

National Theatre

A Teacher's Introduction to the National Theatre Archive

Archive Finding Aid

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Introduction

The National Theatre Archive contains a treasure trove of material that can bring the study of Drama and Theatre to life for you and your students. A visit to the Archive allows young people and aspiring theatre makers to see and handle documents, designs and other artefacts related to National Theatre productions, and learn about the process and practice of producing world-class theatre here at the National Theatre.

The Archive holds records for every production that has taken place since the National Theatre was founded in 1963. Whether you are teaching a set text, exploring the work of a particular theatre practitioner or investigating careers in the theatre, the Archive provides opportunities to create a bespoke and inspiring study experience for your students. An Archive visit also allows your students to develop vital independent research skills in a supportive and inspiring environment.

Visits to the National Theatre Archive are free of charge. In this guide, you will also see the range of online resources that enable you to bring the National Theatre and its Archive into your own classroom or studio.

Onsite visits

Visiting the National Theatre Archive in London enables access to materials such as prompt books, costume and set designs, recordings of performances and talks as well as collections of press reviews, programmes and unique items. Spending time with us here at the Archive allows focused study time which can inform subsequent teaching and learning opportunities back at school or college. You can book a visit for individuals or groups of up to 25 using our [online booking form](#). Please email us on archive@nationaltheatre.org.uk if you have a group of between 25 and 60 students. For a visual journey through the building, please watch this [video](#).



The National Theatre Studio building, which houses the National Theatre Archive

Studying a set text

Many of the set texts on the GCSE and A Level specifications have been performed at the National Theatre and you can search [our online catalogue](#) to find out more. For example, *Our Country's Good* (2015), *Hedda Gabler* (2016), *The Great Wave* (2018) and *Macbeth* (2018) have all been staged at least once. A visit to the Archive to study a set text can therefore involve some or all the following:

- **Watching a full recording of the production.** You may wish to prepare students with a series of questions or prompts to guide their viewing, particularly for longer productions. These recordings allow for detailed analysis of performance style, directorial decisions and design elements and provide a stimulus for students' own creative work.
- **Exploring the prompt book.** We hold prompt books for most of our productions and these can provide invaluable insight into the technical requirements of a production. For example, the use of the Olivier Theatre's revolve forms a key element of many design concepts and introduces unfamiliar aspects of stagecraft to students.
- **Reading the reviews.** Theatre reviews and interviews capture the reactions of journalists, experts and the public and can be used to support work on historical and social context, interpretations of classic plays and understanding of how modern plays reflect the world around us. These reviews can also support work on live theatre reviews, in which key statements by critics can be debated and challenged.
- **Following the design journey.** The process of designing set, costume, lighting, sound and puppetry can be followed through our photographs, drawings and even fabric swatches related to our productions. Comparing the original designs to the final product in photographic or video form allows students to understand the various challenges and opportunities involved in mounting a production of a particular text. By looking through notes, scrapbooks and rehearsal diaries written by staff directors, students will also gain a sense of the depth of research required to support a full vision of a production.
- **Reading the programme.** Not only do production programmes provide cast lists and photographs, they also regularly contain articles written by experts to support the audience's experience of a production. For example, *The Great Wave's* programme includes helpful information about the relationship between Japan and Korea, whilst Clint Dyer's production programme of *Othello* contains expert discussion from Shakespeare specialist Farah Karim-Cooper. These concise but detailed articles are a rich source of supporting

contextual and analytical information to enrich students' practical and written work on their set text(s).

- **Comparing and contrasting different productions of the same text.** For example, *Othello* has been performed twice at the National Theatre in the 21st century and three times in the 20th century. Our range of artefacts from these productions illuminates the social and political issues surrounding the play, and reflects changing attitudes towards race, gender and power.

Studying prescribed practitioners

Many of the practitioners prescribed on A Level specifications are represented by work held at the Archive. This includes Alecky Blythe, Complicité, Paule Constable, Marianne Elliott, Polly Findlay, Gareth Fry, Nicholas Hytner, Katie Mitchell, Rufus Norris and Rae Smith. Please see the *Teaching Practitioners using the Archive* resource also available on the [Learning Hub](#).

