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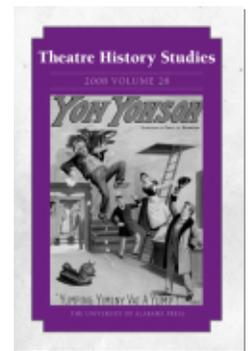
Performing Arts Archives: Dynamic Entities Complementing and Supporting Scholarship and Creativity

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Performing Arts Archives

Dynamic Entities Complementing and Supporting
Scholarship and Creativity

—FRANCESCA MARINI

The Role of Archives in Democratic Societies

In the course of history, whenever political and social oppression take place, many records that document the past and the rights of countries or individuals are destroyed in order to make essential evidence unavailable to anyone who may try to counteract the oppressors' actions. Existing memory is erased. The task of democratic archives is exactly the opposite: to preserve memory and the records "created and received in the course of individual or institutional activity and set aside (preserved) as evidence of that activity,"¹ as well as "for action or reference."² By keeping the records safe from malicious tampering and destruction, archives in democratic societies hold individuals and institutions accountable for their actions, making it possible for citizens to access the records and exercise their rights. Many types of archives house the records of government, business, institutions of all kinds, and individuals, to name just a few examples. All of them, including those that house performing arts materials, participate in preserving democracy as well as cultural and artistic heritage. It is therefore important to make a clear distinction between those who create the records and the archivists who preserve these records for future reference and use. The archival profession supports and fights for service and accountability to the public. Therefore, archivists frequently oppose the actions of an administration or individual when these actions are anti-democratic. Recently, for example, the Society of American Archivists has been very vocal in objecting to

the government's attempts to restrict access to public records.³ From an archivist's perspective, archives are a means to democracy, and working for an institution or individual should never imply supporting wrongdoing. In a democratic society, everyone who uses archives needs to remember that without the work of archivists, many records would not survive and could not be used.

The archival community fully participates in international intellectual and political discourse. Archival theory and practice have changed over the years, embracing new ideas and challenges. Archivists such as South African Verne Harris have been active in reshaping archives and archival practice in ways that support and reflect progressive political and cultural changes in South Africa and other countries.⁴ Much of archival literature and practice focus on the debate on archives as power;⁵ this debate also takes place in other communities and disciplines, such as theatre and performance studies. The thinking of philosopher Jacques Derrida⁶ and the postmodernist approach have played an important role in current archival discourse.⁷ But even before these approaches emerged, those in the archival community were engaged in self-reflection and change.⁸

Performing Arts Archives and Sources

Archivists are active on many fronts and engage with different communities; their work is complex, and not all of its aspects are directly visible to users. For this reason, some users tend to have an oversimplified view of what archivists do, and the role of the archival community is not always properly recognized. Archivists' work is highly interdisciplinary, relies on strong theoretical and practical knowledge, and is carried out in a variety of settings and contexts. Performing arts archives are part of this variety. Archivists are players in the discussion that surrounds the documentation of live performance, which is a highly controversial topic in artistic, archival, and scholarly communities. The selection and preservation in archives of materials that are directly or indirectly related to performance may be seen as an imposition of power⁹ and is often condemned as contrary to the spirit of live theatre and performance.¹⁰ In many instances there is a lack of communication and understanding among artists, scholars, and archivists.

In reality, our goals are the same. We all love theatre and performance for its live quality and its cultural, political, and social meaning. No one is interested in turning theatre into a fixed, immutable entity. Performing arts archives make it possible to preserve the memory of artists, movements, and performances.

Archivists want this memory to stay alive and be used for new creations. One Italian archivist who works in the archives of an active theatre, and whom I interviewed for one of my studies, remarked: “The archive has to be alive; it has to be an entity active for everybody. To the set designers whom . . . I have the pleasure to know, I say: ‘This archive is waiting for your work. You know it is here.’ . . . Because it [an archive] has to be alive. If its existence is not known, if it does not coexist with the city, the people, the scholars . . . it is a dead archive. And theatre cannot be a dead issue: on the contrary, it has to make people understand everything that is out there, convey the possibility to do and discover things.”¹¹

Other performing arts archivists and scholars with whom I have been in contact through my studies and experience share this opinion. It is also recognized that the materials held in archives—for example, photographs, videos, promptbooks, programs, posters, sketches, plans, and stage models—are only one part of what is needed to study and understand theatre and performance. People and places are among the many sources used by scholars and artists. In dance, for example, the dancer’s body is seen as an archive. “Dancers are the living archives of dance history,” writes American dance critic and historian Martha Ullman West. “Long after they leave the stage, in their minds and muscles they hold the memory of form, rhythm, mood, and intent, constituting an irreplaceable resource for performers, historians, and frequently the choreographers themselves.”¹² The dancers’ bodies are a source of information and insight for others as well as for the dancers themselves; an American scholar and tap dancer whom I interviewed pointed out that she discovers connections as she dances.¹³ Performance knowledge can be transmitted in many modes, as performance studies scholar Diana Taylor discusses in *The Archive and the Repertoire*.¹⁴ Archivists do not only work with materials in archives; they also act as liaisons among communities and make users aware of all other types of sources available elsewhere.

