

This interview was conducted with Sarah Ziebell Mann on Monday, April 24th, in her office in the Preservation Department in Bobst Library. Having served as the head of the preservation and re-formatting project concerning the Robert Wilson collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, I was curious to ask Sarah many questions in regard to that project, including how a preservation specialist creates policy and preserves moving image material on such a massive scale.

JM: So how long have you worked with the Robert Wilson Collection?

SZM: I worked on the project for two years between 2004 and early 2006, so for two years.

JM: So were you there from the very beginning?

SZM: Yea, basically, they had hired a couple months earlier a preservation assistant and a cataloguer because they were having a harder time finding a project director, so there were a couple people on staff when I started.

JM: So this was a gift from another archive, correct?

SZM : This was a gift from Robert Wilson and the Birdhoffman Foundation, which is his foundation and they donated to the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, so it was his archive's foundation that made the donation. But it was basically the creator who donated it.

JM: Right. So how many, was it two thousand videos?

SZM: It was probably around three hundred audio recordings, three hundred films and a thousand to twelve hundred videos that ranged from basically across every video format.

JM: So was there any particular reason for the donation?

SZM: Well, Robert Wilson had donated papers to Columbia and Harvard and they knew for quite some time that the media collection was not in a stable housing situation and they had a preservation study done of the collection back in the mid 1990's by Deren Myers Hinkeley, actually, so she had kind of reported that there were a lot of formats that were in danger, some that may be unsavable and she alerted them to the problem and then they knew that it wasn't in their capabilities as a small foundation, a small archive, to really care for the media so they began to look for a place that could handle the preservation and make it more accessible once it

was preserved.

JM: What's the difficulties in having papers in one place and audio formats in another place, and are there collaborative efforts...is it frustrating?

SZM: I think it's hard for researchers if the materials aren't in one institution but the good thing is that they did donate the collections so they are accessible through semi-public institutions. The good thing is that they're all on the East Coast so it could be worse but it would be better to have all the collection housed together, but he's been donating since the early 70's so over time the priorities changed in terms of where they's go but it would be ideal for all of the materials to be housed in one place. But right now there definitely was a connection between the two other research institutions and the library. We did use them a lot for our own research so there was that connection and his foundation is still active and they still maintain...mostly the photo archive...and so they connect the institutions that maintain the collections.

JM: So, your day-to-day job with the collection, could you describe that a little bit?

SZM: Yea, well, it changed over time, given what the project was, so at first we were doing assessments of the collection and assessing preservation priorities and kind of proceeded work-by-work according to several different things. Robert Wilson had prioritized his own body of work over time and decided what was most important. We also knew kind of what the research demand was and what the material instability was, so roughly chronologically but then given a certain level of importance. We started with assessments and determined what the preservation needs were, and if an outside lab needed to handle preservation or if this was something we could try to re-format in-house. After we assessed everything and created a very elaborate preservation report and strategy for each item we went through the whole preservation process. We installed a video re-formatting system similar to what NYU has and began doing re-formatting for certain parts of the collection and then we moved into cataloguing so as I worked on the collection I worked on different aspects but a lot of it at the beginning was making plans and trying to set up procedures and then with the in-house formatting. We purchased a system, it was the first system of its kind in the library so we came up with a lot of guidelines for that and then I ended up doing a lot of media cataloguing as well. So, just whatever the project demanded and then at the very end we did access. We did a lot of public programs and things like that, so all the phases related to the process I was involved in.

JM: That's really interesting that he had his own set of priorities for what was the most

important. Now, was he right on or was it an emotional priority list or was he basing it on preservation risk?

SZM: He was basing it on what he considered to be the most important work in his body of work. It didn't have anything to do with condition, it had to do with what he considered to be the most important creative works and we compared this to what seemed to be research demand and scholarship and that sort of thing, and for the first grouping of works we didn't have to change really from his list very much, we were kind of at an agreement that lot of works he had prioritized were indeed some of the most important pieces and then a lot of them turned out to be the earlier pieces that required a lot of preservation assistance. It's an interesting thing to have! But we had made our own decisions so this was another guide for us, it was one of the factors. For us, the main thing was stabilizing the collection and so we certainly prioritized that, but having a list of what the creator thought were the important works was a very interesting thing to have and quite useful.

