



Leeds University Library Special Collections

Archives of Red Ladder Theatre – Report to the Business Archives Council

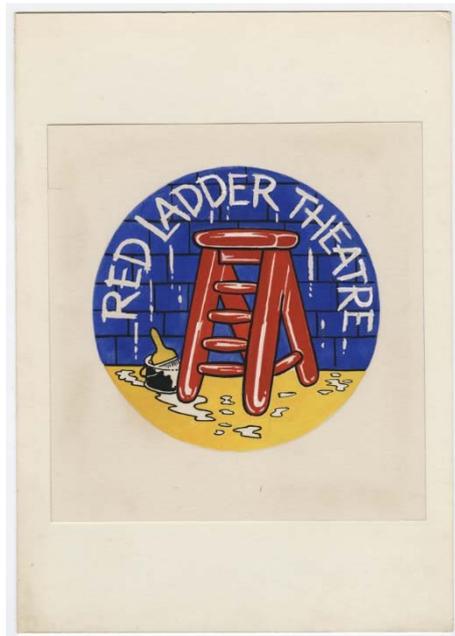
Introduction

Leeds University Library's Special Collections received the 2016 Business Archives Council Cataloguing Grant for Business Archives relating to the Arts. The grant allowed us to recruit an Assistant to catalogue the archives of the Leeds-based Red Ladder Theatre Company. The archive had actually been the subject of a previous bid to the BAC; but while the importance of the company was recognised, and several academics at Leeds and Sheffield Universities had studied their history, the fact that the archives had not yet been deposited in an archive mitigated against it receiving a grant. Following the unsuccessful bid, in 2014 Red Ladder deposited the first batch of records with Leeds University Library's Special Collections, and the two agreed to work in partnership to have the archive catalogued and accessible to researchers. For Red Ladder, the archive now had a secure home. For Special Collections, their growing [performance archive holdings](#) were considerably enhanced with the addition of the archive of a long-standing, influential radical theatre group to sit alongside the records of regional institutions such as the West Yorkshire Playhouse.

Background

Red Ladder is a highly regarded radical theatre company with 49 years of history, acknowledged as one of Britain's leading national touring companies producing new theatre, contributing to social change and global justice. The company has been an important influence on British political theatre and indeed the wider theatre industry. Notable artists who began their career with Red Ladder include Michael Attenborough, Rona Munro, Meera Syal, Chris Reason, Jenny Sealey, and David Edgar. The current artistic director of The Bush, Madani Younis started his career at Director of Asian Theatre School, a Red Ladder project. According to Dr. Bill McDonnell, Senior Lecturer at Sheffield University, "Red Ladder were and remain absolutely pivotal..., being, now, the longest lasting of all the groups that came out of 1968. Their history is also the history of alternative and community theatre over the past 40 years, and so it offers a unique and irreplaceable perspective." The

company has focused on disadvantaged communities and multiculturalism, and working with living playwrights, which means its work potentially opens new avenues of research into the arts and performance in West Yorkshire and beyond.



It started in 1968 as a collective, the Agitprop Street Players, making street theatre – most notably joining the anti-Vietnam War protests in Grosvenor Square led by Vanessa Redgrave. In the early 1970s it changed its name to Red Ladder (after one of its props), and established itself as an influential part of the growing fringe theatre movement. The company received its first Arts Council funding in 1974, and in 1976 moved to Leeds where it has remained ever since, although it continued to tour nationally. In 1985 the company changed from a collective model to a hierarchy, with a Board of Directors and an Artistic Director, the first being Rachel Feldberg. Between 2002 and 2007 the company ran the Asian Theatre School, which then relocated to Bradford as an independent organisation, Freedom Studios.

In the 2010s the company faced straightened times, with a core funding cut of 40% in 2012, and then in 2015 complete withdrawal of its Arts Council funding. This gave some urgency to the need to properly safeguard the archive, something which Artistic Director Rod Dixon and Producer Chris Lloyd saw as key to ensuring the company's legacy.

