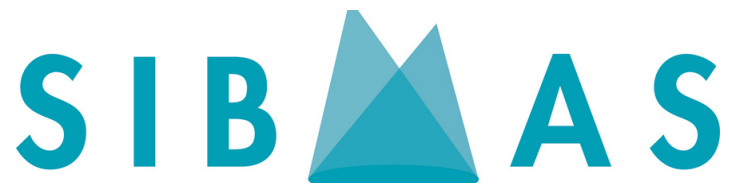


LIBBY SMIGEL

*Resurrecting Uncomfortable Contradictions in
the Performing Arts Archives*
(ONLINE)

Historically in the United States, dance and theatre have been viewed as potentially immoral, and secular dance and theatre practices and performances have been banned or censured from the date of the founding of the nation by Pilgrims. These anti-theatrical and anti-terpsichorean prejudices continue to the present day, and are evident in the comparatively low funding of the performing arts by federal, state, and local government sources. Dance especially has evoked suspicion by religious and political powers, except when it furthers the aim of the current political establishment. This paper will explore the story told by this contradictory attitude toward the artist within several of the special collections held in the Music Division. The Federal Theatre Project/Federal Dance Project (FTP/FDP) created by the United States Congress to remedy the poverty of artists during the Great Depression tells of great successes but also of imposed censorship and eventual program cancellation because of the social justice themes of a very small set of funded projects. After the Great Depression, the U.S. State Department often exported performing arts as a form of soft-power diplomacy, while other U.S. agencies, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), solicited evidence of “un-American” activity of artists. Within these records, there is evidence that many of the artists whose voices were silenced or blacklisted were members of immigrant families, people of color, or political exiles. In these referenced cases, evidence of injustice, prejudice, and oppression require materials in other collections to paint both despair and triumphs. The cases will show how contrast and juxtaposition can provide opportunities for education and conversation. A visual handout/outline or PowerPoint projection will permit conference attendees to see several examples where uncomfortable photos, FBI reports, artist contracts, and other potentially buried items were brought to light against other kinds of evidence. In this way, I hope to encourage thoughtful (internal as well as verbal) reflections and interactions. In each case, “purpose” or other intentional curation or archival description was put to use to create fresh associations and contrasts across specific collections; equally important was the consideration of the intended audience for these materials.

Two conference themes are particularly relevant: 1. Theatre heritage institutions and the politics of memory: the importance of preserving and sharing the uncomfortable contradictions of artistic censorship during the Great Depression of the 1930s to 1950s. 2. The impact of policies and politics on performing arts practices: the contradictory nature of the United States Congress in relation to performing arts, supporting artists to demonstrate freedom and democracy abroad while at the same time exhibiting suspicion of some of those same artists at home. Both of these themes will be explored through examination of records that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) maintained on prominent artists who were outspoken and use of archival records from the Federal Theatre Project/Federal Dance Project collection and the New Dance Group archives held by the Library of Congress Music Division.



Bio: Libby Smigel, MFA PhD, is dance curator and archivist in the Music Division and she is the sole recommending officer for dance at the Library of Congress. She mentors interns and graduate students on research and archival projects, recommends acquisitions for dance books and special collections, leads research orientations in the performing arts for scholars, students, and the general public, and works with the Division's concert office in arranging dance-related displays, performances, and other events. Previously, she was executive director at Dance Heritage Coalition, where she initiated programs to help artists in documenting their creative legacies, co-led a project on defining "fair uses" of presumptively copyrighted dance materials, and developed a 3-year program to train early-career library professionals in preserving, organizing, and creating access to multi-format performing arts collections. She has also taught in university dance and theatre departments, and is currently an associate editor for the National Dance Society Journal