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## Archives and the Arts:

### *Showcasing the Histories of Communities of Color*

NATALIA FERNÁNDEZ

Arts organizations can beautifully express a community's identity through music, dance, and theatre. Through their performances and outreach activities, performing arts organizations can engage audiences in transformative experiences. However, an arts organization is more than just "the performance." The behind-the-scenes of an arts organization provides its own unique narrative documenting a company's rich history that can be made available to the public through archival collections, which can include materials such as administrative records, grants, financial documents, community outreach activities, in addition to audio and video recordings. Similarly, an archive can be more than just a physical repository of those collections. It can showcase a performing arts organization's records through a number of outreach efforts for the benefit of both the performing arts group and the archival repository that collaborates with it and stewards the collection. The Oregon Multicultural Archives (OMA) exemplifies this type of collaboration with two of Oregon's leading performing arts groups, the Obo Addy Legacy Project and the Milagro theatre company.

The OMA was established in 2005 and is a part of Oregon State University Libraries' Special Collections & Archives Research Center. Prior to 2013, it did not include records pertaining to performing arts organizations. Its mission is to build relationships with Oregon's African American, Asian American, Latino/a, and Native American communities and, if they desire, to assist in preserving their histories

and sharing their stories. (Oregon Multicultural Archives) Although Oregon is predominately white and the communities within OMA's scope represent less than twenty percent of the population (U.S. Census Bureau), it reflects how these communities of color have contributed to the state's identity and continue to do so. Performing arts organizations offer distinct perspectives and insights into these communities. Therefore, the OMA began to include their stories as part of its collecting initiatives.

In fall 2012, as curator of the OMA, I began working with two performing arts organizations to document their histories by archiving their collections. Milagro, a Latino-based theatre company, and the Obo Addy Legacy Project (OALP), a West African dance and music group, established in Portland in the mid-1980s, are still active and thriving today. Over the past two and a half years, the OMA has processed both collections, curated an exhibit, and compiled two iBooks featuring both organizations.

This article will share project details of various collaborative efforts between the OMA and both groups to serve as potential models for other librarians and archivists. These projects offer examples of proactively engaging with creators to benefit both the archive and performing arts groups through creation of new resources that can educate and develop potential new audiences.

## **Collaboration Between Performing Arts Organizations and Archival Repositories**

Without any previous experience working with performing arts organizations and their historical materials, I set out to connect with other performing arts archivists and read about the possibilities of collaboration, especially between archival repositories and communities of color. I joined Society of American Archivists' Performing Arts Roundtable, which "encourages the exchange of information on historical and contemporary documentation of music, dance, theater, and other performance media," and read through various back issues of their newsletter *Performance!* (Performing Arts Roundtable) I soon learned about the American Theatre Archive Project (ATAP), joined

the Northwest team covering Washington and Oregon, and read through ATAP's *Preserving Theatrical Legacy: An Archiving Manual for Theatre Companies*. (American Theatre Archive Project)

I also began to review some of the literature regarding performing arts archives. I was particularly inspired by the idea that just as a performing arts group repurposes and reinvents stories and build upon memories, an archive can do the same and use its collections for new creations. (Marini) Another idea that sparked my interest was the use of archival collections to create user-centered experiences and learning opportunities and extend the archive's engagement with community members. (Clark) I was interested in more than just preserving materials—I wanted to engage the public and connect community members with arts organizations and their histories.

I looked to local performing arts archives, including the repository for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, to see how they preserve and showcase their materials. (Hervochon) Nationally, I sought out examples of successful partnerships between archival repositories and performing arts groups within communities of color. I found an excellent model in University of Minnesota Libraries' collaboration with Penumbra, an African American theatre company. I spoke with the archivist and project coordinator to gain insights into her relationship with the company, and learned about the Libraries' current IMLS-funded project to develop a database featuring African American history with a focus on African American theater and performing arts. (University of Minnesota Libraries)

I soon concluded that performing arts organizations and archival repositories can share the goal of outreach and engagement with communities and their missions to tell great stories. Having a support network of colleagues to contact and literature available allowed me to move forward confidently with my work.

## **Building Relationships**

Both the OALP and Milagro have rich and diverse histories. The mission of the OALP is to "offer authentic experiences with the music and dance of Ghana, West Africa, and to create cultural awareness

and understanding through educational offerings, an annual festival, and performing groups that tour the world." Obo and Susan Addy, who served as artistic and executive directors, co-founded the group in 1986 as the Homowo African Arts and Cultures organization. Obo Addy was a Ghanaian master drummer who performed all over the world, wrote music, and taught at the primary, secondary, and college level. He passed away in 2012. Under the leadership of Susan Addy, the OALP is committed to continuing his legacy of creating, performing, and teaching African arts.

