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## Archive or Memory? The Detritus of Live Performance

The positive valuation of theatre as live performance, and therefore also its transience, is frequently accompanied by the urgent expression of the need to counter that transience by means of documentation. This desire to 'save' theatre reaches its most fervent expression (and hope of authority and permanence) with the live performance archive. Archive theory, however, now insists on the instability and uncertainty of the archive, which not only documents but also constructs its subject. In this article, Matthew Reason argues that, by tracing comparisons between archives and human memory, it is possible to establish a new formulation of the archive – as detritus, not completeness – that puts a value on mutability as a reflection of theatre's liveness. Matthew Reason is currently completing a PhD on representations of live performance at the University of Edinburgh. He has edited a special edition of the *Edinburgh Review* (ER 106) on Theatre in Scotland, and has previously worked at the Edinburgh International Festival, where his responsibilities included maintaining the archive.

EUGENIO BARBA suggests in a 1992 article, 'Efermaele', that theatre is the 'art of the present', and describes directors and performers as creators of 'ephemeral works'.<sup>1</sup> This primary valuation of live performance as *live* has often been repeated by those, like Barba, who have celebrated the transitory nature of their work. George Balanchine, for example, was, according to Bonnie Brooks, described as 'a man who didn't give a damn about the past and cared even less about the future'.<sup>2</sup>

However, while Balanchine may not have been interested in the future life of his work, Brooks observes with evident relief that others certainly were. Making a comment that could be extended across the performing arts, Brooks suggests that 'an examination of practices in the dance field shows that the work of saving dances often appears to fall not to the artists themselves, but to the people who surround them'.<sup>3</sup> The work of 'saving' dances is, of course, one of saving them from ephemerality, and is already a long ideological step away from Barba's declaration that performance is the art of the present.

The desire to document performance is a strong though contradictory thread running

through the live arts. It is a desire motivated by an awareness of the inevitable disappearance of live performance, and witnessed in the comments of one Edinburgh Festival Fringe theatre director: 'In five weeks what will be left of [my play]? A script, a press release, a couple of photos and the reviews.'<sup>4</sup> What is worrying this director is the imminent disappearance of his or her production: the passing of an ephemeral event and the fear that the record of that event will be mere residue, inadequate remembrance of the original live performance. Fears such as these have sparked an academic and social urge to 'save' theatre and live performance in general.

Oddly, the idea that live performance must be saved from disappearance is not held as a position incompatible with the valuation of performance as ephemeral. In a single article, published in *New Theatre Quarterly* in 1994, Gay McAuley manages not only to echo Brooks's sentiments about the need to save live performances, but also describes artists as always more interested in the present than the past or future; details the need to persuade sometimes sceptical practitioners to take responsibility for their 'legacy'; and borrows some of Barba's

language of the value of transience. 'Theatre, by its nature', writes McAuley:

is an art of the present moment, and the theatre artists focus their energies on the present of the lived experience. Performance is unrepeatable and it is fascinating because it is unique and ephemeral. . . . While individuals may feel anguish at the lack of more durable traces of these experiences, most theatre artists are more interested in their next show than documenting the one that has just closed.<sup>5</sup>

The shift that McAuley operates here – from the positive valuation of disappearance as central to performance to the subject of documentation – is fascinating, and a movement that quickly becomes familiar when reading around the subject of live performance transience. Disappearance and documentation seem to go hand in hand.

It is possible that the positive valuation, and practical acceptance, of live performance's disappearance continues to be upheld by artists creating performances, although, as demonstrated by the anonymous Fringe director, this is not universal. While audiences, too, are perhaps used to the fact, as Rodrigues Villeneuve asserts, 'the same is not true for journalists, scholars, or historians, who must speak about the performance. They all want to retain something of it. Something material, some tangible trace.'<sup>6</sup> It is certainly here that the urge to document performance is strongest. In the discourses surrounding live performance, ideas of disappearance and transience mark one set of recurring imagery, but they are accompanied by a mirroring, complementary yet contradictory, discourse of documentation.

### **The 'Authoritative' Archive**

Nowhere in the arts can the desire to simply stop things disappearing, and the feeling that one is able to access the past, be stronger than in the live performance archive. The performing arts archive represents the officially sanctioned collecting, cataloguing, preserving, and consecrating of traces of past performances. These performance archives, huge numbers of which exist in companies and institutions around the world, can con-

sist of almost anything – theatre programmes, brochures, leaflets, photographs, video and sound recordings, press releases and cuttings of reviews, details of marketing strategies, figures for tickets sales, contracts with performers and confidential budgets, correspondence, details of sponsorship arrangements, venue plans, set and costume designs, stage and lighting plans, production notes, annotated scripts, interviews with directors or actors, actual costumes and examples of stage properties, and so on, and so on.

