

To separate or not to separate? How playscripts are found in library collections

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INTRODUCTION

When theatre faculty ask for library instruction for their students to help locate plays and monologues, it makes the librarian wonder – do other libraries have this issue?

The locations of plays in both the Dewey Decimal and Library of Congress classification systems can create unnecessary barriers for users. Want to browse for monologues? Well, here's an anthology or just look for the thin and short little books...good luck! Even looking for a specific playwright or title can be tough depending on the usability of the library catalog. Many of the participants in a theatre student focus group at University of Wyoming in Laramie agreed that finding plays in the catalog was difficult (Mayer 2015).

Perhaps instructions could be provided for better navigating the catalog and the stacks, but unfortunately, in a review of 100 universities, 83 of which had a guide for theatre, only 31 of those provided advice on locating plays in the library (Furay 2018). Considering that 61% of information-seeking activity by theatre artists is to read and find new plays, this could be problematic (Medaille 2009). So how to fix it?

One solution could be to offer electronic resources, where plays are “shelved” together and virtually browsed by details such as cast size or runtime. However, when it comes to format preferences, Clark (2013) discovered a preference among performing arts students for print books, as opposed to electronic access. While plays were not specifically differentiated, they are most similar to a book among the materials listed in Clark's survey. A follow-up study five years later maintained this preference, even though the percentage decreased slightly (Clark, et al. 2018). For this follow-up, the performing arts disciplines were individually separated and among all disciplines, theatre showed the highest percentage of preference for books in print.

Knowing that some academic libraries have set apart plays in their own section and that school and public libraries are venturing into “bookstore” style arrangements, it seems like a good time to ask the question: “How can libraries best serve the needs of the primary users of playscripts?”

OBJECTIVES

The goal of this simple study was to discover how other institutions collect and shelve playscripts at their libraries. In asking the following questions, it was hoped that a better plan for creating a more user-friendly situation for theatre arts could be developed.

- Who is responsible for collecting playscripts?
- What different ways are playscripts housed within library collections?
- How user-friendly are these systems?
- Are there ways to digitally supplement for printed monographs?
- Is there a way to make playscripts more discoverable?

METHODS

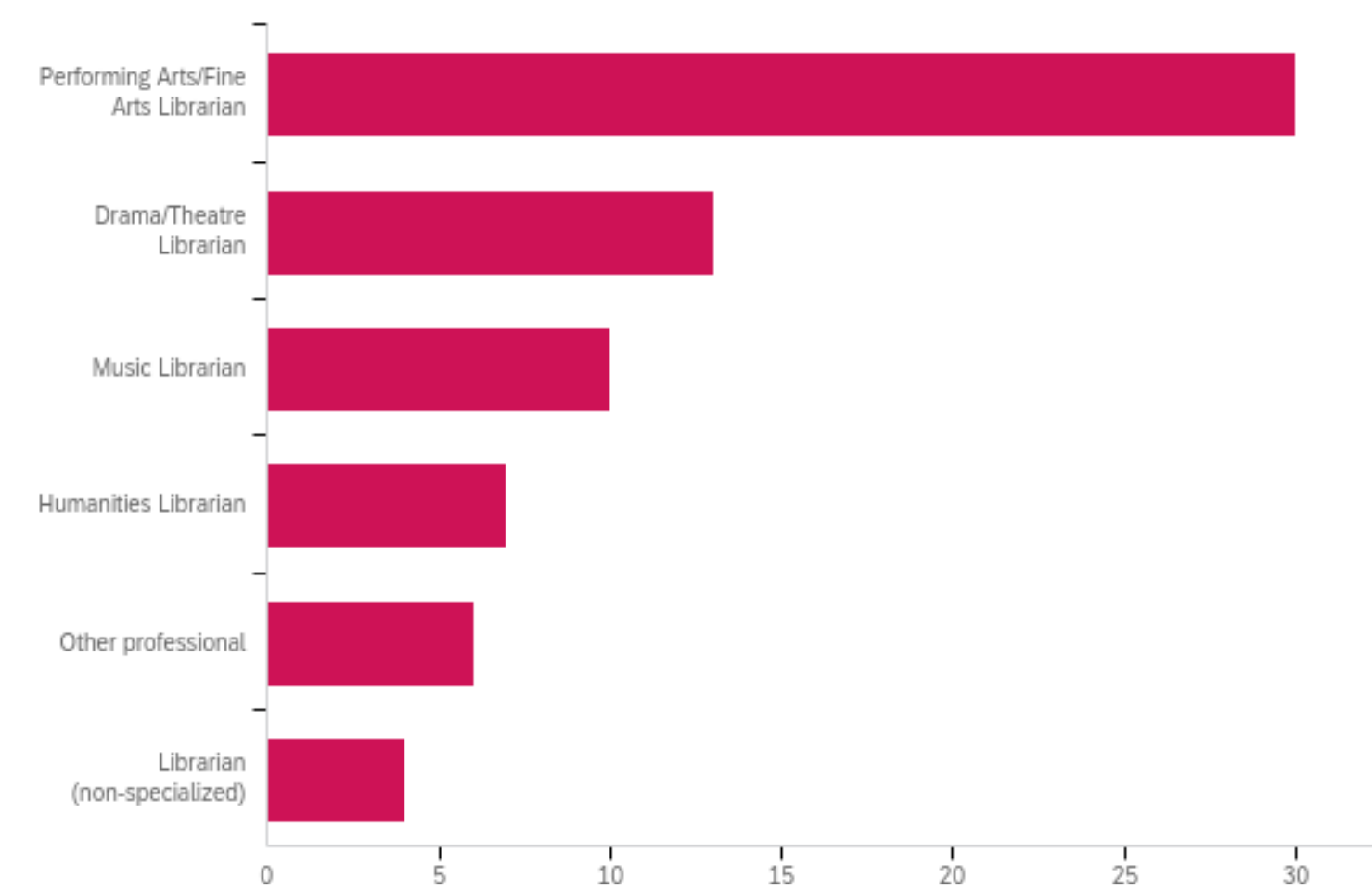
A short survey was built using Qualtrics. It was distributed through MLA-L, TLA membership emails, Facebook group “Librarian Support Network,” and selected K-12 institutions from a Google search.

