**Exploring new routes in theatre archive research**Lindsay Ince

Mikron Theatre Company are a small professional theatre company based in West Yorkshire. Their mission is theatre ‘anywhere for everyone by Canal, River and Road.’ Founded in 1972, they’ve spent the last four decades travelling the UK’s canal and road network, staging productions relating to the history of the canal system, and themes and institutions relevant to British history, exploring topics like equal pay, the histories of institutions like the RNLI and the WI, to plays focusing on how we live, work and play. Whether its community halls, allotments or pub gardens, Mikron will set up and perform for whoever gathers in that space, and they come back time and time again. Due to the relationship we’ve established with them regarding their archive, they also perform one of their plays in our Group Space at Heritage Quay each year, this year it will be about the history of Butlins Redcoats. The company recognised the lack of space and inaccessible storage areas at their headquarters at the Marsden Mechanics Hall was a huge barrier to accessing and harnessing their archive long-term, and so deposited the collection of about 60 boxes and objects with the University of Huddersfield in 2015. We’ve since developed a process to ensure a regular annual accrual of material from them to ensure the archive is up to date and reflects their recent creative outputs. The resource we’ve been able to put into the collection, which I’ll discuss in a minute, has meant we know a lot more about the contents and the potential of this archive than some of our other collections, and we’ve tried to pass on this opportunity to our users in three different ways, depending on the audience involved. I’m going to talk about these experiences and the successes and challenges we’ve faced as part of this work. If you’re attending from an archival background I hope it’ll be useful to see what another institution has done to promote a collection more widely than its obvious core audience. But course, we’re still interested in welcoming theatre historians to use the material, and part of the reason I’m here today is to make the collection more widely known in the theatre research community, so this is also partly a ‘sales pitch’ of the Mikron archive to any potential theatre history researchers!

The first way in which we have reached out to promote the collection across the disciplines in the University is through our cataloguing and exhibition programmes. Between 2017 and 2018 the archive was catalogued by a professionally qualified Archivist. We usually employ the MPLP (More Product, Less Process) methodology when cataloguing our collections. This means keeping descriptions at a broader series level, rather than a more detailed item level. This strikes a balance between the capacities of staff to spend time on cataloguing alongside other duties, whilst still making material available to researchers in a timely manner. However, the ability to engage a short-term cataloguer to process this collection meant cataloguing at item level, where appropriate, was possible, leading to a particularly detailed catalogue. This is now available online on our website, and at archive portals like the Archives Hub. The cataloguer also produced a Collections Briefing for the rest of the staff team, which highlighted some areas of interest within the collection, and was hugely helpful in pulling together this presentation, so I must credit one of my former colleagues, Emma Burgham, now at MOSI, for her work on this. The benefits of having such a detailed catalogue and being able to push it out to other portals, like the Hub and subsequently Europeana almost goes without saying. We get lots more visibility on the descriptions, and are finding that some smaller, and perhaps otherwise underutilized parts of the collection are attracting attention. For instance, we get a lot of researchers interested in labour politics, as you might imagine being in the heart of West Yorkshire, and because some of Mikron’s shows have dealt with the history of radical politics, researchers are often interested in the contents of the show’s research files and Mikron founder Mike Lucas’ library, for rare publications and the research notes from older, harder to find, sources.

For the first exhibitions held in our new archive centre in Heritage Quay, we focused on our main collecting themes, one of these being theatre. As our newest theatrical collection at that time, we made a focus of Mikron in the exhibition. It was a useful collection to have as it’s probably one of our more object heavy collections, and the 3D element held provided a bit more excitement in the cases than the usually heavily paper based archive exhibitions. The contents of the exhibition helped to promote the archive amongst our public and academic visitors and it was still in place during Mikron’s performance in Heritage Quay that year, allowing fans, friends and current staff to explore their own history and share reminiscences of former shows and cast members, and led to many questions and conversations between audience members, Mikron staff and the archivists. If you’re interested you can still view the exhibition online by visiting our Wakelet site, via the link on the slide. I believe the exhibition was successful because we were able to include a lot of the objects that came with the collection, which led us to showcase items researchers might not necessarily ask to see very often, but still had some interesting stories attached to them. For instance, this mug might be explained away as just being part of the boat’s equipment. Undoubtedly it probably was. But in the early days, that mug was what was grabbed to pass round the audience to collect the night’s takings. It was great to be able to use the water buckets decorated with the traditional roses and castles of the narrowboats, and do a bit of research into what they were actually used for in order to create the exhibition captions. Visitors also enjoyed being able to get up close to some of the detailed scaled down models of set and costume designs.

