Richard Stone describes how the online index to Australia’s performing arts history is helping to preserve a snapshot of society that would otherwise be lost forever.

The curtain has been raised on an Australian world premiere: AusStage, the online gateway to Australia’s performing arts.

For the casual user or academic researcher, AusStage provides Web access to a comprehensive index of past and present Australian performing arts events, as well as a national directory of performing arts resources. Among a stellar cast of players appearing in AusStage is the National Library’s extensive collection of Australian theatre programs, the PROMPT Collection.

As far as can be ascertained, there is no similar project elsewhere in the world. While there are many online projects and products using interactive technology and powerful indexing mechanisms, there is no online index recording, in the same manner as AusStage, a nation’s total performing arts history. As well, they are very short on the usual elements required in traditional library cataloguing practices, such as author responsibility and imprint details (place, publisher and date). Libraries such as the National Library, with a large, significant performing arts ephemera and program collection, have resorted to pragmatic practices involving minimal catalogue control, listings of files or finding aids. Fine as these are, AusStage goes further and deeper in actually extracting and indexing essential information and making it available.

The initiative for AusStage came from the academic world, from university departments teaching drama and theatre studies. In 1987, the Australasian Drama Studies Association (ADSA) launched ANZTR: Australian and New Zealand Theatre Record, published by the Australian Theatre Studies Centre at the University of New South Wales from 1987 until 1996. Basically, ANZTR was a monthly compilation of reviews of performances in Australia and New Zealand sourced from major capital city daily newspapers, selected periodicals and some regional newspapers. It included cast lists in later volumes, and a monthly theatre news digest. It was a very useful publication for academic researchers, students and libraries.

After funding ran out in 1996, the academics who had nurtured and used ANZTR were determined to find a replacement, but one that would use online technology. Part of the answer was found at the Adelaide Festival Centre where The Event Database had been developed in the Performing Arts Collection of South Australia. TED, as the system became known, started as an internal management system, but the concept and its coverage was extended to include the cataloguing of performing arts events elsewhere around Adelaide and South Australia, through indexing newspaper advertisements, reviews, press coverage, programs and ephemera.

One of the principal authors of TED, Joh Hartog, from the Drama
Studies department at Flinders University, saw its potential for development on a national basis, and ADSA embraced it as a major initiative to improve research capabilities in the performing arts.

The challenge was to combine the range of information in ANZTR with the underlying concept of events-based information behind TED. The resulting database would aim to present performing arts data that could be utilised in sociological, political, economic and cultural research. The health of the performing arts as an industry and as a creative force is an important barometer of how well society is functioning at any given time. Without accessible and reliable data it does not have a significant enough profile in the research paradigm.

A development project was established in 1999, funded partially by a grant from the Australian Research Council (ARC), plus contributions from eight universities with departments of theatre and drama studies—Latrobe University, Flinders University, University of Western Australia, University of New England, University of New South Wales, University of Queensland, Queensland University of Technology and the University of Newcastle. The development of Phase One (the prototype) was completed at the end of 2002. Further funding for two more years was obtained from the ARC to advance the application of the system in Phase Two.

Flinders University has the computer base of the project and oversees its daily management. Overall management is vested in a board representing the eight participating universities, as well as representatives from the theatre industry, from the Australia Council, and from the performing arts resources sector in the person of the chairman of the Performing Arts Special Interest Group, Museums Australia (PASIG).

PASIG is an informal network representing the major performing arts collections held in heritage institutions such as the National Library, ScreenSound Australia, the state libraries, performing arts museums, archival bodies, and a host of other collections in university and public libraries, historical societies etc. Some of these institutions are supplying material for AusStage indexing. Most house individual collections that will be included in the AusStage directory of performing arts resources. AusStage is achieving another 'first', by providing the means for many of these collections of ephemeral material to be given wider exposure and access.

The underlying concept of the AusStage index is event based. The mandatory fields of an AusStage record consist of: Name, Dates, Venue and Primary Genre. Without these elements there cannot be an event to record. The Name is usually the title of the item being performed. Dates can include previews, opening performance and closing performance. Venue should include the place, as well as the name of the actual theatre or venue. And a Primary Genre has to be assigned, such as spoken word, dance, music, musical theatre, or the ubiquitous 'other'.

This basic block of information about an event is extracted from current sources, such as advertising in newspapers, articles, reviews, brochures and flyers, websites of theatre companies and venues, and from theatre magazines. The basic
The AusStage database has the most complete list of performances by the Australian Dance Theatre publicly available. Programs from the PROMPT Collection. Courtesy of Australian Dance Theatre.

A sampling of programs from the PROMPT Collection which have been indexed on to AusStage. Covers of Henry 4 and Julius Caesar courtesy of the Bell Shakespeare Company.

The event record can be expanded later as more information becomes available—for example, whether a performance event is part of an umbrella event such as a festival, whether it is a touring production (an important factor in Australia), and if it is amateur or professional. Descriptions of genre and content can also be upgraded. When programs are located, then even more details such as contributors (writers, composers, designers etc.), production personnel (director, choreographer etc.) and casts, as well as the names of production companies and entrepreneurs, can be easily added.

Information about performing arts events tends to pass quickly, especially for small-scale events for which publicity resources are limited. The AusStage index is meant to capture that ephemeral information and thus preserve a snapshot of society that would otherwise be lost forever. The basic requirement is for limited information on as many events as possible, in a form that is easily gathered, stored and retrieved. Achieving truly national coverage by including events in regional, suburban and rural centres presents a formidable problem which is being addressed by AusStage in the second stage of its development.

The indexing of retrospective events (that is, prior to 2001 when AusStage commenced) uses sources that provide much more detailed entries. Data from ANZTR: Australian and New Zealand Theatre Record, the antecedent publication mentioned earlier, is being added in its entirety, thus ensuring extensive coverage of a 10-year period of recent Australian theatre history. To expand retrospective coverage beyond the life of ANZTR, programs and printed ephemera from the PROMPT Collection in the National Library and from the Dennis Wolsanski Collection in the University of New South Wales Library are being indexed to add historical depth.

The AusStage index covers all live performing arts events. The exceptions are music events such as recitals, concerts and gigs. The sheer number of such events is overwhelming. In the field of classical music, there is potentially a major problem for indexers dealing with musical terminology outside their expertise. It was decided that only musical events with a dramatic component would be included, such as opera and musical theatre events.

After the trials and errors of development over three years, the AusStage index now contains over 25,000 records. This massive amount of performing arts data is contained in records ranging from minimal-level entries based on advertising to substantial records rich in details drawn from programs and reviews.

The second component of the AusStage database is the directory. Three major categories of directory information about Australian performing arts resources are being emphasised—firstly, information on the archives of performing arts companies; secondly, ‘hidden’ performing arts collections which, although they are housed in institutions such as libraries, museums and archives, do not necessarily have an online presence; and, lastly, the provision of links to performing arts collections that already exist in online catalogues and collection descriptions. AusStage directory entries are at the named collection level covering individuals (writers, actors, directors, entrepreneurs and so on), theatre companies, or theatre buildings. Two hundred such collections have been listed so far.

The two major components of AusStage, the index and directory, are closely interrelated. Together they provide a unique combination of powerful tools to unlock Australia’s performing arts history. AusStage is available online at www.AusStage.edu.au.

Richard Stone is Chairman of the Performing Arts Special Interest Group (PASIG) of Museums Australia, and a member of the Management Committee of AusStage.