JM: What goes into taking in a very prestigious collection like the Robert Wilson collection because it has a sort of snowballing effect because you have to take on the researchers and the requests and you have to take on all the different things that come with taking on that kind of prestigious body of work which entails a body of research that people want to use. So was that in the budget too, that some parts of it had to be accessible, that there had to be access copies so that researchers had something to use?

SZM: Absolutely. We needed to create access copies of everything, that was part of the way the project was set up and because it was a public library...that was an important thing for the library as well, so it was set up to be preservation of everything, cataloguing, and access copies made. As I said we proceeded in the processing and making it accessible the collection basically according to the priorities that we had set up for, that had a lot to do with the stability of the media but also had a lot to do with our perception of what the research demand would be. And as soon as people knew the process had begun we had lots of researchers contacting us, asking when the collections would be done. Several researchers had put contracts, monograph contracts, out to write works on Wilson and they were desperately waiting for some tapes to become accessible to help fill out parts of their research and stuff so immediately when we began we began to get the researchers' requests to try and accommodate them as much as we could, and basically since we started making the work accessible there have been several researchers a day

coming to see the material and the archive and the archive so people were really anxious to have it because it was not...considering it was performance documentation, if you didn't see the performance when it was performed you've basically only read about it in second-hand accounts so the opportunity to actually see some of the recordings was something that people wanted.

JM: So, I want to talk a little bit about video because that's what my class is about. You said, every format of video pretty much?

SZM: I think I counted, we counted once and it was fifteen different video formats represented.

JM: Whoa.

SZM: That spanned from 2"inch to D2.

JM: So is there equipment to play all of these?

SZM: No. We set up an in-house formatting system that could...and for NTSC as well as for PAL because a lot of the videos were PAL, because Wilson worked so much internationally. 3/4 inch, VHS, Super-VHS, Beta, BetaSP, DigiBeta, MiniDV, DVCam, so we could play those formats in the archive and all the other formats we knew immediately had to be sent out so we had a lot of material on 1/2 inch open reel, quite a bit on 1" inch, quite a bit on 2"inch, and PAL and NTSC Cam, so it was sort of whatever equipment they happened to have when they were doing a performance they recorded on so it was tremendous..

JM: So you store all the originals in cold storage?

SZM: Yes, all the originals were sent off once they were preserved to...the library has a cooperative storage arrangement called RECAP with Princeton and another college in New Jersey, so after all the preservation was done the masters were sent off to RECAP for archive storage as well as the preservation masters. The access copies that were made on DVD are stored on-site and everything else was sent off for permanent archival storage.

JM: So were you involved in the actual setting up of the video?

SZM: Yeah.

JM: How did you go about that?

SZM: Well, basically, we had a really talented video engineer who worked in our department, Ronny Dosoley, so he knew that this was something they had wanted for a long time and this project gave a good opportunity to try out a significant collection and deal with purchasing the equipment and setting up work-flow. So Ronny and I and a couple other staff members started visiting companies and discussing what our needs were and we ended up selecting a vendor from

Boston, One Beyond, who designed a custom system from us, and provided the decks as well as the computers and helped us develop our workflow, which ended up being real-time copying, so we would load a tape and a preservation master would be made on BetaSP or DigiBeta at the same time as the tape was pulled in and an MPEG-2 file was created from which we could create a DVD, so this was simultaneous transfer and was in real time so it was a very good for us because we had such strong time constraints on our project it was really important for us to be able to have an efficient process for doing in-house re-formatting because we had very strong demand to have...

JM: It just seems very overwhelming to have to set up a lab and take on this collection while at the same time...

SZM: Yea...

JM: Do you feel talking to other people in your field that this is kind of common, that you have to do the dual thing?