For the purpose of this study, playscripts were defined as “self-contained scripts designed for acting purposes (which may include one-man shows and one-acts, but not necessarily include anthologies of monologues).”

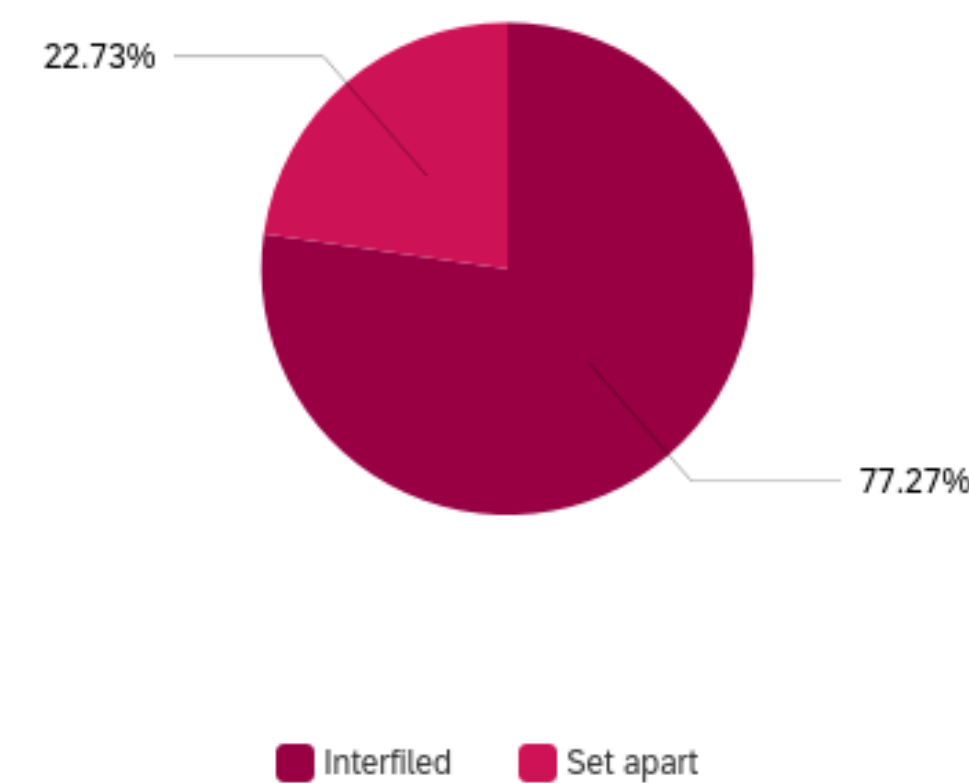
The survey was accessed 81 times, but provided only 70 viable responses, the vast majority being from academic institutions (83%). The original goal was to report on the practices of school, public, and academic library practices. However, with such a low response rate from school and public libraries, the findings serve to illustrate the collecting and housing of playscripts in universities, colleges, and conservatories.

