The hidden marvels of the Reminiscence Theatre Archive

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When I was 11, my grandfather took me to see a magician’s show. One of the tricks that impressed me the most was when he took off his top hat and started taking out all sorts of marvels: coloured handkerchiefs, a pink balloon, even a flock of doves. This is how I felt the first time I opened this box nine months ago. I didn’t know what to expect at all. And I must say that what I found inside was beyond my expectations.
There are more than twenty similar boxes in one of the storerooms of the Reminiscence Theatre Archive. I have chosen this particular one because it contains one of my favourite projects. Its title is “What did you do in the war, mum?”
WHAT DID YOU
DO IN THE
WAR MUM?

WHAT DID YOU DO
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“What did you do in the war, Mum” tells the story of the women who supported this country through the II World War, fighting from home. Some worked in farms (the Land Army), some in the woods, cutting trees (The Timber Corps), some joined the Air Forces, and some worked in the shelters, helping the people who had lost their homes. Forty years later, in the 1980s, Pam Schweitzer and her team interviewed over 50 women in different parts in South London and they recorded their experience of living the war in the home front.
Let’s open the box now and see what we can find: DVDs and CD ROMs, some books, flyers, photos, some folders.
And if we opened the twin box of this project, we would find just document boxes. They contain all these interviews, which were transcribed and then used as the basis for a musical play.

Reading the interviews in the boxes is like travelling back in time. It’s very easy to experience what it was like to be living in England at the time because you are reading the testimonies of real people. What is more, you can listen to them, because there is another store in the archive where you can find the cassettes with the interviews. These cassettes were converted into digital audio by Elvira Nuri, the Finnish Grundtvig assistant who preceded me in the archive.
We can also find an envelope with photos donated by these women, which would be used to make a book with a selection of the most interesting stories. This book would complement the theatre play and the people who attended the show could buy it for very little money.

But there is another story that is contained in this box: the development of the theatre project, from the early versions of the play script, full of handwritten notes, to the different final versions. We must take into account that this show was revived several times, usually coinciding with the commemoration of an anniversary of the war.
In this box we can find beautiful black and white photos of the different shows, taken by Alex Schweitzer, where we can see the different casts that performed this play throughout the years.
There are also different versions of the posters and flyers, which always have a flavour of the magnificent design of the 1930s and 40s.

Something that is very interesting is to have a look at the tour schedules: it’s amazing to see how they managed to visit so many places in so little time and you can imagine the company arriving in their van, setting up the stage in almost no time and performing for a group of people who often didn’t know what to expect, but who soon got involved in the magic of a show brilliantly performed. You can watch and enjoy a recording of this show in the Reminiscence Theatre Archive website.

The third story is how this material was organized and made available to anyone who wishes to make use of it: drama students, specialists in contemporary history or women’s studies, researchers of this period or school teachers. It can also be material that EFL teachers can turn into engaging classroom activities. And, why not, it can also be a source of inspiration for fiction writers.
TOUR SCHEDULE - WAR MUM
SCRIPTS - NSM
MISCELLANEOUS
War Mum
Show Reviews
and Venues Requests
1985 War, Mum Shou
EVALUATION REPORT
+ School Children's Responses

VENUE'S

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All this material had been kept at the Age Exchange Reminiscence Centre until 2005. When Pam Schweitzer decided to donate it to the Drama Department of the University of Greenwich, the first thing that had to be done was to organize it into folders and boxes. She did it with the help of Anna Waldheim from Germany and Anna Kirow from Poland. In the photo you can see the different folders that contain all the information about “What did you do in the war, mum?”: the different tours, the scripts, the press releases and the feedback, including school children’s responses.
What did You Do in the War Mum?
Part 1

Age Exchange 1985

Memorex DVD-R

What did you do in the War Mum?
Part 2
There was also plenty of audiovisual material. In this case, as you can see, the VHS original version of the play has been converted to DVD. However, sometimes we have to work directly with the original or even the tapes from the video camera. Personally, this is the most time-consuming task, as you have to deal with issues that come up continuously such as out-of-sync or poor-quality copies or simply damaged DVDs that can’t be played. This is why one of our priorities is to digitise films and cassettes in order to preserve them for the future generations.
I would like to conclude talking about two hidden jewels I have found in this box. The first is a tape labelled “Women at War”, which contained the recollection of the memories of a series of women combined with beautiful songs of the time. Pam told me that it had been used as the soundtrack for an exhibition. Surprisingly, when I tried to upload it to Youtube in order to embed it in the Reminiscence Archive website, they warned me that due to the content of the songs, it would be censored in certain countries. Thus, I had to edit the recording and take out the songs. However, the original is preserved in the archive.
The second jewel was an interview with Sylvia Jacobs, a woman who worked in the shelters. I had chosen it to upload to the website as an example of contributor. To do this, I had to scan the originally typed interview and convert it to Word. When you do this, sometimes the result is a bit peculiar, as the computer interprets the typed letters in a funny way. What you have to do is read the document carefully and correct the mistakes. This interview was quite long, thirteen pages. I was about to finish when the interviewer asked this lady if there was something she would like to add. She then told the most amazing story about a conversation she overheard when travelling in a bus during the war. It was about an incident that has never been recorded in the history books. It might be true or not, but here is a mystery for whoever wants to research it. But we don’t have time for this story. If you want to find out what the conversation was about, you’ll have to visit the Reminiscence Theatre Archive website.