SZM: Yea, well, it seems to be more and more common that people want to take this work in-house. I think that it makes sense for certain collections, especially collections that have media that is stable, that, you know, require fairly routine re-formatting and creation of access copies and you have a high volume of materials that are on similar formats, then I think it's a really good solution and a good investment and it can end up being fantastic. When you have collections with archival video that are highly deteriorated on such wide array of formats, that's when it can be really challenging, figuring out how to make a system like that work for you immediately. So, it was definitely challenging but I'd say that it was a really fantastic experience to go through, setting up such a system and to do test tapes and to have the opportunity to work on a different recording systems because that exposed a lot of problems, switching back between PAL and NTSC, that, you know, now we know how to go and handle that. So, I think it was a good experience but I would say that this kind of solution is best for collections that have pretty homogenous, pretty, well, materials in pretty good condition.

JM: So what were some of the preservation concerns that showed up on the video, what kind of damage did they have?

SZM: Oh my goodness, some had severe...all kinds of things... hydrolysis...I can't even...binder-base adhesion failure...and that was something that required, I think that was the, that was the problem that required stabilization for about four months before the materials could

be transferred. So these things—sticky shed—all kinds of normal video problems, some damage to the housing that would hurt the play-back. Basically any type of problem you could imagine. And also just the issue of the equipment obsolescence, the most challenging format we had in terms of finding a vendor was 2" inch C-Cam. It's extremely rare to find a player and to find what the best solution is, so that was probably our most difficult format. We also had a ½ inch reel that had been made on a camera that was made only in France only for, I don't know, a period of two years or something, and one of our vendors tried to customize an existing ½ inch open reel machine to be able to play this unusual version of ½ inch open reel and was not successful, so we maintain the original but we were never able to get a transfer done because...we had sought out a company in France that could possibly work with it and then we never kind of heard back from them.

JM: So how many, is it just that one tape or were there other tapes that you just can't...

SZM: It's very funny but that particular 1" inch open reel problem was only one tape but the 2 C-Cam tapes, there must of been between ten and fifteen of them that ended up, we ended up finding a vendor to do them but it took a really long time and the results weren't superb. We also had a process of copy research so if we had situation like this with a format we knew was severely deteriorated, or very obsolete, we would try to seek out better copies of the recording in places where they may exist in theaters or production companies or...

JM: Did you have some instances where people had some of the performances?

SZM: Yea, we did. We, I think we ended up, we had contacted, probably forty, sent out forty letters and we ended up with between ten and fifteen recordings that we acquired, some that we didn't even know existed. But one thing would lead to another so it was a pretty successful process and I think if we had more time and more, you know, we could have had even more but it was a pretty successful process and then we would return a preservation copy to them.

JM: Is that one of the benefits of having an in-house system, where you know what you have and what you can play back and at least you have it in-house because it seems to me that the further we go into the future the more formats become, they develop this obsolescence, and you can't find anything that...so, it seems to me that you guys have this benefit of having all of these players and, it seems to be a sort of a model, so other archives won't have to go through the same thing.

SZM: Yea, no, it's tremendously important to keep the equipment as best you can, and so yes,

that is one benefit to having an in-house system. You know, you continually up-grade it but you have some of the decks at your institution that are maintained that you can continue to use for playback. I think that's very important.

JM: It worries me because I think it smaller archives in a sense might not be able to have that because of the money, you know "Well, this is only made in France," you know...

SZM: Right

JM: Maybe you could help them out, you know, by letting them use your system...

SZM: Yea, you're never going to be able, especially with a collection, this was an unusual number of videos that were represented, so you're never really going to be able to have everything maintained and able to play back but at the same time. Also, just being able to tell people, "Well, if you do have 2-inch C-Cam, we found a vendor to do it," and that kind of thing.

JM: Do you have a cooperative relationship where you can give advice and...

SZM: Oh, sure...

JM: And do you have people come to you?

