

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

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MOTION PICTURE, BROADCASTING  
AND RECORDED SOUND DIVISION

THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY  
Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

STATEMENT

for

THE NATIONAL FILM PRESERVATION BOARD

Good morning, my name is Marie Nesthus. I am Head Librarian of Donnell Media Center of The New York Public Library. Joining me today are Mary Boone Bowling, Curator of Manuscripts at the Central Research Library, and James Briggs Murray, Curator of the Moving Image and Recording Sound Division at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

The New York Public Library welcomes the passage of the National Film Preservation Act of 1992, which acknowledges the need for national leadership in the field of film preservation and re-establishes the National Film Preservation Board for that purpose. We are also pleased that the Board was expanded to include representation from the film archives community. It is especially encouraging that the Board is now seeking information on the preservation efforts and needs of the various types of public institutions that have film holdings. These measures indicate that the Board is expanding its sphere of activity, a process we believe to be essential if it is to fulfill its mandate to develop "a comprehensive national film preservation program." We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this goal by sharing The New York Public Library's experience with and concern about film preservation.

The New York Public Library (NYPL) is one of many repositories whose primary mission is not the collection of motion pictures, but whose holdings contain significant film collections. A

number of units of the Library actively collect film. These include Donnell Media Center; The Theatre on Film and Tape Archive of The Billy Rose Theatre Collection, and the Dance Collection in its Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center; the Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; and the Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, located in the landmark Central Research Library.

The collection of 7,000 films at Donnell Media Center began with a modest acquisition program in the 1950s. For nearly four decades, film specialists and librarians at Donnell have carefully selected films to add to the collection. In addition, Donnell Media Center has a collection of nearly 7,000 videotapes. Throughout the years, the collection's focus has been on independent film production of all varieties--documentaries, experimental film, independently produced feature films, children's film and animation. Within the independent film community, the Donnell collection is so well known that inclusion in it is often noted on an artist's resume.

With the passage of time and the serious fluctuations within the independent or non-theatrical film industry (including failures of distributors and film laboratories), a great number of films have been lost. Some have simply been dropped from distribution; others have been lost completely, with all distribution prints

and laboratory printing materials destroyed or missing. The Media Center increasingly finds itself to be the owner of rare, and in some instances, unique film materials. Donnell's collection serves as an essential resource for film programmers at other institutions (e.g., the Museum of Modern Art, New York's Public Theater and The Hirshhorn Museum) and also for film professors and scholars.

Although Donnell Media Center has never had the funding necessary to house its collection under archival conditions, it has carefully inspected, repaired, and maintained its films between each use. It has thoroughly cataloged its holdings in machine readable form, and made its printed catalogs available to the public for consultation and for sale. It has made prints available for screening within its film and video study facility. An important segment of film and cultural history can be found on Donnell's shelves; the fact that Donnell owns these films increases their likelihood of survival.

In addition to Donnell Media Center, two divisions of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, the Theatre on Film and Tape (TOFT) Archive and the Dance Collection, contain extensive film holdings. TOFT is the world's foremost collection of films and videotapes of live theatre performances. In 1970, TOFT began to film, videotape, collect and preserve visual records of Broadway, off-Broadway and regional theatre

productions; dialogues, lectures and seminars featuring distinguished theatre personalities; and a variety of theatre-related programs, including filmed and television adaptations of theatre productions, documentaries, interviews, and awards programs. The major part of the Archive consists of theatre productions recorded during performance and includes excerpts from Rodgers and Hart and Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals, as well as most of the outstanding productions of the last two decades, including *Equus*, *Amadeus*, *A Chorus Line*, *The Phantom of the Opera* and several productions of Shakespeare. Rare extant footage also includes filmed versions of theatre classics, featuring such theatre notables as George Bernard Shaw, George M. Cohan, and Mary Martin, and the home movies of Richard Rodgers and George Gershwin. Although TOFT's 2,176 programs are made available on videocassette, the Archive includes 132,236 feet (128 reels) of motion picture film prints in storage at the Iron Mountain Storage Facility in Rosendale, New York, which are in danger of deterioration. These consist of original films of Broadway productions recorded by TOFT prior to securing union permission to use videotape, kinescopes of early TOFT videotapes and some materials acquired by TOFT from outside sources. In addition to these prints, negatives, optical sound tracks, outtakes, and work prints are also stored at Iron Mountain. These materials are fully cataloged and will be accessible through an on-site local data base. The unique material in this Archive provides rare and precious research information which,

with proper and careful preservation, will remain available as a treasured American cultural resource.

The Dance Collection contains over 9,000 films and videotapes, 1,000 every year, representing the first time in history that the art of dance has been systematically documented in motion. The collection policy of the Dance Collection is comprehensive; all forms and styles of dance are included. These are primary sources that form the backbone of virtually any serious research of twentieth century dance. They provide current artists with inspiration and reference resources. Included in the Dance Collection are unique films documenting the early years of such major dance companies as the New York City Ballet, American Ballet Theater, the Joffrey Ballet, the Martha Graham Dance Company and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Further, these films document the choreographic careers of America's creative geniuses, George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins and Martha Graham. The Dance Collection also holds footage of Anna Pavlova dancing in 1915 in a film directed by silent American film director, Lois Weber, and Rudolf Nureyev's 1958 graduation performance in Leningrad. As Jerome Robbins has emphasized, films and videotapes of dance provide the equivalent of decoding the key to the Rosetta Stone.

