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Digital Database Helps Give Global Perspective to the Performing Arts

Franklin Crawford, May 3, 2001, *Cornell Chronicle*

Karen Brazell is no stranger to the idea that computer technology enhances liberal arts instruction. In 1981, when typewriters, photocopiers and overhead projectors were still the teacher's only techno pets, Brazell was one of the few humanities faculty to win an Ezra Cornell computer grant. The machine she purchased had less capacity than today's hand-sized computers, such as Palm Pilots, she said. But Brazell, the Goldwin Smith Professor of Japanese Literature and Theatre and professor of Asian studies, made innovative use of her electronic dinosaur, creating an index of 3,000 teaching slides.



This web page, from the Global Performing Arts Consortium's Japanese Performing Arts Resource Center (JPARC), provides multiple resources on Noh play costuming.

That computer grant marked the beginnings of a scholarly database and web site that is flourishing today. Brazell is now director of GloPAC -- the Global Performing Arts Consortium, an organization committed to the creation of an authoritative, multimedia and multilingual database of images, sound and video of the performing arts. Institutions, performing arts groups and individuals are currently contributing material to GloPAC's projects from places as far-flung as St. Petersburg and Singapore.

Not only will the database provide access to material that would otherwise be unavailable to most people, but it also allows students and scholars to examine the performing arts in a cross-cultural context. Instead of searching through scores of books on the use of puppets in Japan, Vietnam, China, Russia and the United States, for example, researchers will be just a few clicks away from hundreds of images worldwide -- with authoritative, peer-reviewed information attached.

Brazell is working on this project with Ann Ferguson, the library's curator for theater arts and with the staff of the Cornell Institute for Digital Collections (CIDC).

"Very little has been done with metadata in the performing arts, so Karen and I are collaborating in uncharted territory,"

said Ferguson. "Creating an effective international database of this scope is a major undertaking, and we have spent hundreds of hours working together on this project. Collaborations like ours -- between faculty and librarians -- can result in the creation of digital scholarly tools that offer exciting new ways of studying the arts and humanities."

Brazell has long anticipated the need for putting performing arts, particularly non-Western forms of art, into global perspective. Her extensive knowledge of Japanese Noh plays, for example, has given her a different perspective on what constitutes the standard in performing arts.

"You learn that not everybody is assuming that Shakespeare's plays or 19th century realism is the standard," Brazell said. "The student population today is more international -- and more visually oriented. Many students arrive with a greater global awareness of culture and a powerful visual sense."

And many students also expect high-end technology to serve as their vehicle to new knowledge. To meet that challenge for the past decade, at least, Brazell has intensified her efforts to present instruction materials in multimedia formats. And GloPAC, a work-in-progress, is an example of that effort.

In addition to the staff at CIDC, Brazell has been assisted in this project by a diverse group of students: Ray Wenderlich '01, computer science, helped design the original database. Other students, including Tang Fang '99, architecture; Mien Wang, BFA '99 in painting and printmaking; Thomas Lent '00, Asian studies; Othilia Kim '02, electrical engineering; and Zixue Mi '04 contributed to the Global Performing Arts Data Base (GloPAD) and GloPAC's other major initiative, Performing Arts Resource Centers (PARCs).

The initial PARC focuses on Japan (JPARC) and includes an interactive play script, a streaming video performance and a dynamic slide show as well as a multilayered glossary, an index of translations and a web source station of Japanese clip art and Internet links. At the present time, anyone may freely enter these web sites simply by registering.

"This is not just for my own class -- it's meant for an international audience of teachers and students," Brazell said, demonstrating at her keyboard. "The interactive learning modules can be used instead of more conventional reading assignments or in-class presentations. This, for example, is much more effective than a slide show."



Karen Brazell in her Rockefeller Hall office. *Richard Killen/Univ. Photography*

To illustrate, Brazell enters a site on "Costuming a Warrior for a Japanese Noh Play." Digital images of an actor being dressed for the role of a warrior are enhanced by text; pertinent terms are highlighted for reference to a glossary that's just a click away. A sequence of links allows a student to explore the subject more deeply. The glossary definitions are written by "top-of-the-line scholars specifically for this project," said Brazell. "They are not merely items from a dictionary."

The GloPAC web site allows students to learn more efficiently on their own time outside the classroom, Brazell said. Time saved outside the classroom translates into quality time inside the classroom. And it gives Brazell more time to focus on research.

In her Rockefeller Hall office, Brazell points to a paper handout on Japanese Noh plays typed in purple ink, a throwback to the days of mimeographs that reeked of fumes. It is void of images or visual appeal and by today's standards something of an academic eyesore. By contrast, the GloPac web site offers a universe of intellectual stimulation -- images, sound, words -- quickly.

"And you can't write about visual things without using pictures," said Brazell. "The fact that we can reproduce pictures and sound has revolutionized how we can teach."