The mission of Milagro, co-founded in 1985 by executive and artistic directors José González and Dañiel Malán, is to "provide extraordinary Latino theatre, culture, and arts education experiences for the enrichment of all communities." Milagro produces classical and contemporary performances, both Spanish and bilingual, through its main stage in Portland and "Milagro Tour," a national touring group (previously known as Teatro Milagro). Milagro strives to raise awareness and address significant issues of the Latino/a community through partnerships with schools and social service organizations. Both the OALP and Milagro support and empower through their art the communities they represent.

The first step the OMA took towards establishing archival collections for these two groups (as with any archival collection) was to develop a trusting relationship with the potential donors. In the instance of an active performing arts organization, the executive director would be the logical first contact. However, responsibilities vary from organization to organization, and discussions may need to involve the board of directors.

Two factors proved significant in working with both the OALP and Milagro: the co-founders of each group are still actively involved, and both were approaching milestones in anniversary dates. These factors made it easy to highlight the importance of preserving their legacies. Also, since both were well established and financially stable, they were able to dedicate time and energy to archival projects.

The OMA's relationship with Milagro began in fall 2012 through a referral from an OSU colleague who had met José González and informed me of his interest in archives. Over the next few months,

González and I convened at his Portland theatre, so I could review the organization's records and meet theatre staff. He also visited the OMA in Corvallis to have the opportunity to review his company collection's potential new home. In early 2013, González introduced me to Susan Addy, and we began a similar process.

Over the next several months, I had a number of meetings with both organizations to discuss the archival process. We considered the pros and cons of an in-house archive, the need for a records management policy, copyright arrangements, a potential exhibit featuring both groups, and a timeline for the overall process from processing collections to making them accessible.

The Milagro theatre was particularly interested in establishing an independent, internally housed archive since one obvious benefit would be easy access to materials by theatre staff. However, after discussions regarding costs, security concerns, and resources the OMA had to offer, both Milagro and the OALP decided to physically donate their collections to us.

Since transfer of materials will continue into the foreseeable future as both are still active organizations, we discussed the need for an ongoing relationship and a records retention policy to continue to add materials on an annual basis. We also determined we would only need to archive "inactive" records and that any materials the organization still used would stay with them. For donor forms, we discussed copyright and permissions requirements. Both organizations retained copyright of their materials, and specified that user requests from the public needed to be vetted and approved by the organization. Based on the amount of material and availability of students to work with the collections, I provided an estimated timeline of about one year before the collections could be accessible to the public. All these conversations further strengthened our relationship over time.

## **Curating Archival Collections**

As with any archival collection, materials from the OALP and Milagro first needed to be arranged and described. Basic steps included conducting a preliminary inventory and accessioning the collection,

weeding and processing materials, and creating an EAD record to make information available through the OMA website, along with the regional online database. For the OALP collection, the traditional process began in June 2013 with picking up materials in a cargo van. It took about a year for an OMA student worker to complete processing. The collection was made available to the public with a finding aid in April 2014, well within my projected timeline.

The Milagro collection, however, was different, and presented several challenges. Whereas OALP's offices are based out of Addy's home and the majority of materials kept in a storage unit, the Milagro collection was housed in a small room in the theatre building's basement. González and other staff still occasionally access materials. Although they did not have a full inventory, materials were fairly well organized. Since González did not want to give up immediate access and expressed emotional attachment to the physical objects, we discussed the possibility of processing the collection onsite rather than in Corvallis. This would require a Portland-based individual to work on the project.

Fortuitously, during a meeting for small arts organizations in Portland, I met an MLIS student from San José State University who expressed specific interest in working with a performing arts collection for her capstone project. She ended up working on it one day a week over a year beginning in August 2013. Within that year, I met with her periodically, and she sent me weekly updates. As a result, the timeline for the Milagro processing project extended a few months longer than the OALP collection. Milagro materials were transferred incrementally as she made progress arranging and boxing the collection.

The completed collections feature decades of history pertaining to the African American and Latino/a communities in Oregon. The Obo Addy Legacy Project collection consists of nineteen cubic feet of records, promotional materials, and various forms of media related to the Homowo African Arts and Cultures organization, as well as Obo Addy's personal materials including correspondence, promotional materials, and photographs. The collection is divided into three sub-

groups: Obo Addy Materials, Homowo Organizational records and materials, and a separate subgroup for various forms of media.

