Review: Hispanic Theater Collection / Colección de teatro hispánico

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Project
Hispanic Theater Collection / Colección de teatro hispánico

Project Team

Gabriela Baeza Ventura, curation, metadata, translations, editing, protocols, University of Houston

Lorena Gauthereau, curation, metadata, translations, editing, protocols, University of Houston

Nicolás Kanellos, collection owner/donor, advisor, University of Houston

Katerín Zapata, geolocation, image resizing, upload, University of Houston

S. Shine Trabucco, geolocation, University of Houston

María Sánchez Carbajo, scanning, inventory, University of Houston

Elías David Navarro, translations, University of Houston

Project URL
https://recoveryapp.github.io/hispanictheater/

Project Reviewer

María Ascensión Mazuela Anguita, Universidad da Granada

Project Overview

Gabriela Baeza Ventura and Lorena Gauthereau

The US Latino Digital Humanities Center’s (USLDH) Hispanic Theater Collection features photographs, posters, playbills, flyers, and other items related to Hispanic theater in the U.S. The collection draws from the archives at the Recovering the US Hispanic Literary Heritage Program at the University of Houston (UH) and the Nicolás Kanellos Theater Collection at UH’s Special Collections. It provides a sense of the breadth and richness of the theatrical past and present of Hispanic artists. These items demonstrate the social, moral, and political functions of creating theater as Latinos within the U.S. They illustrate the use of Spanish-language traditions and art forms within a larger, dominating cultural structure. The items have been collected by Kanellos over the past 50 years and were part of the exhibition “Two Centuries of Hispanic Theatre in the Southwest,” which toured major museums in Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas. The digital project includes a map, timeline, word cloud, and other visualizations, as well as browsing features, item pages, and new, reusable data formats that can be downloaded by users and processed or indexed by machines.
USLDH employed its “Best Practices” while creating this project. We followed Collections as Data facets, and created the project using documentation for Collection Builder and Mexican Theatre: Then and Now by Kanellos. USLDH received funding from the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) and University of Idaho’s Collection Builder to digitize, create metadata, research geolocations, translate, and create an exhibit on the CollectionBuilder platform. CollectionBuilder is an open source tool for creating digital collection and exhibit websites that are driven by metadata and powered by modern static web technology. Since the templates and documentation are available to fork on GitHub, projects can be developed collaboratively.

USLDH staff used CollectionBuilder’s three primary components — a spreadsheet of metadata, a directory of assets, and a configuration file — to build and customize a sustainable, digital exhibit. CollectionBuilder uses workflows and the static site generator Jekyll to generate digital collections and exhibits from spreadsheets and digital media. Research fellows and interns digitized the items in the collection and generated latitude and longitude data for geolocation under the direction of Gabriela Baeza Ventura and Lorena Gauthereau. Baeza Ventura and Gauthereau curated an exhibit and created the metadata. English and Spanish translations were created by Baeza Ventura, Gauthereau, and Elías David Navarro. USLDH used Google Drive to create and organize the metadata while mitigating the challenges of working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Hispanic Theater Collection is geared toward researchers, educators, students, and community members interested in learning about the U.S. Latino theater, its origins, key participants, theaters, troupes, and performances. Users can use it as a launching point for further research in U.S. Latino studies, American studies, theater and performance studies, material/print culture, and women’s, gender, and sexualities studies, etc. The digital collection is supported by the US Latino Digital Humanities Center/Recovering the US Hispanic Literary Heritage Program. A complementary e-text for the collection is available on APPDigital.

Project Review

María Ascensión Mazuela Anguita

The Hispanic Theater Collection is an inspiring digital humanities project developed by the US Latino Digital Humanities Center at the University of Houston. The project provides community access to the Hispanic Theater Collection, which is preserved at the University of Houston Libraries Special Collections. Consisting of nine boxes of photographs, posters, manuscripts, publications, and printed materials — such as flyers and playbills — dating from 1972 to 2015, this is one of the largest and more comprehensive collections on U.S. Hispanic theater. The importance of these rich materials lies primarily in their potential use as a source for the study of the essential role played by the Hispanic community in U.S. theater.

The project uses the CollectionBuilder platform, which was developed by librarians at the University of Idaho Library following the Lib-STATIC methodology as a tool for creating websites for digital collections and exhibits. Specifically, this project uses CollectionBuilder-gh (Jekyll and GitHub Pages). Because of the visual
nature of the collection, this technology is certainly an effective option, as the CollectionBuilder templates provide users with an intuitive way of exploring the materials. To digitize the entire collection, create metadata, georeference the images, translate texts, and create an exhibit on the CollectionBuilder platform, the project team received funding from the American Council of Learned Societies and University of Idaho’s CollectionBuilder.

As the curator of the physical collection, Nicolás Kanellos forms part of the project team as an advisor. Directed by Gabriela Baeza Ventura and Lorena Gauthereau, this team is integrated by a broad cross-section of specialists, including Collection Builder consultants, translators, and geolocation experts.

The digitized images of the collection constitute the project’s foundation. Users can engage with them in several ways. They can navigate the different visualization options, which include a map, a timeline, and a useful word cloud to browse terms and subjects. The homepage template that has been used is very neat, including an excerpt of the project description; a slideshow with sample items; links to the timeline, top subjects, locations, and objects; and a number of options for downloading the data that are related to subjects, locations, or timeline. One of the strongest points of this project is how it provides visitors with a variety of reusable data formats that can be downloaded.

The text included in the “About” tab is outstanding for its level of detail — for instance, regarding the technologies that have been used — and for its accuracy and completeness. Although text descriptions of the images are provided both in Spanish and English, the website is only in English. However, the project team is currently working on a plurilingual version of the platform. Recently, the US Latino Digital Humanities Center at the University of Houston announced the digital publication of *Mexican American Theatre: Then and Now* (1989), a collection of essays, interviews, and vaudeville skits edited by Nicolás Kanellos, on APPDigital. This publication serves as an enlightening companion to the exhibit website.

The Hispanic Theater Collection is notable for bringing together a broad range of archival data and for facilitating its use by the community. By making the complete collection available on this platform, this project allows researchers to use the data as primary sources in order to develop studies on this interesting topic. The social relevance of the collection and its exhibition in the form of this easily navigable open-access website will also attract students, educators, and people with an interest not only in theater but also in U.S. Latino culture and history in general.