The second way we promote the collection, and more traditional for us as a University archive service, is amongst our student and academic communities, both internal and external. Part of my role within the University is to promote the use of collections through teaching and learning. When I first came into post in 2013, the archives provided induction sessions for both undergraduate and postgraduate historians, and a general induction for postgraduates. As of the last academic year, we’ve held induction or module based sessions for each year of the History degree and postgrad course, English and Creative Writing students, Geographers, Textile practice students, Costume, Fashion Brand Marketing, Education, Motion Graphics and Music students. The diversity of the Mikron archive means we’ve been able to use material from it amongst many of those sessions. We’ve brought out marketing materials from shows about radical politics to inspire fashion students creating t-shirts with political slogans on them for an induction project. We’ve brought out some of the backdrops and set design pieces to look at with Textile Practice students. Some of the bold and theme linked colour schemes on Mikron’s posters were part of the materials we used with Art & Design students, and they’ve also shown the +++++++++++++++++++development of marketing design from the 1970s through to the present day. The ability to bring out material from Mikron’s archive amongst this diverse range of courses has been a real success of taking in this collection, and I feel like there are areas of the collection we haven’t yet engaged with thoroughly enough, for example, I think there are possibilities to explore the evidence of the difficulties of using the canal system in the 1970s and 80s, at a time before it was generally put back into recreational usage perhaps with some of our Geography students. This is part of the ongoing conversations we’re having with academics every year in lots of our departments about potentially relevant sources for their courses! It’s obviously been frustrating that we haven’t been able to find an opportunity to work with our own theatre department. Unfortunately, as they are predominantly practice based there has never been an appropriate opportunity to use the archive within their courses. Neither does the collection fall within the remit of any of the research interests of the current academic staff, however we continue to keep in touch with them, recognising the research landscape is changing all the time. And to make a positive from a negative, this failure did challenge us to see the possibilities in other collections in order to realise the potential of the archive.

Traditionally, Minutes and Annual Reports have been the obvious way to trace the history and decision making of an organisation. It can sometimes be difficult to negotiate how to use other papers unless you have a specific existing interest. I thought it might be worth highlighting a couple of examples of potential areas of research interest that we’ve uncovered during the cataloguing and use of the collection to illustrate this point:

For those that might have an interest in the creative direction of a theatre company, there is potential to trace this kind of story though Mikron’s papers. During the period when the first Artistic Director, Mike Lucas, was stepping down, after over thirty years in the position, the question of where to go next creatively, and what form the leadership of the company should take from that point became a big issue for the Board of Management. They dealt with the problem by instigating an Organisational Review in 2003, which examined the running of the company, and set its agenda going forward, both creatively, and organisationally. When Mike Lucas stood down in 2005, instead of one post encompassing both Producer and Artistic Director, the roles were split, leading to a greater amount of capacity for work and to increase the range of the annual tours, thus expanding the company’s audiences and ability to operate in the future. Road based Spring and Autumn tours now bookend the canal based Summer tour, and they visit over 130 venues and around 10,000 people per year. The records of this entire process are in the archive. This change also allowed Mikron to move toward new approaches to creating shows. So instead of being produced predominantly inhouse and through research and workshopping between the cast as in the past, Mikron have been able to develop and run New Writers Programmes, to commission writers and professional playwrights outside the Mikron environment to come in and write new plays, and there are records of that in the collection to, in terms of the research files that exist, plus a range of annotated scripts at different stages of development.

Funding in the arts is a perennial topic, and it’s possible to research the ups and downs of Mikron’s fortunes in these papers too through grant application and ideas for fundraising schemes. After being founded in earnest in 1972, they became a charity in 1973, and by 1975 were a regularly funded organisation by the Arts Council. This funding remained in place until 1985 when it was withdrawn. This was a dire piece of news for the company and could have signalled the end of them. This was when existing audience’s rallied round and the idea of the Friends of Mikron was conceived. In 2012, when funding was lost again, and faced with selling the narrowboat, it was again the Friends who came to the rescue. Thankfully, the company now has secure Arts Council support until at least 2022, but it has more than once been the case that the Friends have helped keep Mikron afloat, if you’ll pardon the pun! They still contribute to fundraising through their Friends subs, sponsorship of shows and equipment, and regular fundraising drives, the details of all of these, as well as relationships with the major grant giving bodies, can be found in the Fundraising section.