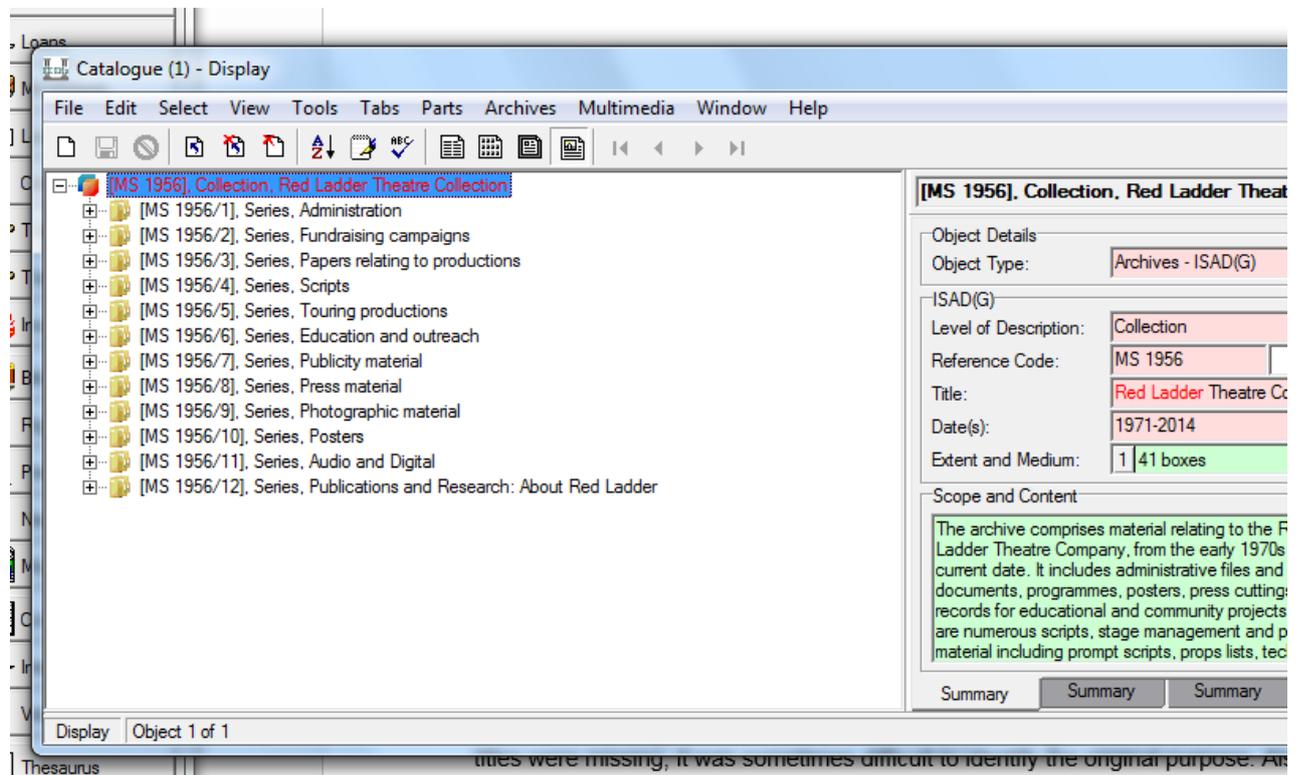


While successive producers and artistic directors had been assiduous about saving the company's documentary assets, not surprisingly storage space was not a high priority and the archives were split between various cupboards in the company office, and warehouse storage. The first deposit consisted of: stage management files containing tour plans, press cuttings, articles, audience feedback sheets, scripts, technical information such as lighting plans and set drawings, performance contracts, etc.; wallets of publicity material such as flyers, promotional items, programmes etc.; photographs of performances, rehearsals and cast members, mostly prints but some CDs; and a 'sound archive' of reel-to-reel tapes, cassettes and other formats. In addition there was further material in Red Ladder's storage awaiting appraisal, weeding and transfer including board minutes and papers, posters, notebooks and marketing and promotional papers. Coverage from the earliest days is patchy, but from the late 1970s through to the early 2000s there is material from almost every production. Much of the material was mixed together, there was considerable duplication, and no easy way to access material relating to a specific production.

The Project

The main aim was to sort the archive into coherent series and create catalogue records using Special Collections' EMu database, so that the archive would be accessible to researchers and discoverable remotely. From the outset this was conceived of as a partnership project; Rod and Chris made two further deliveries of material, there were two meetings at Special Collections, Fiona visited the Red Ladder offices and there was an almost constant e-mail dialogue between the project and Red Ladder. In addition, Rod and Chris gave a presentation at a workshop on Special Collections' performance archives, convened by the University's [Cultural Institute](#). This helped to raise the profile of the collection and has opened up possibilities for future academic study using the collection.

The main challenge was the bulk of material to be arranged into coherent series. Where file titles were missing, it was sometimes difficult to identify the original purpose. Also a lot of the publicity material did not carry years. This was where working with the company proved invaluable, as they could advise on when productions had taken place, and what the purpose of certain files were. Eventually the archive was arranged into 12 series, as shown in the screen grab from the back end of the EMu database:



The next step was to catalogue down to file level. Many of the series were split down into files by production, for example /5 Touring Productions, while others such as /7 Publicity Material were arranged chronologically. We were able to use a new EMu module called Sapphire, which is a web-based data entry module designed for repetitive entry over long series, without the complexity of the complete EMu back end. This was the first time we had used Sapphire for a fixed-term project, and it proved extremely effective. Fiona has been able to capture some useful pointers for future use of Sapphire which will feed into future projects.

In parallel with the cataloguing, the volunteers were repackaging and sorting the photographic material, supported by the Conservation team. Also Fiona was feeding material to the Digitisation Studio, both to enhance the catalogue entries and to create a bank of high quality images to use in Red Ladder's forthcoming 50th anniversary celebrations.



Key Outcomes and Next Steps

The key outcome, of file level cataloguing of the most important documents in Red Ladder's collection has been achieved. This brings together the theatre's administrative history in a way that has never previously been available. The catalogue can be viewed here - https://library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/389638/red_ladder_theatre_collection
Click the 'In this Collection' tab to see the hierarchy

In addition a record has been created detailing the scripts, production files, posters, publicity etc. for each production. This will be valuable for researchers and useful for Red Ladder in developing an oral history project, and for their 50th anniversary. It can also be made available to researchers through the catalogue, to aid easy cross-referencing.

