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### Title

A New Way to Discover Playscripts: Using Tagpacker to Better Explore Collections

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2cn4p8z2>

### Journal

College & Research Libraries News, 85(8)

### ISSN

0099-0086

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### Publication Date

2024

### DOI

10.5860/crln.85.8.337

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Peer reviewed

## ACRL TechConnect

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### A New Way to Discover Playscripts; Using Tagpacker to Better Explore Collections

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*“I am trying to find a play for one man and one woman.”*

*“Can we get some help and guidance from you on where to find some Latinx plays?”*

*“I was wondering if you had any farcical comedies.”*

*“I want to browse plays that are physically available in the library. I don’t have a [specific] title. I just want to see what’s available and find something to read.”*

The previous quotes are a few actual requests from drama students at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), who were trying to find playscripts in the UCI Libraries collection. Like the more than 77% of other libraries that don’t have a separate playscript collection,<sup>1</sup> browsing for playscripts in UCI Libraries is difficult since they are interfiled with other materials such as novels, poetry, and literary criticism in the P (Language and Literature) area. Because physical browsing is difficult due to the volume of other materials as well as their size (it’s so easy for those slim playscripts to almost magically become invisible when compared to their much larger novels and criticism book neighbors), students instead need to rely on the library’s catalog to find these items.

While the catalog is the best resource for known-item searches, for playscripts, it is sorely lacking for general browsing and discovery purposes since there’s not even a specific subject heading or other MARC field that is regularly used to delineate playscripts from other resources. This deficiency has become even more apparent as students are increasingly wanting to read a much wider variety of plays outside of the traditional white, male, Euro-centric canon. But our records don’t provide demographic information of the materials’ creators. In years past, we might have turned to highly specialized print reference sources such as *Black Playwrights, 1823–1977: An Annotated Bibliography of Plays*<sup>2</sup> and *100 Great Plays for Women*,<sup>3</sup> or perhaps use the database Play Index—if you could afford this subscription. But these print resources are quickly outdated and also require students to both know of their existence and to then actually use them.

## UCI Drama Library Tagpacker

As I became increasingly frustrated with this situation, I decided to create my own discovery tool specifically aimed at helping users find playscripts with indexing facets of most interest to them. Consequently, in 2019, I used the online tool Tagpacker to create the UCI Drama Library page (<https://tagpacker.com/user/uci.drama.library>). Tagpacker is an open access resource that allows a user to create a collection of links that they can then “tag” with as many different pieces of metadata as they’d like, and then “pack” them into different categories.

### Ruined : a play / by Lynn Nottage

“ From Lynn Nottage, the Pulitzer Prize–winning author of such plays as *Fabulation* and *Intimate Apparel*, comes this haunting, probing work about the resilience of the human spirit during times of war. Set in a small mining town in Democratic Republic of Congo, this powerful play follows Mama Nadi, a shrewd businesswoman in a land torn apart by civil war. But is she protecting or profiting by the women she shelters? How far will she go to survive? Can a price be placed on a human life?

8M 4F Drama Black Stories Female playwright American playwright  
Heterosexual playwright Pulitzer Prize (Winner) Women's Stories War Prostitute  
Theatre Communications Group Online preview 6. Contemporary (1950-1999) 2008  
Drama Desk Awards (Winner) Horton Foote Prize (Winner)  
New York Drama Critics Circle (Winner) Obie Award (Winner)  
Outer Critics Circle Awards (Winner) Susan Smith Blackburn Prize (Finalist)  
Lucille Lortel Award (Winner)

The screenshot displays the UCI Libraries website interface. On the left is a sidebar with a list of filters: GENRE, MAJOR THEMES, PLAY'S TIME PERIOD, CAST - FEMALE, CAST - MALE, CAST - GENDER NOT SPECIFIED, CAST - OTHER, PLAYWRIGHT GENDER, PLAYWRIGHT ETHNICITY, PLAYWRIGHT SEXUAL ORIENTATION, PLAYWRIGHT NATIONALITY, AWARDS, and PREMIERE YEAR. The main content area features two play entries. The first entry is 'String Fever / by Jacquelyn Reingold', with a quote: 'Lily juggles the big issues: turning forty, artificial insemination and the elusive scientific Theory of Everything. Lily's world includes an Icelandic comedian, her wisecracking best friend, a cat-loving physicist, her no-longer-suicidal father and an ex-boyfriend who carries around a chair.' Below the quote are tags: Comedy, Romance, Science, Women's Stories, Friendship, 7. Contemporary (2000 - present), 3F, 3M, Female playwright, White playwright, Unknown sexuality, American playwright, 2003, Online preview, and Smith & Kraus. The second entry is 'The Last Schwartz / by Deborah Zoe Laufer', with a quote: 'The Schwartz family is on its last legs. Their father's dead and their Catskills home is up for sale. Norma's husband hasn't spoken to her since she turned their 15 year old son in for smoking pot. After five miscarriages it appears Herb's wife won't provide him with an heir. Simon has one foot on'. Below the quote are tags: Comedy, Jewish Stories, Death, Family, 7. Contemporary (2000 - present), 3F, 3M, Female playwright, White playwright, Heterosexual playwright, and American playwright.

Users of the site can search using a combination of tag filters and keywords, or just browse playscripts in the resource. One example of its use is by students in a Latinx Performance History class who regularly use the Latinx Stories (a major theme) and Latinx playwright (a demographic filter) tags to locate playscripts that fit into their class's focus. Similarly, one could use tags to locate a dark comedy by a female playwright that has been a finalist for a major award (spoiler alert: one result will be the brilliant play *Topdog/Underdog* by Suzan-Lori Parks) or find a list of plays that thematically explore gender identity. Once a user finds a play that interests them, they can then click on its title to be taken to the library's catalog and determine if it's currently available and its call number so they can find it on the shelf.