Since 1965, over 550 dance works by some 150 choreographers have been filmed or videotaped by the Dance Collection, with

consistent support from state and federal arts funding agencies. These are unique records from which the dance works can be studied today and reconstructed in the future.

An on-going preservation program was established in the Dance Collection, partially supported by continuous funding from the American Film Institute, to address the problem of shrunken and brittle films. A list is maintained of such films not owned by other archives, which are especially important for documenting the history of dance. Preservation proceeds according to selection criteria which prioritize the historic importance of the choreography or performers in the film and the rarity of documentation. Preservation work is performed by outside laboratories with technical specialists individually approved by the Dance Collection and by similar archives.

The films and videotapes are housed under special temperature and humidity conditions. Viewing copies are gradually being created on 3/4" videotape, which has proved most successful with users; preservation masters are stored off-site at Iron Mountain. A register of "condition" information on each film is maintained.

This film and videotape preservation activity is headed by a full-time staff technician and a part-time specialist; supplementary hourly staff assist as funding permits. Quality assurance consists of staff inspection of materials before and

after outside laboratory work is done.

Films and videotapes can be viewed in the Dance Collection's reading room; some are exhibited selectively as part of the Library's public programs. Public access for individual research is facilitated by an on-line catalog. This catalog is also available off-site through Internet, and available for purchase in CD-ROM or bound volumes. Arrangements have been made to load this data into the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN), a national bibliographic database, within several months.

The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture is among the world's foremost institutions devoted to documenting, preserving and providing access to research resources on the historical and cultural development of peoples of African descent throughout the world. Over the past two decades the Center's Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division has developed collections of materials documented by way of audio-visual technology. Included are some 15,000 recorded music discs, 5,000 hours of oral history recordings, 4,000 video tapes (primarily public affairs television programs and television commercials) and a substantial collection of motion picture film. Both completed productions and unedited outtakes are collected. Approximately 500 films, consisting primarily of 16mm documentaries, complement the Center's holdings in other formats. Included are political, anthropological, religious and performing arts documentaries

illustrating life experiences (and interpretations thereof) in the United States, Africa, the Caribbean, South America and Latin America. Many of the titles are currently out of distribution. Although the principal collecting efforts have been focused on documentaries, the Schomburg Center is also in the process of becoming a major repository of dramatic works created by independent black filmmakers.

The Schomburg Center has also developed a substantial collection of film outtakes, consisting of some four million feet of unedited documentary footage (including work prints and optical and magnetic sound reels). In some instances the collection of outtakes has been focused on the preservation of the work of a major documentary filmmaker, as in the case of veteran African-American filmmaker William Greaves. Outtakes from Mr. Greaves' quarter of a century of filmmaking include interviews with major literary and artistic figures from the Harlem Renaissance period, and the historic 1972 National Black Political Convention in Gary, Indiana, among others. In other instances, the collection of outtakes is focused on preserving the raw footage of a specific film, as in the case of the classic, *Jazz On A Summer's Day*. This documentation of the 1958 Newport Jazz Festival includes performances by Louis Armstrong, Chuck Berry, Chico Hamilton, Big Maybelle, Jimmy Giuffre, Mahalia Jackson, Thelonious Monk, Gerry Mulligan, Anita O'Day, Max Roach, George Shearing, Sonny Stitt, Jack Teagarden and Dinah Washington.

Since 1980 the Schomburg Center has regularly conducted videotaped oral history interviews and is currently documenting all public programs--lectures, conferences, concerts and theatrical productions--on broadcast quality videotape through its Oral History/Video Documentation Program.

The Schomburg Center's moving image holdings, like its collections in other formats, are cataloged in RLIN. These records are downloaded into the Catalog of The New York Public Library (CATNYP), an online public access catalog. Patrons have in-house access to screening completed documentaries or outtakes. Schomburg Center prints are not loaned, but are restricted to screening for research purposes on library premises. No reproductions are permitted without verified, written permission from copyright holders.

The Schomburg Center maintains its film collections in a climate controlled vault with appropriate temperature and humidity settings. Prints are never screened via film projectors; rather, for preservation purposes, these materials are screened only on a film scanner. Further, when copyright permits, prints are transferred to video tape for in-house public use. The Schomburg Center maintains a film chain in its production facility, making service video copies of films, where permissible. This reduces the potential of damage to its collections which might occur should those collections be sent to outside labs.

