

Laura Schwartz

When life becomes art

A librarian's experience acting the part

In fall 2014, I was approached by a theater/dance undergraduate student who wanted to put on a play in the Fine Arts Library (FAL) at the University of Texas (UT)-Austin. Because we had done a variety of performing arts programming in our magnificent space, I was inclined to say yes. She had written and was directing a play that took place in a library. Being the liaison to the Art and Art History Department, I thought it prudent to bring the theater/dance librarian into the discussion.

The play was to be part of the Cohen New Works Festival in the Department of Theatre and Dance. The festival is a biennial weeklong showcase of new work created by UT students and held in various locations in and around the UT-Austin campus.

The student had been honest with me, explaining that the subject matter was for mature audiences. I cleared it with my supervisor and we were on our way, or so I thought. Later that semester, the student arrived in my office again. She had a follow-up question for the theater/dance librarian and me. The question was, "Would either of us like to be in the play?" She was looking for someone to play the librarian and thought it entirely appropriate that one of us could and should do it. The theater/dance librarian was a backstage theater person, specializing in scene and set design. She instantly said no way and no thank you.

I, on the other hand, was extremely interested, even though I had no experience

acting. My immediate thought was that I have done some amazing things as a librarian, I have worked on some very interesting and engaging projects, but I have never ever done anything like this, what a unique opportunity. And when would I ever have the chance to do something like this again? Never. So again, I went back to my supervisor who graciously supported my interest in this endeavor.

FAL had a long history of performing arts programming covering the disciplines of art, music, theater, and dance. From performance art to a concert series to a film series, the reading room became an event space for the performing arts at certain times throughout the semester. In so doing, the aforementioned theater performance became one of a series of events. But this event was different, the space itself became a performer, personified. The books, furniture, and computer workstations became part of the set. Other differences included the duration of the event, four performances of one show instead of just one as we had done in the past, and using the space as a rehearsal space during opening hours was also a change from other events.

The New Works Festival performance was appealing for several reasons. First, the event was different from other events held

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at FAL, a play had not been performed in the space. Second, the libraries had collaborated with Theater and Dance but not on this level, becoming a performance space for the hugely popular New Works Festival would raise our profile with the department and expose FAL to many new users. Spaces are frequently discussed in the context of serving new needs of users, but that mostly focuses on pedagogy and learning styles, we less often speak about spaces as an outreach tool. In arts libraries, there is an opportunity to take advantage of the performative nature of the disciplines we serve

(as well as the exhibitive nature in the visual arts). Third, students were getting a course credit for their participation in the play, which involved spending time in FAL. This curricular support was unprecedented.

Holding a performance in a library is often a lot of work, it is so much more than hosting an event. The benefits make the effort worth it. In this case, logistics included working with the techs to schedule all of the events, including rehearsals and performances, storing all of the costumes and additional nonlibrary props, producing signage about disruptions, and scheduling deliveries, such as bleachers.

The benefits of the play were definitely for the performers and the patrons of the performance. The performers had a new respect for libraries, and even a new relationship with libraries, and they said they will think

differently about libraries moving forward. As everyone involved were undergraduates (except me), it was a formative time to influence them about libraries.

To be fair and quite honest, not everyone benefited. Between the dress rehearsals and the performances, some library patrons were inconvenienced. Those who were disrupted for the most part were flexible. As we had a history of performances in FAL, they were used to finding other quiet spots to study.

Performing in this play was one of the highlights of my career. I took the liaison role



The opening scene of *Emanation* in the Fine Arts Library at the University of Texas-Austin.

to new heights, and an increased level of respect was gained on both sides. I have a deeper appreciation of the craft of theater performance, and the students and faculty have

a more developed understanding of new roles that libraries play. The experience reinforced how important it is to try new things and to take risks both personally and professionally. I hope that lesson rubbed off on those who shared the experience with me: my staff, colleagues, friends, and family.

If you are ever asked to host a play performance in your library, say yes. You might just end up the star of the show and an advocate for your library in a whole new way.

In spring 2015, the play *Emanation* ran four nights, the audience numbered 75 to 100 each night. To say that is was one of the highlights of my career is not an exaggeration. ♪