Some Characteristics of the Work of Performing Arts Archivists

Much of what I discuss in this article is drawn from results of a study of mine that provided an overview of methodological approaches to theatre research and scholarly uses of sources and of the interaction among theatre scholars, archivists, and librarians.¹⁵ Carried out over the course of three years (2002–5), the study gave me the opportunity to broadly survey theatre research and the

practices of performing arts archives and libraries in Italy and the United States and, to a lesser degree, in France and Belgium. I conducted more than forty interviews, including twenty-two with theatre scholars and nineteen with archivists and librarians in major university departments and performing arts archives and libraries. Except for two independent scholars, those interviewed are faculty teaching in leading performing arts programs in public and private universities. The archivists and librarians manage the performing arts archives and special collections, as well as some circulating collections, of active theatres, opera houses, and theatre festivals; leading libraries and research institutes; museums; public and private universities; a major national society; and private impresarios.

These archives and libraries have a variety of users. University students in several fields and disciplines—for example, performing arts, the arts, architecture, and fashion design—working on theses and dissertations compose one large group. Large numbers of established scholars use the most specialized archives and libraries. Other significant groups of users are performing arts practitioners and critics. Internal users are predominant in in-house archives of active theatres. Other users are members of the general public, especially in circulating collections but also in archives and special collections.¹⁶

Theatre is as complex as life itself. At the creative, intellectual, and practical levels, issues merge and cannot be separated. Performances are dynamic, interactive, situated in space and time, set in many intertwining contexts, and based on creativity, collaboration, and research.¹⁷ Performing arts materials and scholars' and archivists' work mirror these characteristics. Some overarching categories that cut across the data and encompass the specific issues addressed by scholars and archivists emerged from my study. These categories are context, time, creativity, engagement, and interdisciplinarity. Since I have discussed them in detail elsewhere,¹⁸ here I will briefly summarize only some aspects of my findings. I will focus on the archivists' involvement in and understanding of performing arts practice, understanding of context, and understanding of dynamic sources.

Involvement in and Understanding of Practice

Direct involvement in and understanding of practice is a key element in the study of theatre and performance and in the management of its sources held in archives. Performing arts archivists are always in close contact with theatre practice and are often directly part of it. The group I interviewed included ac-

tors, dancers, singers, and musicians. Similarly, performing arts scholars are in touch with practice through collaboration with artists or through direct involvement as actors, directors, dramaturges, playwrights, composers, and designers.¹⁹ This involvement with practice informs the work of archivists and scholars; one cannot conduct research, elaborate theories, generate new knowledge, support new generations of artists, or manage sources unless one fully understands theatre and performance. As theatre historian David Mayer points out, archivists can help scholars only if they “understand how theatre scholars work on ‘the event’ as well as on ‘the production’ and ‘the performance,’ and . . . are receptive to evidence which helps to increase understanding of the event.”²⁰

For archivists, close contact with practice also requires knowing what is happening in the performing arts and therefore where to acquire materials. It is also essential in order to communicate with artists, who often fear that archives may turn their work into a static entity. By showing they are part of the performing arts world and know the process of performance, archivists may start fruitful collaborations with artists. Some artists and companies simply do not think about documenting their work or do not have enough time or funding to organize and preserve their materials; in these cases, artists usually appreciate help from archivists. Other artists and companies are already engaged in documentation and may or may not be interested in donating their materials to archives. Some artists thoroughly document their work. Robert Wilson maintains his own archive; he has also donated videotapes of his performances to the Theatre on Film and Tape Archive of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and part of his papers to Columbia University’s Rare Book and Manuscripts Library.²¹ Wilson wants to preserve his vision for future audiences, as is shown in the documentary *Absolute Wilson*, which provides useful examples of his interest in documentation.²² Some artists, however, do not wish to document their work. “I don’t like it being there forever,” remarked an Eastern European professor and costume designer based in the United States. “I like the fact that it’s gone.”²³ When artists do not want to preserve their work, archivists simply have to respect this desire.²⁴ Archives are as much about remembering as they are about forgetting, as Harris discusses.²⁵