Anything that is remotely associated with the performance can belong in an archive. The archive can include material detailing the processes of creation, of production, and of reception. Clearly, each of these archival traces of performance warrants consideration in its own right. Here, however, the concept of the archive itself will be considered, examining the theory and ideology of the archive, and the promise made in many archive manifestos that they allow access to an authentic memory of past performances.

The identity of the archive as repository of accuracy and objectivity is one deeply rooted in the heart of our understanding of the archive, and of the usefulness of collecting and examining historical documents and objects. This basic perception and expectation of the archive is demonstrated in the mission statements of live performance archives. Arts Archive, for example, is 'dedicated to documenting the processes at work within contemporary performing arts practice'; the Live Arts Archive 'continues to document current events as they occur and seeks to make its historical record as complete as possible'; the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library describes itself as 'the largest and most comprehensive archive in the world devoted to the documentation of dance'.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, as the Jerome Robbins Dance Division also observes, the fear of the disappearance of live performance is particularly strongly felt by dance, an art form that has traditionally been very difficult to document. As Michelle Potter writes in an article on archiving dance, the desire to document

live performance is grounded in the fear that, 'without efforts to preserve the history and heritage of the art form it will forever languish as trivial and not worthy of serious research'.<sup>8</sup>

As a result, many organizations have been established directly to counter the problem of the disappearance of dance. The National Initiative to Preserve America's Dance (NIPAD) was set up in 1993, along with the Dance Heritage Coalition, *SAVE AS: DANCE*, and Preserve, Inc., whose slogan is 'assuring dance a life beyond performance'.<sup>9</sup> These are institutions established with the primary aim not of facilitating the creation of new art, but of ensuring the documentation of existing art: looking to the past and the future rather than the present. The importance placed on documentation by these institutions is clearly defined in the NIPAD mission statement with its goal to 'foster America's dance legacy by supporting dance documentation and preservation as an integral and ongoing part of the creation, transmission, and performance of dance'.<sup>10</sup>

Archival documentation, the message is clear, must be conducted at the centre of creation itself. As you perform you must record, and as you create you must document. Here it is possible to see the transformation of a valuation of live performance's ephemerality into a fear of ephemerality and a subsequent valuation of documentation and the document.

There is a clear moral dimension to this ambition, evident in the language emerging in this discussion: performance must be 'saved' or 'rescued', it is part of our 'heritage', our 'legacy', and must not be 'lost'. As a moral endeavour, the documentary ambition needs no justification beyond these aspirations themselves. The value of the archive is in the action of archiving, in halting disappearance and preserving for the future.

### Questioning the Archive

While archival institutions only implicitly suggest the value of the archive as repository of a true record of the past, this promise is explored explicitly by many archival theor-

ists. Irving Velody, for example, opens an article on the theory of the archive by stating:

As the backdrop to all scholarly research stands the archive. Appeals to ultimate truth, adequacy, and plausibility in the work of the humanities and social sciences rest on archival presuppositions.<sup>11</sup>

Such a basic starting point holds true for the performing arts archive as much as for any other kind, where research holds out the promise of reaching back to origins, and literally to original documents. This ability to touch items and objects from the past is, in itself, one of the key attractions of the archive: Harriet Bradley, among others, stresses the 'pleasures, seductions, and illusions of archival work' and the 'intoxication of the archive'.<sup>12</sup> Helen Freshwater also acknowledges the attraction of the archive, drawing on her experience working in theatre archives to describe the 'allure of the archive' as in part voyeuristic pleasure and in part the sense of accessing authentic material:

The archive grounds claims of truth, plausibility, authenticity. For the researcher utilizing archived material, the temptation of making a claim to the academic authority conferred by undertaking 'proper research' may prove irresistible.<sup>13</sup>

This seductive identity of the archive continues to enchant even while most contemporary theorists, including Velody, Bradley, and Freshwater themselves, have interrogated our understanding of archival documents and historical truth. Contemporary theory examines the constructive and constituting role the historical document performs in creating our understanding of the past. The powerful imagery that declares that the archive reveals the past to us is complemented by claims of archival limitation and fabrication. The archive's claim to neutral access is based, it is now stressed, on compromised positions of selection, omission, and manipulation. Carolyn Steedman, for example, describes this constructed nature of the archive:

The Archive is made from the selected and consciously chosen documentation from the past *and* from the mad fragmentations that no one intended to preserve and that just ended up there. . . . In

the Archive, you cannot be shocked at its exclusions, its emptinesses, at what *is not* catalogued.<sup>14</sup>

Far from being complete, or authentic, or neutral or objective, the archive is the reverse. Steedman is surely correct to describe the archive as empty, the researcher actively creating meaning, rather than simply finding it in the archive: the researcher is also constructing, selecting, editing, and speaking for the archive.

