playbills moved suddenly up to the head of the queue.

The foreign playbills necessitated a significant change in procedure: since there were no cards to work from, I worked directly from the materials themselves. As it was a relatively small number of items (representing about fifty distinct theaters or performance locations), I was able to catalog these playbills fully at the item level.

These records were not too different from the collection-level records I described earlier, but I was able to provide access points for printers, information about the plays advertised, and the language of the text, and occasionally highlight actors (for instance, we have about a dozen playbills from Ira Aldridge's first European tour in the 1850s).

There's a twist here: about a quarter of the way through this subset of playbills, I started noticing 3"x 5" cards tucked into the enclosures of many of the playbills. At first I thought these were just notes or call slips, but eventually I realized this was in fact the shelflist for the playbills - filed in the box with the very items it was supposed to provide access to. I don't know when or why this occurred, but it did explain why the cards weren't filed with the main shelflist.

While I would certainly not recommend an item-level cataloging approach for most large collections, it did benefit this particular sub-set by allowing for more attention on an underrepresented part of the collection.

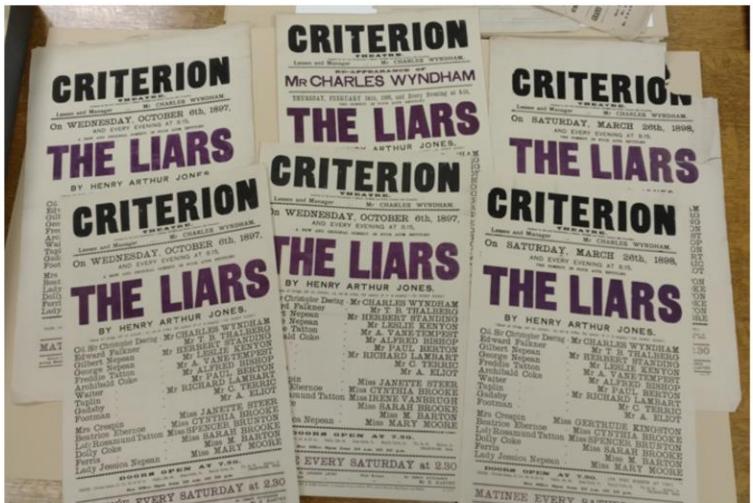


Ultimately, the greatest challenge of this project has been time management and morale. My initial time estimate was overly ambitious on its own, even assuming a consistent rate of uninterrupted work. Further complicating matters, the beginning of the playbill project coincided with a major grant project, as well as some smaller internal projects.

I also underestimated the nature of recon work. Where item-in-hand original cataloging involves a great deal of research and analysis, recon de-emphasizes extra research and focuses on consistent, repetitive data entry. Alternating between original cataloging and recon, plus "other duties as assigned," was occasionally relaxing, but more often jarring. I felt simultaneously as though I was not giving the playbill records the full attention they needed, and that I was not making enough progress on the

recon project. When I did spend time doing research for the playbill records, such as establishing authorized name headings or working item-in-hand with the foreign playbills, I felt guilty for spending too much time on individual theaters even though I found the work more fulfilling.

Some of the existing literature on retrospective conversion projects recommends considering participant morale in the planning phase of a project, and that was a step that I neglected.



playbill from the Avenue Theatre (BILL Box G2 A95 [1896?])

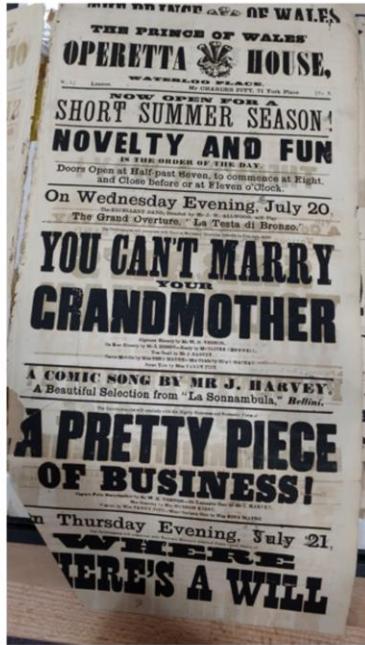
playbills from the Criterion Theatre (BILL Box G2 C87 1897)

I don't want to give the impression that this process was nothing but stress from beginning to end! It has been quite fulfilling, and has produced several positive outcomes.

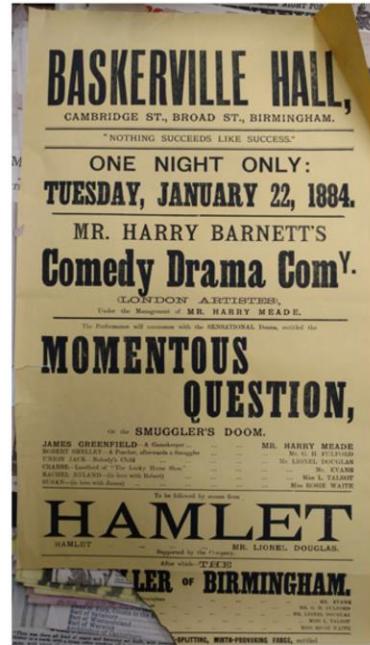
Overall, the primary goal of this project was to make the playbill collection more findable in the online catalog, and that has begun to happen. We now have a much better sense of what the playbill collection is like as a whole: what theaters and geographical locations are represented within, what the physical condition of the materials are, and how much effort will likely be needed to finish making it accessible in the online catalog. The playbills are fascinating objects, and working with them has suggested several possible research projects for the future. It's also led to a few posts for our Folger blogs, allowing me to share some of the playbills with a wider audience.



BILL Box U6 W16



BILL Box G2 P95



BILL Box G3 B53bh 1884

In a way, the project has been almost too successful. Creating increased access to the playbills has also highlighted the poor condition that some of them are in, and has run us headlong into the tension between access and preservation that we worried about at the start. Due to this and a number of other factors, earlier this month we decided to put the playbill project on hiatus for the immediate future.

This is certainly somewhat disappointing, and a touch anticlimactic - I did not anticipate this turn of events when I submitted my proposal for this presentation! - but I am hopeful that it will enable a better long-term plan for the playbills when description is resumed, building on the work described here today.

If you're considering your own historic playbill metadata project, I hope my perspective has been helpful, and I have just one final word of caution: consign

yourself to a life of spelling the word "theater" with an "re" when you mean to use an "er," and vice versa.

Thank you!

twitter: @sehovde

email: shovde@folger.edu

Playbill from the Grecian Theatre  
(BILL Box G2 G81 1856)



Thank you very much! Questions?