RESULTS

Playscript collection is (mostly) the responsibility of arts subject specialists



Less than one quarter of respondents set playscripts apart from the regular, interfiled collection



20% of respondents indicate providing a metadata tag to assist with catalog searching. These are input in 655 or as a local field (591-598). Examples provided in the optional open text response for this question:

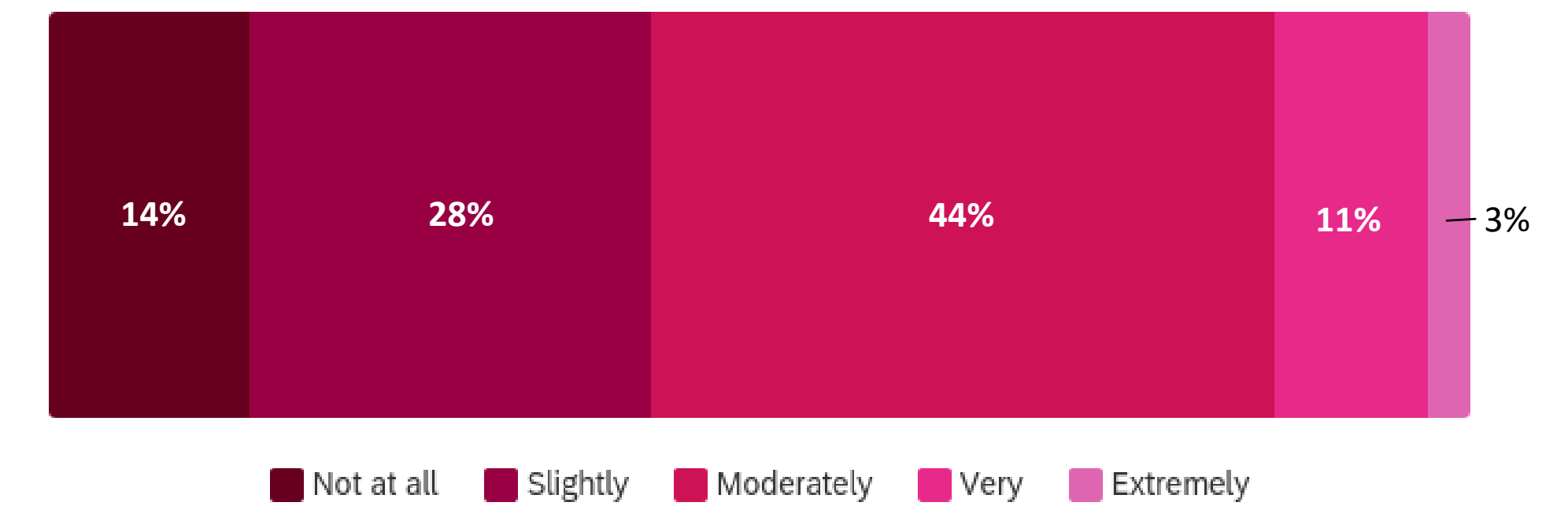
- LC Genre - Drama
- “University Theatre Arts Script Library”
- “acting edition”
- “play script”
- “Newman Scripts”
- “Drama Collection”

70% of respondents provide at least one digital resource to supplement their print collections. Presented here in order by most responses to least:

1. Alexander Street Drama Collection (complete or individual collections)
2. Drama Online
3. Literature Online (LION)
4. New Play Exchange
5. PlayIndex
6. Chadwyck-Healy Collections
7. Overdrive

RESULTS

Overall, playscript collections are not as user-friendly as they could be! When participants were asked to rate their systems for organizing plays on how user-friendly they are, 42% indicated slightly or “not at all.”



Note: Upon a cross-analysis, it was discovered that interfiled collections were rated 52% friendly (moderate to extremely). Institutions where the playscripts were set apart, on the other hand, rated 77% friendly.

CONCLUSION

The marked difference in apparent user-friendliness by interfiled and set apart collections may be a clue on one way in making playscripts more accessible to the theatre community. This would need further investigation to determine what additional components may be in play in making these systems more successful. It would also be important to get user perspectives to confirm the impressions of librarians about the usability of their collections.

There is also reason to believe that more work needs to be done in cataloging and discovery to make plays easier to locate in a search. In Mayer's (2015) focus group, a student specifically recommended “in the advanced search if there was a box it just says script or something” (p.423). Adding these elements can be of great benefit in information-seeking online. Evidence from this survey indicates 61% user-friendly collections by those who provide a metadata tag (opposed to the 48% who do not). Adding more details to the record would be a small step in better assisting theatre students and faculty.

As more digital resources become available, these electronic sources may take priority over physical, print playscripts. However, budgets will not often allow for specialized subscriptions such as these, especially in smaller institutions. In the face of an unpredictable future, librarians must focus on what they own and how they can best serve the users of these materials.

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