University of York acquires Ayckbourn Archive for the nation

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The archive - which contains thousands of items including original stage sketches, working manuscripts, plot diagrams and correspondence - will become part of the internationally important Samuel Storey Writing and Performance Collection at the University's Borthwick Institute.

Professor Brian Cantor, the University of York's Vice-Chancellor, announced the news at a performance of Thomas Middleton's Jacobean comedy A Mad World, My Masters! by the Out of the Blue Theatre Company in the new auditorium in the University's Department of Theatre, Film and Television.

The £240,000 purchase has been made possible thanks to support from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), the Samuel Storey Charitable Trust, the MLA/V&A Purchase Grant Fund and the Friends of the National Libraries.

The Ayckbourn Archive will be the focus of a major outreach programme, supported by HLF, which will see its contents made available for public use. The archive will also form a major teaching resource for undergraduate and postgraduate courses in the Department of Theatre, Film and Television. It will provide a unique research resource, because of the completeness with which it documents one of the most outstanding theatrical careers of our time.

Fiona Spiers, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund, Yorkshire and Humber, who attended the performance, said: "This is incredibly exciting news, both for the University and the public. The Ayckbourn Archive is a fascinating collection and resource which will enable everyone to learn more about one of the greatest playwrights of our time for many years to come."

Janet Davies, Head of V&A UK Section & Purchase Grant Fund, added: "The Borthwick Institute fully merited what will be the Purchase Grant Fund's largest grant this year for this archive of international importance. We are very pleased to support the development of the Samuel Storey Writing and Performance Collection in this absorbing subject."

Sir Alan's archive maps his pre-eminence as playwright, theatre director, and (at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough) artistic director over the last five decades. By the end of this summer, he will have premiered 75 plays. His work has been translated into more than 30 languages.

With a playwriting career unrivalled in modern times, Ayckbourn is the creator of some of the greatest comedies since the Second World War – from The Norman Conquests to Woman in Mind, and Absurd Person Singular to Bedroom Farce.

The archive documents the composition and preparation of both his plays' first productions and their subsequent runs elsewhere in the UK and abroad, as well as including many theatre reviews. It includes working drafts, holograph manuscripts and revised typescripts, showing Sir Alan creating some of the most complex comic structures of modern times. There are notes on plots, diagrams of relationships between characters, sketches of stage settings, and positionings and movements of characters.

Correspondence with playwrights, actors, directors, producers, designers and agents, reads like a Who's Who of theatre from the second half of the 20th century onwards. Peter Hall, Peggy Ramsay, Trevor Nunn, Michael Winner, Stephen Sondheim, John Osborne, Harold Pinter, Alan Plater and Martin Jarvis are among the familiar names which appear.

Sir Alan said: "The archive is really about the writing process. The old method was my wife, Heather, at an old typewriter with me dictating from my handwritten notes. I always like to go to bed with a tidy script and, in the old days, I would trawl back through several pages of typing and blot things out with tippex or cover my scripts with arrows.

"I realised that what I was learning from others and from experience was valuable and I wanted to chronicle it. I hope the archive is an extension of this. I think the archive will be a fertile ground for ideas and inspire people to write."
The University aims to reach a wider audience through a suite of online educational tools and resources based on the archive that will support A and AS level teaching in English and Drama and Theatre Studies.

Mike Cordner, Ken Dixon Professor of Drama in the Department of Theatre, Film and Television, said: "Sir Alan is a uniquely prolific, radically innovative, and supremely inventive dramatist. His work holds a special resonance for Yorkshire and it is entirely appropriate that the archive remains in the county where much of the work was produced.

"We are enormously proud that the University of York is to be the repository for this extraordinary collection, and that it will be available for use not only by the University community but the wider public."

The Samuel Storey Writing and Performance Collection was established in 2003 through the generosity of the Samuel Storey Trust. The Ayckbourn Archive is an important addition to the collection which also contains work by a range of writers including David Storey, Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran and Barry Took. It features contemporary comedy from Charles Wood's screenplay for the second Beatles film Help! via Round the Horne to Goodnight Sweetheart.

Keeper of Archives at the Borthwick, Chris Webb, said: "As part of this project, we plan to establish a new position of Educational Outreach Officer at the Borthwick to forge closer links with schools in the region. Sir Alan's Archive is a hugely welcome and important addition to the Samuel Storey Writing and Performance Collection."

Note to editors

As well as work by writers including Charles Wood, David Storey, Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran, Peter Whelan, Julia Pascal and Barry Took, the Samuel Storey Writing and Performance Collection contains around 5,000 published volumes, and new titles are added almost daily. The aim is to buy a copy of every new play currently being published in English, but also to ensure that the Collection offers outstanding resources for work on earlier periods of drama.

Find out more about the University of York's Department of Theatre, Film and Television.

Find out more about the Borthwick Institute.

The MLA/V&A Purchase Grant Fund is a government fund that helps regional museums, record offices and specialist libraries in England and Wales to acquire objects relating to the arts, literature and history. It was established at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in 1881 and continues to be part of its nationwide work.The annual grants budget, currently £600,000, is provided by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA). Each year, the Purchase Grant Fund considers some 250 applications and awards grants to around 100 organisations, enabling acquisitions of over

£3million to go ahead. Visit the V&A website.

Further information

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