While the site now indexes more than 2,600 playscripts in the UCI Libraries (the majority of which have been published from 2010 to the present), it obviously wasn't always like this. This resource has developed and evolved over the past several years to what it is today thanks to regular conversations with students and faculty in the Drama department. Initially, I was primarily focused on cast information, major themes, and playwright demographics. However, after talking with a small group of graduate student actors about a year after this resource had been created, they told me how they'd really like it to provide genre information. Thus, a new pack was born, and I retroactively added genre tags to all plays that had already been indexed in the resource. This process occurred again in spring 2023, when faculty and graduate students informed me that it would be helpful to have

information about the play's time period (i.e., when the play is set), when the play premiered, and whether it had won or been a finalist for major awards.

I'm sure that additional tag packs will be added in the future as users' needs and desires continue to evolve—and I'll be happy if and when that occurs. Why? Because it means that people are using the resource and communicating how they'd like to use it *again*.

## **Process**

How was this resource actually created? I use an in-browser Tagpacker widget to save the permalink to a playscript's record in our OPAC and then assign one or more tags in a wide variety of packs. Currently, these packs are genre, major theme, play's time period, cast information (broken down by gender), playwright demographics (gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and nationality), awards, premiere year, whether an online preview exists in Google books, and publisher. The widget will prompt me to choose at least one tag in each pack, but I can add more than one (e.g., for genre, a play can be both a comedy and a short play; many plays have multiple themes, such as Tony Kushner's award-winning *Angels in America*, which is tagged with AIDS, LGBTQ Stories, and Religion) or choose to skip adding tags in that particular pack—something that frequently occurs with awards. In addition to the structured tags, each link has a free text box that I use to enter the publisher's description of that play and a link to a preview of the item in Google Books when it's available.

Since the catalog has never provided me with all the information I need, I use an array of other resources, including the playscript itself, to find information to help me index these playscripts. The sites of play publishers are excellent sources of genre, descriptions, cast information, and time period of the plays. Demographic information for the playwrights is frequently found on their own personal sites, Wikipedia, New Play Exchange (a subscription-based resource to discover generally unpublished and unproduced plays), published interviews, and occasionally scholarly reference sources. However, since demographic information can be difficult to obtain—especially for sexual orientation and ethnicity—I regularly use “unknown” tags in a few categories.

Initially, this was a slow process since I was looking for many different facets of information for each play. But as the corpus has grown, this has become faster since I only need to look in the site itself to see if a playwright has already been included and then use that demographic information again.

Once a new playscript is available to checkout from the library, I will add this title into Tagpacker. In addition to adding new materials, I'm also actively adding older titles with the

ultimate goal of having all playscripts in UCI Libraries published from 2000 to the present in this resource.

For those worried about this work suddenly being wiped away if Tagpacker were to cease to exist—fear not! I have configured my Tagpacker account to automatically back up my links with their tags and descriptions on a weekly basis in my Dropbox account, a standard option available to all Tagpacker accounts.

## **Limitations**

One major limitation of this resource is that it only works well for plays that are published individually, not those published in an anthology, a publishing practice that regularly occurs for playscripts. Because Tagpacker will only allow a URL to be entered once, I can't create multiple entries for each individual play in an anthology. I initially tried adding tags for all plays in an anthology, but this quickly became confusing when an anthology has titles by a wide range of playwrights that each require their own separate demographic tags and each title has different cast requirements. Consequently, I only include single-author anthologies and created a miscellaneous cast information tag.

The other main limitation is time. This process takes time to collect and enter data. It takes time to read a play's description—and perhaps even a review of a performance—to determine its major themes. I'm sure that I've invested hundreds of hours into creating and maintaining this resource over the past several years.

## **Reception**

While the creation of this resource has taken a large amount of time, I'm genuinely happy to do this because of the overwhelmingly positive reception it has received. Numbers don't lie—this relatively small homegrown resource has amassed more than 26,000 uses in less than five years. A faculty member recently stated in an email that this “is the most exciting resource we have experienced in the past twenty years.” They go on to describe how it has affected the Drama department's play selection process by allowing the “season play selection committee quick and easy access to thousands of show titles.” Put quite differently and more succinctly, one undergraduate recently said, “This is awesome!” Anecdotal (because it's nigh impossible to collect circulation statistics on playscripts due to the same issues with browsing them), I know that I've seen playscripts regularly being reshelfed and records with statuses of “Checked Out” in the OPAC significantly more frequently than prior to the existence of this site.

## Conclusion

Though the playscripts and URLs are for those in UCI Libraries, I encourage librarians and those interested in playscripts elsewhere to use this resource too. Use it to browse and discover plays, then use that information to find the playscript in a local collection or request it through interlibrary loan. As long as this resource is helpful and serves a purpose, I'm excited to continue nurturing and growing the UCI Drama Library Tagpacker site!

## Notes

1. Christine Edwards, "To Separate, or Not to Separate: How Playscripts are Found in Library Collections" (poster presentation, Music Library Association and Theatre Library Association joint conference, online, March 3, 2021), <https://hdl.handle.net/11244/329086>.
2. James V. Hatch and Omani Abdullah, eds., *Black Playwrights, 1823–1977: An Annotated Bibliography of Plays* (New York: Bowker, 1977).
3. Lucy Kerbel and Kate Mosse, *100 Great Plays for Women* (New York: Nick Hern Books, 2013).

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