There has been a lot of attendant publicity, including features on the APAC (Association of Performance Archive Collections) blog and forthcoming in their newsletter; posts on the Special Collections blog and on the library website; Tweets on both Special Collections and Red Ladder's feeds; and features in Red Ladder's e-newsletters.

The next steps will include pursuing some of the academic contacts who have expressed an interest in using the collection for research and possible PhD applications. There will also be

some further social media activity including a release by the Library's Press and Marketing team. There remain a few packaging tasks and tidying up of file level records which will be completed by the volunteers and the archivist.

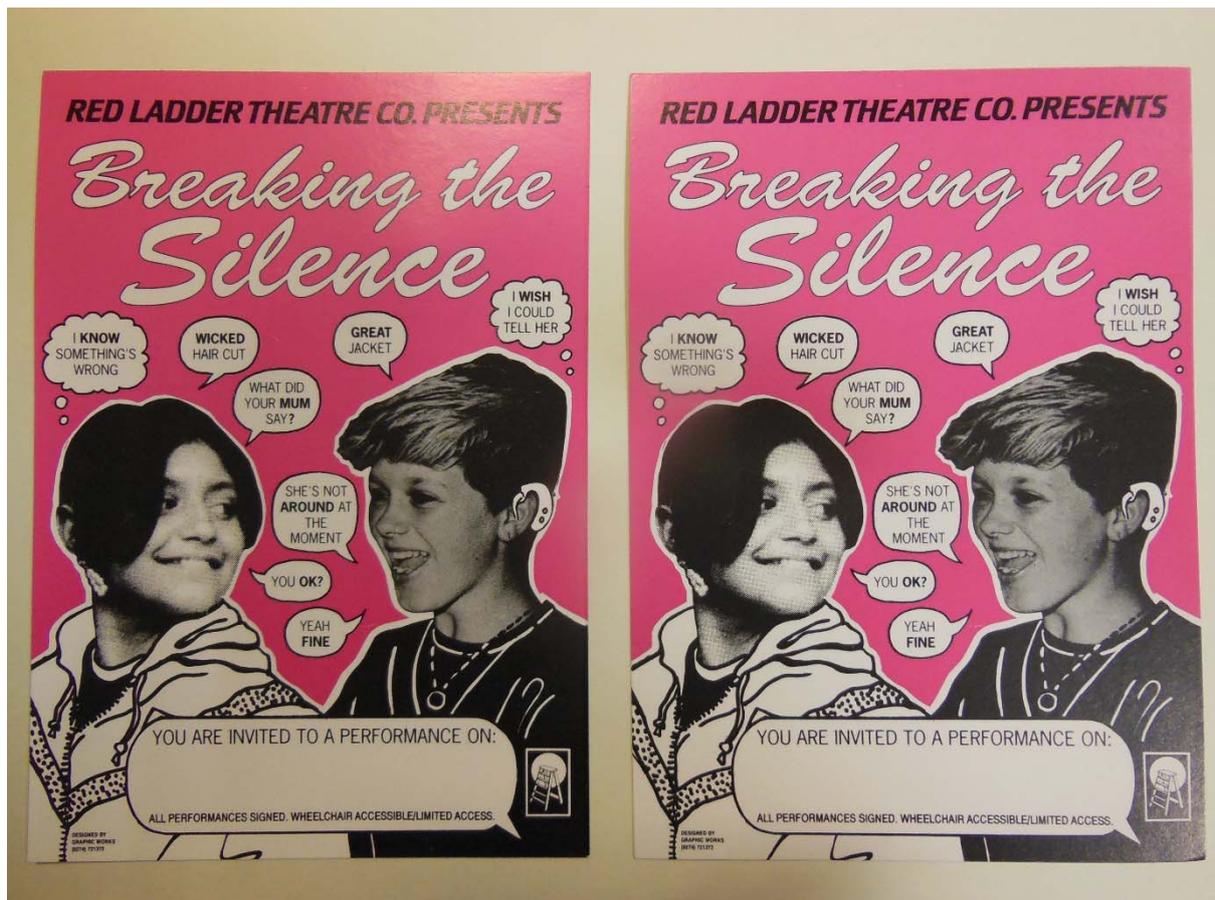
Tim Procter
Collections & Engagement Manager (Archives & Manuscripts)

Fiona Gell
Red Ladder Project Assistant

Jennifer Zwierink
Archivist

Special Collections
University of Leeds Library

25 April 2017



Appendix

Budget Breakdown

Intern for 8 weeks (Grade 3, £16,017 pro rata):	£3007.00
Catalogue data validation and publishing to web – Special Collections archivist time equivalent to:	£200.00
Preservation materials – existing stock equivalent to:	£350.00
Total	£3557.00
Value of Special Collections contribution	£557.00

NB – some additional archivist time will be required to upload the final few file level records to the public catalogue once complete.