### Archive and Memory

In the performing arts, the exploration of the archive by the academic is perceived as an opportunity for 'proper research': that is, proper research in being both true and official, and authentic and authorized. The archive provides an opportunity to claim a validity beyond the anecdotal or speculative, as an aid to and justification of the researcher's own memory and interpretation. This is the attraction of the archive for the performing arts researcher, where as each performance disappears the archive offers the possibility of supplementing and perhaps supplanting doubtful memory as the site of performance record.

This parallel of the archive and memory is a popular motif in contemporary archive theory. Carolyn Steedman notes a common desire to use the archive as a metaphor for memory, an observation also witnessed when Richard Harvey Brown and Beth Davis-Brown<sup>15</sup> explore the role the archive plays in defining national memory and consciousness, and again when Irving Velody examines the idea that the 'modern memory is above all archival'.

Such parallels are particularly relevant to the performing arts archive, especially when examined alongside radical declarations that the only trace of the live performance event can and should be the audience's memory. Peter Brook powerfully suggests this, declaring that a live performance is:

an event for that moment in time, for that [audience] in that place – and its gone. Gone without a trace. There was no journalist; there was no photographer; the only witnesses were the people

present; the only record is what they retained, which is how it should be in theatre.<sup>16</sup>

These are ideas echoed by Patrice Pavis, who writes that: 'The only memory which one can preserve [of live performance] is that of the spectator's more or less distracted perception.'<sup>17</sup> The idea that the archive may be a kind of shared memory, suddenly becomes very pertinent and challenging to this positive valuation of audience memory.

The possibility of enabling a more accurate, objective, and accessible memory of live performance is the primary promise of the performing arts archive. This is clear from Mindy Aloff's description of dance archives in an article entitled, revealingly, 'It's Not Ephemera After All':

Although it is customary to speak about dancing as an ephemeral art that leaves nothing behind except the memory of its performance, in fact it leaves much more than you might guess: costumes and sets, musical scores, perhaps notation of the choreography, programmes and reviews, photographs, letters, films, and, nowadays, hours and hours of video-cassette recordings. While such leavings constitute a husk of dancing, they are also the kernels of dance history. . . . The art of choreography at this moment is an art of history as well, and support for historical archives has become indirectly support for dancing, too.<sup>18</sup>

The archive, in other words, is our memory, our heritage, our live performance of the past: although, in his description of 'kernels' and 'husks', Aloff also recognizes the incompleteness of such leavings. As Aloff's article makes clear, however, the idea that the archive preserves 'our theatre history' or 'dance heritage' runs through the manifestos of archival institution. The result is simple and inevitable: our performing arts history is what exists in the archive, and only what exists in the archive. The archive does not aid memory, but replaces it. The original experience, that which for Brook and Pavis exists in the audience's memory, becomes devalued as subjective, inaccessible, unauthoritative, and unempirical.

This opposition between archive and memory comes to the fore in a *New Theatre Quarterly* article by Denise Varney and Rachel Fensham proclaiming the need to video-record

live performance. In their support of recording live theatre performances, Varney and Fensham echo the urgent appeals of those seeking to archive dance, the ambition of video-recording being essentially the archival objective of 'saving' live performance. They also formulate such archival endeavour as a site of proper documentation in active competition with the positive valuation of audience memory of performance described by Brook and Pavis. Varney and Fensham declare: 'Surely the very ephemerality of individual memories should make it suspect as a reliable record of a performance.'<sup>19</sup>

It is possible to see the archive, therefore, as our 'proper' memory of performance, one that is superior to actual memory in terms of its accessibility, its durability, its scope, and its promise of objectivity and stability. In contrast, audience memory becomes devalued as subjective, inaccessible, and disappearing.

