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Theater Documentation Past and Present

Abstract

This article discusses the definitions and typology of theater documentation. The author comments on the existing distinction between: 1) documentation of theater performances, which, according to his 1970 concept, is divided into process records (giving insights into performance preparation) and product records (enabling the reconstruction of a performance); 2) documentation of theater life, comprising variously arranged inventories of performances, referred to as repertoires (e.g., of a given historical period, city, theater or ensemble, artist, etc.). He proposes a new distinction: between passive documentation (comprising various library, archive, and museum collections) and active documentation (comprising all types of elaboration). He also distinguishes between current and historical documentation. He analyzes the relationship between documentation and interpretation, emphasizing that while active documentation always involves a degree of interpretation, it remains credible provided that it is characterized by interpretive restraint, so that different, even contradictory interpretations of the material are possible. The article discusses

institutions in charge of current and historical theater documentation (the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences) and collecting historical documentation (Warsaw Theater Museum). The author also indicates the most important direction for this strand of theater research: the urgent need to undertake documentary research on pre-photographic and photographic iconography of actors.

Keywords

theater documentation, archive, theater historiography, theater iconography

Abstrakt

Dokumentacja teatralna wczoraj i dziś

Artykuł poświęcony definicjom i typologii dokumentacji teatralnej. Autor omawia dotychczasowe rozróżnienia na: 1) dokumentację przedstawień teatralnych, którą zgodnie z własną propozycją z 1970 roku dzieli się na dokumenty pracy (dające wgląd w proces przygotowania przedstawienia teatralnego) i dokumenty dzieła (dające możliwość zrekonstruowania przedstawienia), 2) dokumentację życia teatralnego obejmującą różnie uporządkowane spisy przedstawień określane jako repertuary (np. w okresie historycznym, mieście, teatrze albo określonego zespołu, artyści etc.). Proponuje wprowadzenie innego podziału: na dokumentację bierną (obejmującą różne zbiory o charakterze bibliotecznym, archiwalnym, muzealnym) i czynną (obejmującą opracowania wszelkiego typu). Rozróżnia także dokumentację bieżącą i historyczną. Analizuje relację między dokumentacją a interpretacją. Podkreśla, że dokumentacja czynna zawiera zawsze jakiś element interpretacji, zachowuje jednak dokumentacyjną wiarygodność, jeśli cechuje ją interpretacyjna powściągliwość, dzięki której możliwe są różne, nawet sprzeczne interpretacje materiału. W artykule omówione są instytucje zajmujące się bieżącą i historyczną dokumentacją teatralną (Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk) oraz gromadzące dokumentację historyczną (warszawskie Muzeum Teatralne). Autor wskazuje także najważniejszy kierunek rozwoju tego nurtu badań teatralnych: pilną konieczność podjęcia dokumentacyjnych badań nad przedfotograficzną i fotograficzną ikonografią aktorską.

Słowa kluczowe

dokumentacja teatralna, archiwum, historiografia teatralna, ikonografia teatralna

1.

Few words have made such a career in research as *documentation*. Equally certain is that the meaning of the word evolved in time. To this day, in the history of theater, there is no definition that would specify clearly what we mean by documentation. The meanings we use have all been determined through our everyday practices. There seem to be two primary definitions.

It is quite common to use the term documentation when referring to collections that allow us to document the course of theater history or the characteristics of individual performances. And by documentation, a word readily used in the vernacular, we understand the gathering of documents, i.e. credible sources, or simply those more credible than others. The popular belief is that priority among documents, defined as above, is given to a particularly informative and confidence-inspiring written text, or possibly a draft displaying such characteristics.

Research practice has long advised expanding this scope, primarily through iconography, i.e. all kinds of sources of a pictorial nature (drawing, graphics, painting). In addition, we include sources that are mechanical registrations of sound or image, or both sound and image.

In 1970, a suggestion was made to introduce a distinction in theatrical documentation between that documenting the work process and that documenting the work itself.¹ The idea caught on, and today it is quite common to distinguish between documents that provide insight into the work process of a performance, and those that allow us to reconstruct a completed performance. In both cases, the term document also includes pictorial sources, being quite a departure from common linguistic traditions, nevertheless justified, for the benefit of research.

And this is the first meaning of the term *theater documentation* that we have today. It simply means a collection of documents and its use for research purposes (or other purposes, provided they are research motivated).

2.