Understanding Context

Theatre practice takes place in specific contexts at first, and later on it is reinterpreted according to other contexts. Scholars and archivists must thoroughly

understand the different contexts (cultural, artistic, political, and social) in which materials were created. When working with performing arts materials, archivists and scholars also need to be aware of and openly acknowledge their own professional and intellectual standpoints at the time. For archivists, understanding the context of creation is crucial in order to correctly arrange, describe, and make available materials. Archivists work with specific collections and conduct as much research as scholars do. Some archivists publish their research independently, but even when they have no interest or time to do so they are as qualified as researchers as scholars are.

Understanding context is also crucial because archivists often have to explain the materials to users, especially when it comes to technical records such as stage plans. They also need to show users the relationships with other materials existing inside and outside their archive. “Sometimes I am lost and I cannot find the solution to a problem,” an Italian professor and director told me, but “I know archivists that can get me out of trouble and tell me where the sources that I am looking for are. It is like being a detective who has his informant friends.”²⁶ The context of the archival profession and the context of the institution in which archivists work also play important roles. Since performing arts materials differ from other archival materials, traditional archival principles often need to be adapted. The different environments of archivists’ work are relevant. Archivists who work in in-house archives within active theatres at times have less control over materials than do archivists who work in research institutions. Sometimes, active theatres do not see their archives as a priority and do not assign proper funding or decisional power to them.

Being Proactive, Understanding Dynamic Sources, and Promoting Use

Performances are instantaneously past, so you cannot wait for performing arts sources to come to you—you have to go out and gather everything available, as well as actively document what is going on and create sources when appropriate. The close contact with practice and understanding of performance enable archivists to identify where existing sources are. Many sources are ephemeral and may easily disappear after initial use. Materials created in relation to a production are dynamic entities, and some never become fixed; for example, scripts get annotated and reused. Some materials never reach the archives, and those that do have generally acquired a specific form. Even then, they still get creatively reused. Archives have to accommodate this vitality. Archives at times

have to deal with sources that never stop evolving—this happens, for example, within the digital environment. Archives play an active role in the creation of new documentation; among other activities, archivists may be involved in conducting oral histories or promoting the recording of performances and events. In more traditional archival theory and practice, archivists are usually not actively engaged in documentation efforts.

One school of thought promotes the “documentation strategy.”²⁷ According to Richard Pearce-Moses, “Documentation strategies are typically undertaken by collaborating records creators, archives, and users. A key element is the analysis of the subject to be documented” in order to assess “how that subject is documented in existing records” and to identify what “information about the subject . . . is lacking in those records.” The outcome of this analysis is “the development of a plan to capture adequate documentation of that subject, including the creation of records, if necessary.”²⁸ More-traditional archivists consider this stance controversial, but in the performing arts a proactive approach seems to be necessary owing to the temporal and dynamic characteristics of theatre and performance.

Besides being proactive, performing arts archivists are engaged in promoting the use of the materials they manage; “the archive has to be alive,” as the Italian archivist said. Other interviewees said there is no point in keeping materials unless they are used, and they discussed ways to promote use. One American special collections librarian promoted a research initiative that led to a theatre performance using sources from the repository.²⁹ An archive in Italy involved scholars in research projects based on its sources and promoted related seminars and publications.³⁰

Conclusion

Performing arts archivists and scholars are dynamic and passionate groups interested in a vast range of topics and projects, closely engaged with performing arts theory and practice, and deeply concerned with artistic, social, and political issues. Archivists have strong research skills and a thorough understanding of performance and context. They manage dynamic sources, are proactive in their role, and strongly promote use of materials. This article has highlighted some characteristics of performing arts archives and archivists’ work. While I continue to address these issues in more detail in other venues, I hope this discussion may further strengthen the dialogue among archivists, scholars, and artists.