However, a distinction needs to be made between performances of which there can be no living memory and recent performances where physical archives might be regarded as 'in competition' with surviving audience memories. With such living memories, 'proper' archival documentation fails to supplant memory as a valuable site of post-performance afterlife. The attempt to replace memory with proper documentations, and the belief in the archive as repository of live performance memory, fails to acknowledge the full extent of the memorial representation. For the depiction of memory as the sole trace of live performance is more than simply a description – it is not perceived by commentators such as Brook and Pavis as a problem to be overcome by employment of a better memory such as the archive: instead it is a statement that also contains a positive valuation. Eugenio Barba illustrates this:

The spectator does not consume these performances. Often s/he does not understand them or does not know how to evaluate them. But s/he continues to have a dialogue with the memories which these performances have sown deep in his/her spirit.<sup>20</sup>

This is what Barba means when he writes that 'theatrical performance resists time not

by being frozen in a recording but by transforming itself': that transformation, Barba insists, is found in the individual memories of individual spectators. Put very simply: if you value live performance because of its liveness, then memory must be a more appropriate site for any trace or afterlife than the frozen and unchanging archive. Barba's valuation of the audience memory of live performance is not held despite the transformations enacted by memory, but because of them: the memory, says Barba, is in this transformative, multiple, mobile nature closer to the essential identity of the live performance after, not before, it has undergone such transformations.

### Memory of Metamorphosis

The archive or video-recording may *claim* to show the live performance as it really was; but Barba declares that the performance wasn't really what *was* happening on stage, but what *is* happening in the minds and subsequently the memories of the audience. What Barba writes elsewhere of technological recordings is also relevant to the claims of the archive:

In the age of electronic memory, of films, and of reproducibility, theatre performance also defines itself through the work of living memory, which is not museum but metamorphosis.<sup>21</sup>

Those who object to the positive valuation of the memory as a legitimate trace of live performance, do so because of the subjective, inaccessible, and transformative nature of memory which Barba describes. Marvin Carlson, for example, writes that:

Even those fortunate enough to witness the original are unable to return to it to check the accuracy of their memory or to test subsequent hypotheses against it, and for others there remains only the thinner substance of an experience filtered through the selective consciousness and reportage of intermediaries.<sup>22</sup>

Varney and Fensham echo these sentiments when they cite Keir Elam's observation in *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* that live performance has resisted serious study as

we have no reliable memory of it. They also express vehement distrust of Barba's positive valuation of subjective memory, condemning it on several counts including elitism, unacknowledged selection, and lack of detail or accountability. 'We oppose a hierarchy of performance reception where memory is the only fit place for performance to be stored', they declare, and ask, 'Whose memories are privileged?'

Later Varney and Fensham recognize why Barba places a positive valuation on transformative memory, but reject it none the less: memory, they state, does not 'produce a purer form of truth'.<sup>23</sup> This, however, depends on what kind of truth about live performance one is attempting to reach, and what it is about live performance that one is attempting to 'save'.

Additionally, many of their objections can be similarly directed at the archive, at documentation in general, or indeed (Varney and Fensham's particular concern) at video. While promising the authoritative archival ideal such documentations must fail to deliver, as archive theory makes clear, on any count of completeness, neutrality, and accuracy. Academic documentations can also take on an arrogant egotism – theatre history constructed as that which is studied and written about – that surely transcends any elitism that can be levelled at memory.

Indeed Varney and Fensham illustrate such academic instincts, as their understanding of audience memory is in the end textual: for them the question 'Whose memories are privileged?' has an answer, 'Those that are written down' – a failure to step away from the valuation of the text over the non-textual. Nor do Varney and Fensham examine how the impossibility of documenting all performances means that the question 'What performances are recorded?' is just as problematic. Finally, while memory is upfront about its transformations, no documentation fails radically to transform its subject, but often neglects to acknowledge the importance of such mutations.

Intriguingly, the metaphorical relationship that some writers perceive between archive and memory is perhaps *more* appro-

priate as a result of the contemporary understanding of archives as unstable, as read into rather than read, than it is for the hypothetical ideal of the archive as complete and neutral. If memory is recreated each time we revisit it, if memory is inherently transformative, then so is the archive's construction of the past recreated each time it is accessed. Is it possible, therefore, to take contemporary archive theory, and the positive valuation of memory, and develop a concept of the live performance archive that embraces the transformative conditions of both memory and archive?

In other words, instead of the archive's instability and compromised authority being an inevitable accident, can it be transformed into the central motif of a live performance archive celebrating transformation and fluidity? The ambition of such a project would be to reject the claimed authority of archives, look beyond the surface authenticity of video-recordings, and accept the positive valuation of memory's transformative power as a positive characteristic of a mutable live performance archive.