In the second sense, documentation is understood as works that serve to describe the theater life but are not descriptions as such. Of these, various lists are paramount, especially inventories of performances played by a specific theater at a certain time. Polish theater studies have made great achievements

¹ Zbigniew Raszewski, "Dokumentacja przedstawienia teatralnego," in *Dokumentacja w badaniach literackich i teatralnych: Wybrane problemy*, ed. Jadwiga Czachowska (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1970), 287-303.

in this area, even though they are often overlooked. It should be noted that we have already published almost all repertoires recording all the performances that we know of, played by Polish companies in Warsaw and Cracow, from the establishment of professional theater in those cities, until the outbreak of the World War I. Work has begun on forming such inventories regarding other cities and periods, in some cases already much progress has been made.² For some time we have seen attempts to call such studies *theatrography*, by an analogy with bibliography, which lists books, and filmography, which lists films.³ In the vernacular, these are called *repertoires*.

In addition to the repertoires of cities and theaters, we also have repertoires concerning individuals. Most often these are lists of stagings by one director or roles by one actor. Occasionally there are very helpful performance lists of individual plays or plays by a single author. These writings, and others related, are also considered to be of great help in documenting the theater world.

Perhaps the moment has come to give distinctive names for these two types of theater documentation: *passive* documentation (comprising various library, archive, and museum collection) and *active* documentation (comprising all types of elaboration). It seems equally necessary to separate documentation from occurrences which should not fall under these categories. These include guidebooks and brochures, which do not always fall within the field of documentation, as well as hermeneutical source analysis and source criticism, which is of its own nature. Passive documentation has different variations, depending on the type of documents collected and how they are collected.

A systematic collection of documents produced by contemporary theater could be called *current* documentation, as opposed to *historical* documentation,

² Everything points to the fact that Poland has been fortunate in compiling this kind of work. Even before the outbreak of World War I, Ludwik Bernacki began collecting materials for his work *Teatr, dramat i muzyka za Stanisława Augusta* (Theatre, Drama, and Music Under the Reign of King Stanisław August). When it was published (1925), it was an instant sensation, and its importance rose further in 1944 [Warsaw Uprising], when the posters used by Bernacki burned down. Also, Bernacki's continuators (Ludwik Simon, Mieczysław Klimowicz) have proved to be documentarians of the highest caliber, filling in the large gaps in his work. New books filled with repertoires of individual theaters, published after World War II, number a total of eighteen volumes, partly printed, partly reproduced, and among them are such masterpieces as Jerzy Got, *Teatr krakowski pod dyktando Adama Skorupki i Stanisława Koźmiana 1865–1885* (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1962). A phenomenon of continuity, by our standards, is the *Almanach Sceny Polskiej* (Almanac of the Polish Scene), filled primarily with repertoires, published since 1961 continuously, and sequentially edited by Edward Csató, Jerzy Koenig, Stanisław Marczak-Oborski, and, from volume 11 onward, by Kazimierz Andrzej Wyśniński.

³ A full analogy would be present if the neologism were different—*spectaclography*. But we have not yet encountered such a word, and *theatrography* has shown great vitality and is likely to thrive. If this word really takes off, Bernacki will surely become a classic of *theatrography*: a newly traced performance is already said to be “unknown to Bernacki” in the same way that a newly discovered book is said to be “unknown to Estreicher.”

that is, documentation that archives performances which are no longer being played at the time of document collection.

Current documentation often resorts to the production of documents which, however, do not necessarily lead to active documentation (as described here), while a list made for research purposes always possesses such a character.

This difference can be grasped by comparing a documentary film—as an example of passive documentation—with a repertoire—as an example of active documentation.

In the former, the work will entail the registration of objects and activities that are available to all interested parties at the time of filming. This cannot be said of Cracow's repertoire of 1865–1885, because it is not available to anyone until it has been prepared by a highly-qualified specialist.

Therefore, in the first instance, we do not transgress the document, while in the second we have already made some progress from documentation to interpretation, and as a result, obtained a type of semi-finished product. The latter is separated from passive documentation by its artificial character—it is not produced through theater work itself; it is not enough to simply register this work for it to be created. It is the result of research procedures that the theater could do without in order to achieve its objectives. Despite its research character, it does, however, belong to documentation, because it deliberately refrains from answering the inevitable research question—*why*? And it refrains from this question in order to facilitate the formulation of a variety of answers, including those that contradict each other, and with this aim, it organizes the material in such a way as to best serve not just one but many possible interpretations.

In active documentation, the category of authenticity of the document does not apply, however the category of credibility, which documents produced in this way gain through interpretive restraint, is still essential.

One could even say that one knows a master documentarian by the way they combine restraint of suggestion with an abundance of information that facilitates interpretation. An example is the type of repertoire drafted by Jerzy Got.

And vice versa, the more biased a list, the less the documentary value it has. The least useful is a list that interfaces not only different research subjects, but also different practices. This reminds us that the principal value of all documentation is the integrity of purpose and subject.