Notes

1. Richard Pearce-Moses, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), s.v. "record."
2. The InterPARES 2 Project, *Terminology Database-Glossary* (current as of April 26, 2007), s.v. "record," http://www.interpares.org/ip2/ip2_terminology_db.cfm.
3. See the Society of American Archivists, "Guantanamo Detainee Records May Be in Jeopardy; SAA and Others Seek Clarification," April 20, 2007, <http://www.archivists.org/news/Guantanamo.asp>.
4. See Carolyn Hamilton et al., eds., *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town, South Africa: David Philip, 2002).
5. See, e.g., Randall C. Jimerson, "Embracing the Power of Archives," *American Archivist* 69, no. 1 (2006): 19–32.
6. See, e.g., Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Verne Harris, "A Shaft of Darkness: Derrida in the Archives," in Hamilton et al., *Refiguring the Archive*, 61–81.
7. Among many postmodern archival writings, see Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz, "Archives, Records, and Power: From (Postmodern) Theory to (Archival) Performance," *Archival Science* 2, nos. 3–4 (2002): 171–85; and Tom Nesmith, "Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives," *American Archivist* 65, no. 1 (2002): 24–41.
8. As an example, see Jimerson, "Embracing the Power of Archives."
9. See, e.g., Matthew Reason, *Documentation, Disappearance, and the Representation of Live Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
10. Ibid. Among many writings that address performance documentation, see, e.g., Kenneth Schlesinger, Pamela Bloom, and Ann Ferguson, eds., *Performance Documentation and Preservation in an Online Environment* (New York: Theatre Library Association, 2004); Denise Varney and Rachel Fensham, "More-and-Less-Than: Liveness, Video Recording, and the Future of Performance," *New Theatre Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (2000): 88–96; Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993); Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003; reprint, 2005); and Reason, *Documentation*.
11. "L'archivio deve vivere, deve essere un nucleo attivo con tutti quanti. Agli scenografi che . . . ho il piacere di conoscere, dico 'Questo qui è un archivio che aspetta le vostre opere. Sapete che c'è.' . . . Perché [l'archivio] deve vivere. Se non è conosciuto, se non convive con la città, con le persone, con gli studiosi . . . è un archivio morto. E il teatro non deve assolutamente essere un discorso morto, anzi deve far capire agli altri tutto quello che c'è, la possibilità proprio di fare, di scoprire." Francesca Marini, "Sources and Methodology of Theater Research in the View of Scholars and Information Professionals" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2005), 174–75 (interview 3). In the discussion, I am withholding the names of the interviewees and of their institutions. This is an established practice in qualitative research and is required by the regulations enforced by the Office for Protection of Research Subjects of the University of California, Los Angeles, with which I was affiliated at the time of the study. The English translation of the quotes is mine. Since literal translation is not always possible, I have included the original quotes in the notes to allow for comparison.

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12. Martha Ullman West, "Dancers as Living Archives," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 7, 2006, B14.
13. Marini, "Sources and Methodology," 107 (interview 28).
14. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*.
15. Marini, "Sources and Methodology"; see also Marini, "Archivists, Librarians, and Theatre Research," *Archivaria* 63 (Spring 2007): 7–33.
16. See Marini, "Sources and Methodology," 148–50. Research on the uses of performing arts archives is currently under way at the Theatre Museum in London, conducted by Bonnie Hewson. Bonnie Hewson, e-mail to author, April 17, 2007.
17. See Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994); Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1999).
18. Marini, "Sources and Methodology" and "Archivists, Librarians, and Theatre Research."
19. Ibid.
20. David Mayer, e-mail to author, January 26, 2002.
21. "The Robert Wilson Archive," <http://www.robertwilson.com/archive/overview.php>.
22. *Absolute Wilson*, directed by Katharina Otto-Bernstein (USA/Germany: Film Manufactures, 2006).
23. Marini, "Sources and Methodology," 99 (interview 31).
24. I am currently investigating the ethical aspects of documenting performance in my research project "Future Memory and the Performing Arts: Ethical and Artistic Considerations in Documenting and Preserving Performances."
25. Harris, "A Shaft of Darkness," 81.
26. "Certe volte non riesco a cavarmela su certi problemi . . . mentre invece conosco degli archivisti che mi tirano fuori d'impiccio e mi dicono dov'è [quello che cerco]. È un po' come un detective che ha qualche amico informatore in un angolo." Marini, "Sources and Methodology," 164 (interview 16).
27. On the documentation strategy process see Helen W. Samuels, "Who Controls the Past?" *American Archivist* 49, no. 2 (1986): 109–24; and Helen W. Samuels, *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities* (Lanham, Md., and London: Society of American Archivists and Scarecrow Press, 1998). See also Richard J. Cox, "The Documentation Strategy and Archival Appraisal Principles: A Different Perspective," *Archivaria* 38 (Fall 1994): 11–36; and Richard J. Cox, *American Archival Analysis* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1990), especially chapter 13 (291–303). See also Pearce-Moses, *Glossary*, s.v. "documentation strategy."
28. Pearce-Moses, *Glossary*, s.v. "documentation strategy."
29. Marini, "Sources and Methodology," 173–74 (interview 41).
30. Ibid., 173 (interview 17).