### **Imaginative Reworking of Documentation**

One example of an imaginative reworking of archival documentation comes from Forced Entertainment, in Tim Etchells and Richard Lowdon's 'Notes and Documents of *Emanuelle Enchanted*'.<sup>24</sup> Published in an edition of *Contemporary Theatre Review*, these 'Notes and Documents' do not present any clear, neutral, or scientific documentation of the performance: it would be impossible to recreate *Emanuelle Enchanted* from this documentation. Nor do they attempt to interpret, evaluate, or describe the performance. Instead Etchells and Lowdon accept the inevitable transformative effect of documentation, and attempt to create a record that recreates not the appearance of the performance, but the experience of the performance. As Nick Kaye comments on the documentation:

Tim Etchells and Richard Lowdon . . . use material derived from the performance to re-address concerns for excess information and incompleteness.

Rather than speculating upon the 'meaning' of *Emanuelle Enchanted* or recounting the mechanisms by which it operated, this presentation offers an experience analogous to that of a meeting with the event which preceded it. Calling on the 'fragmented/atomized' nature of the performance . . . this 're-presentation' resists being read as a transparent record, but furthers the work's dissemination through a variety of forms.<sup>25</sup>

In his preface to *The New Theatre*, Michael Kirby suggests that the responsibility of documentation is to be objective. He writes that, 'If it is a clear, accurate, objective recreation of the performance, the reader will respond to the documentation in much the same way as he would have responded to the performance.'<sup>26</sup>

Overthrowing this reliance on surface and neutrality, Etchells and Lowdon reject many of these impulses of documentation, including the underlying instinct to 'save' the performance. Instead, they present a documentation that is far from clear, accurate, or objective, which does not seek to recreate the performance, but does perhaps manage to achieve the result of replicating in the reader some of the experiences of the audience. The 'Notes and Documents' are an archive constructed not by recording the performance, but by attempting to echo the memory of the performance.

This is a fluid and transformative documentation, and an archive that highlights its own incompleteness, selectiveness, uneven qualities, and fabricated nature in its surface appearance. This surely is an archive appropriate for the documentation of the valued liveness of live performance.

### **An Archive of Detritus?**

I would also like to propose, speculatively, another possible alternative archive: namely, a theoretical archive of detritus. An archive of detritus would seek to mimic many of the positively valued characteristics of both the audience's memory of the performance and the liveness of live performance.

To illustrate this, I again turn to the work of Forced Entertainment and the manner in which it often highlights performance pro-

cess through the accumulation of detritus on the stage. Many theatre productions clear up as they go along, making tidy transitions from one act to another: the props from Scene One, for example, quickly removed before the start of Scene Two. In contrast, the stage at the end of a Forced Entertainment production is often littered with traces of what has gone before, traces of the performance which was present but now has gone.

Once noticed, this accumulation of performance detritus can be seen in many live performance productions – in, for example, Carles Santos's Latin opera *Ricardo i Elena*, where the performers take their bows on a stage littered with pianos, picture frames, books, and gigantic remote-control furniture, traces of the previous hour's events.<sup>27</sup> For me the memory of the performance is contained in this final tableau, represented by remains, with all the fragmented traces prompting fragmented memories.

This is also experienced in Meg Stuart's dance work *appetite*, which uses a slowly hardening clay floor physically to mark the passing of time on stage as the clay crumbles and becomes damaged as the dancers perform.<sup>28</sup> And once more in Wim Vandekeybus's *Scratching the Inner Fields*, where the debris that remains on the stage – right down to a side-winder trail of sweat tracing the final movement of a dancer through scattered earth, sticks, and discarded clothing – are physical reminders of the moments that have passed before the audience.<sup>29</sup>

Stage detritus presents an 'archive' able to create and recreate the multiple appearance of the performance. In the accumulation of these traces it is as if an immediate archive of the production is established: here is the shaky and incomplete evidence of what happened; these are archives which display their own randomness and selectiveness, and that mirror the nature of the audience's memory of the production. These are also archives that, uniquely, need archiving if they are not to disappear.

The image of stage detritus as archive is particularly suited for unstable and multiple Forced Entertainment productions, but also appropriate for the disappearing state of all

live performance and of memory. The idea of detritus as archive is also not so far from the state of all archives: but the archive as detritus turns around the presumptions of neutral detachment, objectivity, fidelity, consistency, and authenticity – instead claiming partiality, fluidity, randomness, and memory. And having abandoned claims to accuracy and completeness, such an archive is able to present archival interpretations, proclamations, and demonstrations, consciously and overtly performing what all archives are already enacting: dumb objects not allowed to speak for themselves, but spoken for.

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