By viewing a range of material such as production photographs, press reviews, rehearsal notes and practitioner research, students can gain full insight into the working practice of directors and designers alike. Students can:

- Read notes, such as Katie Mitchell's background biographical details for characters.
- Explore sketches by Rae Smith from productions such as *Barber Shop Chronicles* (2017), *Translations* (2018) and *The Light Princess* (2013) to investigate working methods, themes and style of Smith's practice.
- Watch extracts of productions directed by Rufus Norris and find specific examples of his practice, such as creating dramatic transitions between scenes and settings.
- Notice patterns of collaboration: many practitioners have long-standing relationships with other theatre-makers. For example, Katie Mitchell's productions often include sound design by Gareth Fry. The breadth of information available ensures that performance and design candidates are equally well catered for.
- Notice and discuss the range of techniques used by a particular practitioner or company to ensure a full and detailed understanding of their work. When a practitioner is represented by a body of work at the Archive, it is also possible to make insightful comments about the style and content of their work, for example a focus on feminist themes, or a collaboration with a particular playwright.

Online resources

The National Theatre Archive is uniquely placed to create relevant and stimulating material based on its collections.

- The National Theatre's [Learning Hub](#) is an outstanding resource to use in conjunction with an Archive visit. For example, it hosts the [In Search of Greek Theatre](#) series of videos created and presented by Dr Lucy Jackson, Assistant Professor in Ancient Greek Literature at Durham University, and Erin Lee, Head of Archive at the National Theatre, London. These videos are partly funded by Durham University. The Learning Hub also hosts [Google Art and Culture](#) exhibitions. You can access online exhibitions on topics such as 'Staging Children's Theatre at the National Theatre' which includes *War Horse* (2007), *The Wind in the Willows* (1990) and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1998), and 'Bright Young Tings' which tracks the emergence of Black theatre companies in the 1970s and 1980s.
- The [National Theatre Collection](#) contains over 70 production recordings, which are often supported by short videos and teaching resources. These materials are often an excellent preparation for an Archive visit, allowing you to watch a production beforehand and create a series of questions or tasks to complete during your time with us.

FAQs

How do I know what's available?

The online catalogue can be found [here](#). Guidance on how to use search the catalogue can be found [here](#).

Can we arrange to access the Archive material online?

There is a range of information online to support your students, including videos which use and refer to key items from the collection. However, much of the material requires an in-person visit to the Archive: a unique opportunity to see material related to specific productions, directors and designers.

Will we see costumes and props at the Archive?

The National Theatre Archive does not store costumes and props – many of them are looked after by the National Theatre Green Store (managed by our Costume and Props Hire teams), whilst others have been hired for specific productions and then returned to their owners. However, recordings, photographs and costume bibles hold interesting and helpful information about how props and costumes have been used in productions. Using the catalogue is the best way to check what is available to access.

Can we borrow items from the Archive?

Items cannot be removed from the Archive. However, we can provide background packs for productions for a small fee, which includes digital scans of the programme, major press reviews and watermarked production photographs.

Can we buy food and drink at the Archive?

The Archive is housed on The Cut which is approximately ten minutes' walk from the main National Theatre site. Your group will need to bring a packed lunch or make arrangements to obtain food at the many restaurants or shops in the local area. There are several eating options available in the main National Theatre building on the South Bank.

Can I visit on my own as a teacher?

Yes! Teachers find a visit to the Archive an invaluable way of increasing their own subject knowledge before teaching a text, particularly if it is one with which they are not familiar. The range of material available can inspire a much greater depth and breadth of teaching and provides an excellent evidence base with which to inform students' own exploration of drama and theatre. You can book your individual visit [here](#).

Can my students visit on their own?

Individuals over the age of 18 can book their own visit to the Archive using the [online booking form](#). We ask that students aged 16 and 17 wishing to visit alone email us on archive@nationaltheatre.org.uk. Groups of fewer than 25 students under the age of 18 must be accompanied by school staff and should be booked using the [online booking form](#).

Further detail on how to use the Archive for teaching set texts and practitioners can be found in our additional Archive Learning Guides on the [Learning Hub](#). You can also find out more about how to access and use the Black Plays Archive, which can be found [here](#).

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Thank you

This guide to Teacher's Introduction to the National Theatre Archive was written
by Theatre Education Consultant Susie Ferguson, 2024.