The Rare Books and Manuscripts Division holds approximately 300,000 feet of film (approximately 2,700 reels) that compose parts of the manuscript and archival collections in its holdings. The bulk of these materials are 16mm color films, but there are also significant numbers of 35mm films, as well as some 8mm films. These include negatives, optical and magnetic sound tracks, work prints and release prints. The Division also holds 159 videotapes in a number of different formats. The films date from the 1930s to the 1980s, and document a wide variety of subjects relating to twentieth century American history. They include documentary films, outtakes from documentaries, political commercials, kinescopes of early television shows, home movies of prominent individuals and newsreels. Among these materials is film footage of a 1932 disarmament march, a campaign film for Congressman Henry Wallace, a film documenting President Kennedy's visit to the site of the New York World's Fair and film footage of a U. S. Senate baseball game held in the late 1960s. Most of the films held by this Division are unique.

The Rare Books and Manuscripts Division has received a grant from the U. S. Department of Education to preserve and describe some of its audio-visual holdings. In the course of the two-year project, funded by this grant, approximately 65% of these materials are being described at collection level in RLIN, and this information is downloaded to The Library's online catalog.

Item-level descriptions are being entered into a data base that will be made available to on-site researchers. In most instances, preservation copies of these films are made on 1" videotape (format C); in a few instances, film copies are made. Service copies of the films, for use by researchers, are made on 1/2" VHS videotape. The original films are removed from reels, placed on 2 1/2" polyethylene film cores and stored in polypropylene film cans. The films are housed in climate controlled stacks, but these are designed for the storage of books and papers, and do not provide ideal conditions for the long term storage of films. For this reason, consideration is being given to the possibility of storing films off-site. The Rare Books and Manuscripts Division expects this media preservation project to become an on-going effort, but it is likely to depend on external funds for some time.

The scope and subject matter of the films held by the various divisions of The New York Public Library, and the procedures followed for preserving and providing access to them, vary somewhat. Nevertheless, we have common concerns regarding film preservation. Although collectively we hold many thousands of titles of released films, we are also preserving millions of feet of footage that would appear to fall outside the primary scope of concern of the National Film Preservation Board. Some of these are film productions that were created originally for television broadcast; others are not fully edited films or are productions

that were not created for theatrical exhibition. We feel that these types of materials merit preservation because of their value to researchers and documentary filmmakers. These researchers and documentary filmmakers require large volumes of raw footage from which to select appropriate segments, just as filmmakers will shoot many more hours of footage than will ever make their final cut.

For this reason, we would urge the Board to concern itself not only with the preservation and restoration of individual released titles, but also with collections that contain released films, unreleased films and raw footage. This is not to suggest the preservation of anything and everything. Given the costs of film preservation, we recognize the importance of being selective about what is preserved. The re-creation of this Board, and its contact with so many institutions through this very hearing process, should prove vital for the making of informed decisions regarding appropriate selections for preservation efforts. However, unreleased titles and raw footage, held in research institutions, must be included in any plan designed to preserve the nation's film heritage. This film, when viewed by future generations, will provide them with greater insights into the people and events of their past; and, that same film will be the raw footage upon which future generations of documentary filmmakers will rely for their productions.

In order to assure the preservation of these treasures, institutions such as The New York Public Library rely upon funding from external sources. Only with continued funding can the many formats and film stocks be secured under the appropriate environmental conditions. Only with continued funding can the appropriate screening equipment required for the various formats be maintained. Only with continued funding can trained film historians, archivists, catalogers and technicians be kept on staff, working cohesively to preserve our cinematographic legacy.

Scientific studies on film preservation issues must be undertaken to examine anew the chemical properties of film in relation to time and environment; and to determine the negative impact of film storage materials themselves, such as film cans and shelving. National standards must be established, published and widely disseminated so that film archivists are not left to rely upon their own experiences and the studies conducted by the manufacturers of media materials.

We further recommend that the Board expand that which is certain to be gained by this hearing process by initiating a national survey of all institutions collecting and/or preserving motion picture film. Whether conducted as one national survey or numerous regional or statewide surveys, such an undertaking would finally provide some sense of the volume and scope of the nation's film repositories.

Before concluding, there is one other area, which is apparently outside of the Board's mandate, but that we believe, at the very least, should be acknowledged by the Board as an area worthy of similar concern; this is the matter of videotape. As we acknowledge that both the documentation and the dramatization of our experiences that were once exclusively captured on film are increasingly being captured on videotape, we must also acknowledge that this even more physically fragile medium must be preserved if we are not to lose a substantial part of the history of the last two decades.

Finally, we would like to recommend that the National Film Preservation Board create a structure to facilitate ongoing dialogue among the various institutions whose comments were sought for this study and the Board. Such a structure might be modelled after the National Historic Preservation Trust, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission, and the Commission on Preservation and Access, each of which works to conduct surveys, provide advice, and implement plans. In our view, it would also be useful to include representation on the Board from archives, museums and libraries that have significant film holdings, but which are not members of the International Federation of Film Archives. There should also be representation from professional organizations such as The Society of American Archivists, The Association of Moving Image Archivists, and The American Library Association.

As stated at the beginning of this presentation, The New York Public Library welcomes the passage of the National Film Preservation Act of 1992. We believe that all of the issues we've raised must be part of any national film preservation plan.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to testify before you today.

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