SZM: Um, yes. People who knew about the Robert Wilson collection, and I talked about it in a variety of different contexts, and always stressed these kinds of video horror stories. Um, yea, absolutely, the library's happy to share that kind of information. The more people know what's possible...this is a just a pretty intensive preservation effort and it was just fortunate, I mean a lot of archives don't have the kind of budget to really devote this much time to seeking out best copies for one particular artist and going, you know, if one vendor didn't succeed we'd go to a second and a third and try to have them to salvage materials and you know it's just a benefit to having dedicated funding for a project because you can try to things. So we definitely realized how fortunate we were with this collection to be able to try some of these things out because I think that it's an unusual situation to be able to devote that much time to one creator.

JM: So did you have video in your background before you started this project?

SZM: I mean, not to this extent. I had worked with video collections but more stable formats and not in the level of variety formats or the level of deterioration. I don't know how much in my career I will encounter this level, I mean, especially the level of variety of formats again, to get one this international in scope and the recording varieties. So I had experience but a lot of what I learned was from working with this collection.

JM: Kind of like, flying by the seat of your pants...

SZM: Yea...yea.

JM: So was it a group learning experience, did everybody on board was just, sort of, learning day-by-day what was going to happen?

SZM: Yea, we did assessments, we all worked together, everyone who worked on the project. We had three main staff and several interns and volunteers and because of the way we worked on the project everyone did stuff together, the cataloguer, the preservation assistant, myself, we all felt that we needed to know that and to be able to take care of the materials as completely as possible so everyone who worked on the project became aware of the issues with the video preservation because it was really important for us to have a cataloguer to be able to know when they were cataloguing something, some problem came up that these were not just a bad copy that had been preserved poorly or something like that, that there were these issues. Yea, so everyone involved, even tangentially, ended up learning more than they ever wanted to about video.

JM: It seems important because what we talk a lot about in class is the integrity of the work and the staff, everybody, to the guy actually doing the transfers on, knowing, you know, who these artists are because they could see something they think is damage and fix it, quote-unquote, *fix it*, and it's taking away from the integrity of the work. So it seems important, at least for everyone I've been in contact with, for everyone to have as much of an understanding of a collection as possible, so those mistakes aren't made, so people can say, "Oh, don't touch that, that scratch is suppose to be there."

SZM: Absolutely, especially when you're working with artists' collections.

JM: And experimental film...

SZM: Absolutely, you just have to have an understanding of the creator and the aesthetic and the background before you begin to make these judgments, so, yea, I absolutely agree.

JM: There wasn't any, um, problems with that, was there?

SZM: Ah, no, but partially because this was a collection of performance documentation so there were some original video art pieces and some very early experimental films that Wilson made but it was mostly documentation of a performance so the main work was the performance and the documentation was more, I mean it was important but it was more happen stance, the main thing

that was being documented was the work. But in terms of, well, you still had to be aware of things like color and lighting and that kind of stuff because it's very important to Wilson.

JM: When I worked at Mercer Media we got a lot of stuff from Hallwalls, a collective out in Buffalo, and I was listening to some of their art pieces and there would be this horrendous noise or something and I'd be going, "Uh, I got to turn that down" and Bill would be like "No! It's suppose to sound like that!" and I was ready to turn the volume down.

SZM: Especially with the audio, it probably came up more than anything because we did have, Robert Wilson did work with electronic music composers and people who were doing sound collages, and things like that, it was a big part of his work. And a lot of the tapes we had were the working tapes of the composers and sound collage artists would be something you would think "This isn't intentional," but the more you became familiar with how those sound recordings were integrated into the performance pieces the more you realized, that "Oh, there's no problem here."

JM: Right.

SZM: I think more than the image piece that we had, the sound piece was probably more, you really needed to be familiar with the, how the pieces were integrated into the work in order to make the judgements about what the correct (inaudible).

JM: Is that something you had to communicate to the vendor as well?

SZM: Yes. Yes, although I have to say with the audio we did it in a batch and the vendor worked so long with the audio that there was a familiarity that developed so we had a lot of success with the decisions that the vendor made because it was such an immersive project. But, yea, absolutely, we needed to communicate about the aesthetic, definitely.

