

FRANK MATCHAM SOCIETY

Tristram Hunt
Director
Victoria and Albert Museum
Cromwell Road
London, SW7 2RL

14 March 2021

Dear Tristram Hunt,

I write on behalf of myself, the patrons, president-emeritus, vice-presidents, committee and members of The Frank Matcham Society who enjoy a very valuable reciprocal relationship with The Victoria and Albert Museum Theatre and Performance Department.

Our last organised visit before Covid struck was to show members the stores at Blythe House and learn more about the activities and future plans with the decant and move to East London and we have jointly organised an annual talk on Perspectiv's European Historic Theatres Day on 25 October.

Whilst appreciating that the effects of the pandemic and other world issues require institutions and businesses to change plans, for both practical and economic reasons, the scale of the planned structural alterations we have read about in the media are causing a good deal of alarm and worry.

We know that by law the collections themselves are secure but are all concerned that without a Specialist Department concentration on Theatre and Performance it may well prove more difficult in the future to access the objects and records you hold. Often, by the nature of professional production where changes of mind are constant, such access is required at very short notice.

Our theatrical heritage is generally given scant importance by the professionals involved in productions and buildings at the time as, by necessity, they are always concentrating on their current and next projects. The retention of records is also rarely possible due to a lack of space, so the existence of the V & A focussed collection is vital not just for recording history but for inspiring and informing future works. As Sir Winston Churchill said "The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you can see".

The specialist knowledge of curators, librarians, collections specialists and archivists is invaluable to research students and professionals alike. Unlike most art objects the ephemeral nature of theatrical records in different periods requires not only a knowledge of the item and its source but a rounded understanding of how the business worked at different times and how it continues to evolve. This is important not just from a performance stance but also from the business, technical and architectural sides as, unlike other businesses, theatre is absolutely a communal art-form where every aspect of production is vital to the end result, including the memory of the event.

I am sure the wide perception of lost departmental knowledge will also have a detrimental effect on the Victoria and Albert Museum's own future since people are less likely to trust it as a safe destination for their own collections and records when they are no longer able to accommodate them.

Our focussed interest and main worry would be the collection of Frank Matcham and Company plans held at the museum. Many of these are so delicate they cannot be unrolled without knowledge that conservation may be undertaken, but in recent years architects and building owners have found access to them invaluable with regard to rebuilding and refurbishment projects to help older venues continue operating for the future. There will definitely be a continued need for regular access to these plans which are just one of the many hundreds of objects of which the museum is custodian requiring specialist knowledge and conservation skills to interpret them properly and share appropriately.

The Frank Matcham Society have recently received a donation of some such plans. After scanning and researching we did intend to add these to the V & A collection but now members are questioning whether we should do so.

As a world leader in the industry it is shameful that the United Kingdom does not have a museum and education centre dedicated to performance in all its diversity. The Victoria and Albert Museum Theatre and Performance Department is the closest we get and its staff are greatly appreciated throughout the academic and professional worlds. It would be unforgiveable if any loss of expertise sets back the study and appreciation of the enormously rich performing arts heritage of the UK.

In your consultations please consider very carefully the proven value of the Theatre and Performance Department and all of those who work within it. The whole theatre industry relies on them not just for past knowledge but for its continued development, and success, for generations yet to come.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Fox
Chairman
The Frank Matcham Society
President
Perspectiv, Association of Historic Theatres in Europe

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