One of the real gems of the archive is a series of oral histories, conducted between the late 1970s and 1990s, by the writers of the plays as research into their subject. There are nearly 250 research interviews, originally on cassette tape, carried out as part of the research process for different shows. They captured the experiences of those living on the canal boats in the bargee community throughout the 20th century, and those working with industries to do with travel and transport, like stevedores, bus drivers, train conductors, brewers, publicans, policemen and activists. Thanks to our HLF funding, all of these have been digitised and so are much more easily accessible than in their original formats, and would be a great resource for those studying the history of transport from the 1970s-1990s, or those involved with the bargee community. They are a completely untapped resource at present, so other than elements that may have formed part of the shows, the information in them has been unheard for over twenty years in some cases.

The third and final piece of the puzzle was being able to work with an active and enthusiastic depositor. Mikron have always been keen to encourage the use of their archives, both within and outside the academic environment, and have been keen to make regularly archiving part of their annual cycle of activity wherever possible. As part of the fragility of their funding in the past, they have a well-established and active Friends Group that have been running since 1986. Each year they run two open days, one in the Summer based around opening up their narrowboat, Tyseley, for supporters to explore. Then another in October, usually on the day of their closing night performance at their base. This is usually the place we target to engage with the friends, and in the past have gone out to their event to talk about the depositing of the archive and plans for the future, and opened up Heritage Quay for Study Days, to allow Friends to come in and engage with historic materials. Friends and supporters of the company are often enthusiastic and life-long fans, and as a result of this engagement we are often offered materials for the archive, including candid photographs capturing the Mikron experience from the audience point of view, which is an interesting contrast to the photographs held within the archive, which are often publicity and marketing based. The importance of a lively Friends Group, is of course myriad in promoting the organisation and fundraising for its future, but the Friends are also really interested in exploring and re-living the history of the company, which makes them a significant user and enquiry base for us in the archive. The fact that Mikron are so keen to work with us and maintain a link to their archive is such a positive step in making their material available and understanding it. They are always ready to answer questions and open to ideas on how the material might be used in our work at the University. Rather than controlling their history, and creating an ‘official’ viewpoint, Mikron are keen to acknowledge that their history is one created not only by the company, but the community that have grown up around it, be that audience members that have seen every show, or a venue that has hosted two performances or forty-eight. They are enthusiastic about working with us in the archive to celebrate their upcoming 50th anniversary, and use the opportunity to bring together long-time Friends, new audience members, former cast and crew to curate an exhibition or book of material from the archive. Their support for dealing with multiple audiences and embracing the range of ways people may have been introduced to their work leads to them supporting our desire to use their archival material more widely than just with one audience. Their archive also reflects their place in the community. Papers about the local Jazz Festival, Community and Business Associations, and the Mechanics Hall are all part of the archive, due to Mikron’s association and involvement with them. As a research institution, we’re always looking to the possibilities for funded research for academics and early career researchers. We’d be open to opportunities to work with other archives that might have small, travel based or working class based archives and might want to explore the potential for partnership or collaboration, and likewise academics with interests in this area.

I haven’t had time today to explore the records we hold on the history of Mikron’s narrowboat, Tyseley, for those interested in the history of canals or the waterways as a recreational setting. Or talk about the successful actors who were in Mikron casts early in their careers, including The Archers’ Jolene, Buffy Davis or The Fast Show and Harry Potter’s Mark Williams. Current patrons Timothy West and Prunella Scales make sense considering their love of the UK’s canals, how Margot Fonteyn became a patron is yet to be fully explained! Or talk about the various feedback on early shows held within the archive from different age groups for those of you interested in the responses to theatre by different demographics. From the older audiences it’s enthusiastic, from the children – incredibly brutally honest! I hope though, if you’re from an archival background, this short recap of how we’ve been able to utilise a theatre collection without a core audience of theatre researchers has been useful, and I hope if you’re in the field of theatre history this might have piqued your interest in looking at the Mikron archive!