JM: So is the project done?

SZM: Yes, everything was preserved and catalogued and people can come and research it at the library now, it's completely finished in the time that was allocated to it and, yea, it was a fantastic experience. Very immersive.

JM: So what are your duties here in the preservation lab?

SZM: Well, I'm the Moving Image Preservation Specialist, working on film, video and audio for the NYU Libraries for the different collections within the different collections of the library, accessing preservation needs and doing some in-house work, film inspection, some video re-

formatting, and some assistance with selecting outside labs. I'll be continuing to work with MIAP and the lab is a teaching lab so we'll be continuing to do some of that as well but primarily offering media preservation assistance to NYU collections that have these kinds of material.

JM: So, was there also film in the Robert Wilson collection?

SZM: Yes, there were around three hundred films. Some super-8, 8mm, mostly 16 and the film was in quite good condition.

JM: Oh, good.

SZM: We didn't have any major problems really with the film at all.

JM: Oh, that's how I learned. I bought these films and they were a real horror story and I had to fix them all up, so I kinda had the same experience but not to the same degree. So there were some films that you got to look at?

SZM: Yes, we looked at the film on rewinds at the library and then sent them off to be preserved. We found that a lot of the material was original material and there wasn't much duplication among the films so we just kind of did some cursory inspections in order to give the vendor basic information and to establish that we didn't have five prints of the same thing. And then we basically sent it out and had preservation masters made and the films were transferred to BeatSP and so users come and look at DVD copies of the films.

JM: So it's just DVD access copies of the films?

SZM: Yes

JM: No VHS?

SZM: No, no VHS, DVD is what the library wants and for the audio, CD copies.

JM: Oh wow, you've made it to the Big Time!

SZM: Yea, and so the audio was preserved, the preservation format was broadcast WAVE file which is stored on the library's servers and then for video, BetaSP, some DigiBeta if it was a digital source, and then the film was preserved on the DVD.

JM: So now you have the digital format to take care of too.

SZM: Well, for anything that was analog it was transferred to BetaSP and then an MPEG-2 created for. But for anything that was digital it was preserved digitally.

JM: Oh man, another generation is born!

SZM: Yes, yes. But that's probably a fairly small portion of the collection but definitely the audio is all digital audio.

JM: So who owns control over all of this?

SZM: Well, it's a little bit spread out in terms of the ownership. Wilson and the Birdhoffman Foundation have the right to a certain number of pieces but also, sometimes the rights reside with the institutions that did the documentation or perhaps the festival that sponsored the performance. Other underlining rights to other things, you know, the theaters are very...for collaborations there are all the different levels of rights that go along with composers and actors and choreographers and things like that, so it's a little bit dispersed. And so at the library it's research access only for our particular archives and any kind of distribution would have to be arranged separately, would have to be a separate project. But the main thing was providing the access at the library for researchers.

JM: Did a lot of your metadata about the collection come from the foundation that gave it to you?

SZM: Yea, they gave us a copy of their database which was quite good and so we used that, we kind of adapted that and used that as our in-house collection management system. And as we did the cataloguing our MARC records became sort of the main records but that database followed us through the whole project and we got a lot of the very basic information from it and it was so nice to have an archive devoted to the creator that had lots of documentation that we could draw from with our research and stuff so we used that throughout, for all kinds of things. We were really fortunate to have that, especially in the same city.

JM: Anything else you want to add about video preservation?

SZM: Oh boy. I think that in-house re-formatting can be great for archives but I think you always have to assess if it fits the collection with which you're working and if you feel that you are beyond the level of being able to handle something in-house that you should probably not attempt it and just work with outside vendors to try to make sure that you're handling the preservation appropriately. So I think it's a good strategy but I would not want everything to be handled in-house. I think specialty labs are there for a reason, that they are part of an overall strategy but I think it's just assessing what's the best solution for your collection and that in-house work can be

a part of that but to you need to be sure it really fits the needs of the collection.

JM: Anything else?

SZM: Nope, that's it.

JM: Well, thank you!