

A Theater Time Machine

Video Archive Captures Performances For Posterity

BY BRAD HATHAWAY

There is a time-honored saying that live theater is the most temporary of arts because, when it is over, it is over. One performance is never exactly like another as the artists respond to the differing reactions of different audiences. And once a show closes, well – it can't be recreated exactly.

This may well be true – but I know of a time machine that captures many of Washington's great performances. You can step back to 1995 and watch "The Three Sisters" that Joy Zinoman directed at her Studio Theatre. Or you can slip back to 1996 and see Michael Kahn's notable mounting of both "Henry IV" and "Henry V" for his Shakespeare Theatre.

Interested in 1997's "Sunday in the Park with George" which Eric Schaeffer recreated at Arena Stage with the original Broadway costumes he had purchased when that show closed in New York?

You can re-visit Paata Tsikurishvili's wordless "Hamlet ... The Rest is Silence" or the premiere of Craig Wright's post-2001 play "Recent Tragic Events" which was a joint production of Woolly Mammoth Theatre and Theater J or Folger's spectacular "Elizabeth the Queen" starring Michael Learned.

How about sampling some of the Kennedy Center's history-making Sondheim Celebration of 2002 when they mounted full productions of six of Sondheim's musicals in repertory? All six can be re-visited anytime you want.

Well, not anytime. You have to visit this time machine at the Washingtonian Division of the DC Public Library at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Library on G St. NW. That's where you will find the collection of the Washington Area Performing Arts Video Archive (WAPAVA), one of only two active programs in America recording live theater for posterity. The other one is the Theatre on Film and Tape (TOFT) program of the Public Library of New York, but that archive is only available to professional researchers. The WAPAVA collection is available to anyone.

Our tapes aren't quite as high quality as those of TOFT, where they spend many thousands of dollars to capture a Broadway musical using multiple cam-



The Martin Luther King, Jr Library on G Street NW holds a theater lover's time machine. Photo: Teddie Hathaway

eras. WAPAVA usually has just a single camera to tape a show at a cost of \$750 plus some \$250 for the post-production expenses.

These tapes aren't like watching a film or a full television production. They are archival documents. Using a single zoom lens to come in for a close-up and then pull back to catch elements of staging, choreography or a set design, the cameraman's concentration is on capturing the details of the performance. If you saw a show and want to re-visit the experience, you will find your memory cells stimulated. If you didn't see the show, you will probably be somewhat frustrated, but that frustration will come more from seeing a "reasonable facsimile of" what you missed than from the limitations of the recording.

WAPAVA was started by a great theater-lover, the late James J. Taylor who saw the need for capturing these fleeting works of art and dedicated his life to accomplishing their preser-

vation. He paid much of the cost out of his own pocket and prevailed on some theaters that had larger budgets to underwrite their own archival tapes. He also solicited donations to make it possible to capture more shows.

With his death in 2005, the effort was continued under the leadership of Stephen Jarrett and a Board of Directors of eight. This year they have received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts which will allow the capturing of as many as ten shows by smaller theater companies who frequently don't have the resources to subsidize the recording of their works.

In all, some 545 shows have been taped thus far, with almost 50 tapes still awaiting post-production preparation.

It is best to call to make a reservation to view a tape, although walk-ins will be accommodated as well. The staff will have to set up a viewing area with a television set and earphones



Curious Minds author Brad Hathaway in the viewing room where WAPAVA tapes can take you back in theatrical time. Photo: Teddie Hathaway

so you don't bother more silent researchers. There is another option, however. The collection is also available at the Michelle Smith Performing Arts Library at the University of Maryland in College Park.

Brad Hathaway writes on theater and intellectually intriguing opportunities in the nation's capital. He publishes Potomac Stages, a web based theater resource and writes for national and regional publications. He lives on Capitol Hill and can be reached at Brad@PotomacStages.com. ★

viewing the tapes

To view tapes of the Washington Performing Arts Video Archive at the Washingtoniana Division of the at the Martin Luther King, Jr. Building of the D.C. Public Library, 901 G Street NW, call 202-727-1213 or walk in. The hours of operation change due to budget constraints this month. The new schedule will be Monday and Tuesday noon to 9:00 p.m., Wednesday – Saturday 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and Sunday 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.

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