The Milagro records consist of 27 cubic feet of material documenting the theatre's administration and board, building history, outreach and education efforts, staff and artists, grants and finances, and creative programming. In addition to textual documents, the collection contains photographs, posters, and audiovisual materials.

## **Making Collections Accessible to the Public and Connecting to Communities**

Providing access to materials through fully arranged collections and detailed finding aids is an essential part of the archival process, but we can always do more to connect with the public. In 2014, I curated an exhibit featuring the two groups, and the following year partnered with a graduate student to write two iBooks about Milagro and OALP. As part of this iBooks project, the OMA hosted performances featuring both groups.

One of our main goals was to curate an exhibit featuring the histories of the two groups. The Library's exhibit space includes two large rectangular cases facing each other. Because both organizations were established around the same time, the co-founders know each other, and each gives voice to communities of color, it made sense to exhibit the two histories together.

In the three months prior to the exhibit's debut in April 2014, I curated an exhibit that included borrowed instruments, textiles, props, costumes, and two viewing stations (a small television and headphones) where patrons could watch performance clips. I curated the textual information and images as a set of five large printed poster panels (30 × 40") for each group. I designed the foam core panels so they would be easy to transport and set up on easels, with the assumption both organizations could later use the exhibit for outreach and education.

Both sets included an introductory panel with information about the organization and the OMA. The OALP panels featured the history of Obo Addy and Homowo African Arts and Cultures, the organiza-



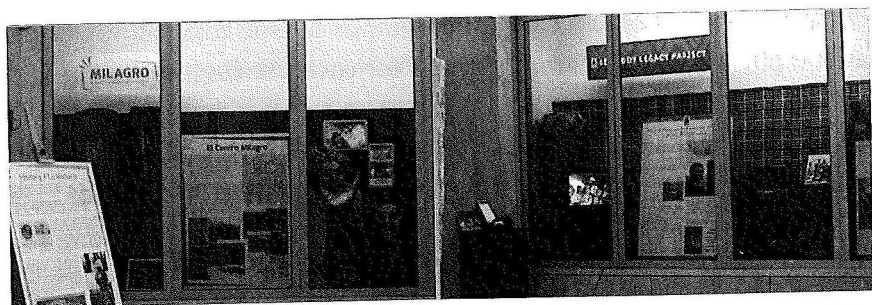


Figure 1. Portions of the Milagro and Obo Addy Legacy Project display cases within the Oregon Multicultural Archives' exhibit, "Applause!", Spring 2014. For more information about the collaborative projects with the OALP and Milagro, see <http://bit.ly/oalp-archives> and [bit.ly/milagro-archives](http://bit.ly/milagro-archives).

tion's performing groups Okropong and Kukrudu, the Homowo Festival, and education and outreach activities. The Milagro panels included the theatre's history, information about the theatre space, creative programming, and community outreach. [Figure 1]

At the beginning of the curation process, I shared my ideas with both executive directors and asked them how involved they wanted to be. Each had a different approach to the exhibit. Milagro wanted to be more included in development of the panels, while the OALP was more interested in seeing what I found significant and asked simply to give feedback.

The curation process presented several challenges, but had a variety of successes. The major challenge was curating an exhibit based on two partially processed collections. However, I had been communicating with the two student workers even before the curation process began, and asked them to identify materials potentially appropriate for display. I also requested that the student processing the Milagro collection organize the grants and financial records last since I knew I would not be using them in the exhibit.

Once I had developed the main topics for each organization's panels, I reviewed collection materials with the student worker processing the OALP collection. He further assisted me with curation of the Milagro collection since by this time the bulk of Milagro materials had been transferred to the OMA. I asked him to locate and scan rel-

evant textual documents and photographs for me to review, as well as compile a list of performance clips for each viewing station.

I began drafting the panels, and sent them several times to González and Addy for review. I worked closely with a graphic design student to develop panel colors, layout, and an overall exhibit aesthetic. Because I intended to offer both groups the sets of panels, I made certain exhibit branding matched the organizations' colors, font, and logo use. I curated the Milagro exhibit in both English and Spanish to reflect the organization's bilingualism.

