

DREW BARKER

How a Library Exhibit Space Pivoted Towards People, Puppets, and Collaboration During a Pandemic

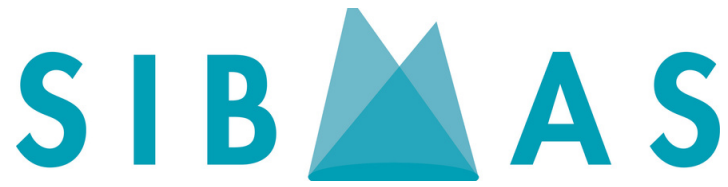
This paper will illustrate how we as a Performing Arts Library chose to re-open our gallery in the fall of 2021, and how we continued to engage our patrons with a new exhibit in our gallery during the spring of 2022.

In response to the pandemic and the social justice protests, we decided to pivot our curation priorities to consider the mindset of our community in our larger building -- which includes faculty, students, and staff within the performing arts academic schools. Our unique architectural position in the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center provides an intersection of scholars, artists, students, and the public at large. Our gallery is part of the main entrance to the library from the rest of the building, which provides an excellent opportunity (and challenge) for engagement. We asked ourselves how we could promote work and people that were missed, and this paper will ask if we were successful in that endeavor. So, instead of the traditional exhibit with objects just from our collections, how did we include our community in our curation?

Our first curatorial response in our gallery was to engage our community by inviting them to respond on our walls with chalk. The exhibit was titled "Remembrance & Resilience" and it included blackboard walls with changing questions that invited patrons to pick up chalk and respond. The two other parts of the exhibit included paintings of artistic campus leaders we lost in 2020, and a wall that displayed performance work that people may have missed from 2020 and the first half of 2021. And so, we represented members of our community that we lost, members' work that we may have missed, and members' voices through blackboard responses. In these ways, we reflected with our community. This successful exhibit went up at the beginning of the 2021 fall semester and came down after the semester ended.

The beginning of the spring semester in 2022 saw a very different exhibit installed entitled "The Art & Craft of Puppetry." Though it was filling a hole before another exhibit was slated to be installed in August 2022, after the previous exhibit had run its course, it was also in response to a puppetry festival that was scheduled by the School of Theatre for early April. We have a legacy of puppetry at the University of Maryland because we can claim Jim Henson as an alumnus, and so we don't shy away from taking advantage of the relationship and collaboration we have with The Jim Henson Company. The exhibit includes not only a radio-controlled Fraggles from Fraggles Rock, but is also juxtaposed with "Trixie La Brique," a found puppet (a brick with a tutu) whose appeal comes not from animatronics, but instead relies on the viewer's imagination. The exhibit also features a video of artist-in-residence, Yael Inbar, talking about her process and her teaching.

By collaborating with archivists, curators, designers, and theatre-makers (from our campus and other parts of our country) our little gallery made a big impact on patrons while making them think about how performing artists continue to create and perform during a pandemic.



Bio: Drew Barker is the Performing Arts Librarian at the University of Maryland's Michelle Smith Performing Arts Library. He is the subject librarian for Theatre, Dance, & Performance Studies, and curator of exhibits at his library, which include: "The Art & Craft of Puppetry" (2022), "Remembrance & Resilience" (2021), and "The Triumph of Isabella: Exploring Performance Through Art" (2018-2019). Dramaturgy experience at UMD's Fearless New Play Festivals, Center Stage (MD), Theatre J (DC), and Triad Stage (NC). His research interests include the playwright Naomi Wallace, information design, information literacy, and the American Civil War. He earned his master's degrees from the University of Maryland at College Park. www.drewbarker.info