To promote the exhibit, we designed small fliers with information repurposed from the two introductory panels. The fliers did not contain exhibit specific information, so they could also be used as general collection promotional materials. I titled the exhibit, "Applause!," and installed and finalized it in early April, followed by a small reception for the two groups to celebrate. Over the next several months, I promoted the exhibit and collections through Society of American Archivists' Archives and Archivists of Color and Performing Arts Roundtable newsletters, and gave a presentation as part of the annual conference of the Performing Arts Roundtable.

Milagro used the set of panels as part of its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration in June 2014. The OALP used them for an October 2014 concert. Both events served as fundraising opportunities. The panels offered a simple way to highlight history and community impact for attendees and donors. The OSU exhibit was on view from April to September 2014.

That fall, an OSU graduate student with an interest in digital book publishing approached me about collaborating on writing iBooks featuring the OALP and Milagro. He was an experienced iBooks author in the second year of a Masters of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies. We met to brainstorm ideas and draft a project timeline to offer both groups. The OALP and Milagro iBooks project began with several planning meetings in late 2014. For each iBook, the development process involved storyboarding, conducting research, drafting content, and creating the design for each book. We used an Apple iPad since it is a single device that can serve as a photo and video camera,

audio recording studio, tool for media curation, as well as engaging, interactive content delivery mechanism through iBooks.

The entire suite of Apple productivity applications and tools are free, as is the capacity to distribute and publish the final product. The iPad provides an interactive platform to fully engage readers in the intense cultures, colors, sound, and textures that make up the dynamic histories of both groups. The books are available free through the Apple iTunes store. Platform-agnostic versions are available for non-Apple devices. Each iBook features materials from the archival collections that not only include text and photos, but sound and video as well. We used exhibit content in the iBook storyboarding process because panel topics easily translated into chapters within the iBooks, which we could expand with archival material. Since these books are not print-based, in the future we can easily add content to both iBooks.

The project timeline was based on the university's quarter system. Each iBook was written and published during one term: the Obo Addy Legacy Project iBook in winter (January-March), and the Milagro iBook in spring (April-June). The student and I acted as project coordinators. He conducted the majority of research and writing, while I acted as editor and oversaw the process. To fund the project, I applied for the university's Learning Innovation Grant for projects fostering and supporting meaningful use of educational technology. I requested and was awarded \$7250, of which \$2000 covered equipment costs (including three iPads), and about \$5250 covered student salaries for an average of thirty hours per week for sixteen weeks. The majority of the salary portion went to the graduate student, but it also covered compensation for two students as media specialists to record events and assist with audiovisual curation. My participation was part of my daily work.

We partnered with campus organizations to co-sponsor performances by the two groups. It was important to provide OALP and Milagro with opportunities to showcase their current productions. We collaborated with two university cultural resource centers, the Lonnie B. Harris Black Cultural Center (BCC) and the Centro Cultural César Chávez (CCCC), to promote the project to the campus and

local communities. For Black History Month in February 2015, the BCC co-hosted a panel discussion and *Cross Cultural Rhythms* performance by the OALP. The CCCC, in turn, co-hosted a workshop and performance of Milagro's 2014 touring production, *Searching for Aztlán*, as part of the campus' April celebration of Latino/a heritage.

The benefits were manifold. Hired media specialist students filmed and edited these events to publish with the iBooks and add them to the archival collections. Thus, the OMA strengthened relationships with campus cultural groups, and the organizations gained new audiences.

## **Future Plans**

Collaboration between the OMA, Obo Addy Legacy Project, and Milagro theatre company has, so far, been incredibly fruitful, not only for the archives but the organizations as well. Both groups found it extremely rewarding to shape and promote their own narratives and share their legacies. Since we aspired to make the OALP and Milagro histories more accessible to the general public, students, scholars, donors, and an even wider audience, we are excited about expanding this work and continuing our partnership. I now hope to conduct an oral history project with both groups' staff and long-time supporters, so we can incorporate a critical audience perspective.

Notably, undergraduate and graduate students participated in all phases of the OMA's work and were offered opportunities for experiential learning. For any future project, I plan to continue including interested students and encouraging scholarship based on the collections. Ideas for potential faculty and student scholarship include research in performing arts fields and multicultural and social justice studies to showcase how these groups' artistic output are a form of activism for the communities of color they represent and support. A future OMA collection initiative is to connect with other performing arts groups in Oregon that fall within the scope of the archive to add additional voices of communities of color to the state's historical record. Through increased collaboration between the Oregon Multicultural Archives and local performing arts

groups, I wish to support bringing their incredible behind-the-scenes histories to center stage.

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