3.

It would be hard to lodge a complaint regarding a lack of interest in theatrical documentation in our country, although there have been quite diverse reactions when it comes to different types of documentation.

The most heated debates have been, and still are, on the issues of current documentation, that is, simply saving from oblivion what is currently being created and admired and which perishes before our eyes. No one doubts the importance of this obligation. However, there have been so many changes over the past few years that this entire issue, apparently, needs to be discussed anew.

In the 1970s, the Institute of Art leaned towards starting a campaign to film theatrical performances. Some effort in this regard was made, i.e. a camera was purchased. Then it turned out that the cost of the film would have exceeded the entire budget of the institute many times over, not to mention the salaries for the cinematographer and other workers. So filming entire theatrical productions proved to be financially unfeasible at the time.⁴

Having discovered this sad fact, the institute developed an approach of documenting selected performances throughout the country, usually four to five per season, using the means at its disposal. They were not very fancy, yet were remarkably ingenious, and thanks to them the artistry of many performances that are now legendary was documented. This is largely due to Marianna Gdowska, who was in charge of this form of documentation.⁵

When martial law was declared [in 1981], the theaters were shut down by the authorities and only after some time were they allowed to reopen. Some actors were against the restart, ready to announce a total boycott of performances, not only on television, but also in theaters. But most were in favor of reviving shows. However, it was stressed that the opening nights must feature important plays, possibly in virtuoso stagings, so that the recommencement would have moral grounding. In this atmosphere, Cracow's Stary Teatr decided to revive performances of Wyspiański's *Liberation*, in the staging of Konrad Swinarski, who had long since passed away. At the rehearsals, it was discovered with horror that the understanding of many important details was either questionable or nonexistent. A special courier then arrived from the institute with Marianna Gdowska's documentation (a second piece of documentation was used, from Zofia Krajewska's private archive). With the help of these materials, numerous obstacles were overcome.⁶ This was a clear example of successful theatrical documentation.

⁴ However, documentary films were created through the efforts of other institutions, and lists of these films, *filmographies*, were continuously published in *Pamiętnik Teatralny*.

⁵ At the time, performances worthy of documentation were selected by a specially created council. The "dossier" of one performance consisted of a duplicate of the director's copy, an audio tape of the whole thing, photographs of all situations taken by the institute, a report written down by a clerk, and various others (e.g., photographs ordered by the theater, reproductions of the set designs, etc.).

⁶ Zofia Krajewska edited a very extensive text in her own free time, in which she described all the situations. In some cases, as far as we know, it was her description that settled the uncertainties of the actors.

Much has changed since those days. The institute's capabilities have further declined, due to the changes that have taken place in our country's economy (and, in a way, also in our political system.) [Poland was going through a political and economic transformation at the time.] At the same time, there have been such advances in technology that it has become possible to document many theater performances.

Which is not to say that the problem has resolved itself in this new reality. Technical and financial possibilities do not guarantee success in this field, if these operations are not coupled with expertise and experience.

Those who have come into contact with a technical recording of a performance know how many conditions must be met for this work to be useful: for example, that there is such a thing as the condition of identity. (All technical means should be applied to a single performance, and they should all be accompanied by a tag that includes not only the date, but also the circumstances accompanying the registration.)

Advances in research give us a better knowledge of the performance itself. We now have better knowledge of the variety of its components. Some are less, and some more important for the expression of the show as a whole. This is an important matter when it comes to current documentation. We cannot document everything. Therefore, answers to the question "what should be documented?" are important. (Or—what in particular? How?)

Long-term efforts, in addition to bringing us certain achievements and a considerable amount of experience, have also made it possible for us to bury many delusions. There is no such thing as a complete documentation. The ever-improving methods of technical registration have turned out to be irreplaceable in some respects, but in others, more dangerous than photography, due to the presence of interpretation in the creation of the document itself.

Any registration, especially film, is at the same time an interpretation of a theatrical performance, often harming the performance by recording its course and presentation, while stripping it of its impact on the audience (even if it does show the audience's reactions.) This is probably due to the fact we know very little about the phenomenon of how theater impacts audiences. And when one does not fully grasp something, it is very difficult to document it properly.

There are plenty of experts on the subject who, to this day, claim that the most truthful document is a description made by a skilled author, displaying equal measure of knowledge of the theater along with expert writing skills. It is only through such a combination that the independence of artistry, its type and strength, and the nature of our experience

can be saved in a document. In all other documents the inherent unity of this phenomenon is broken.⁷

There are many people today who believe this to be true. However, the opposing bias is also strong, valuing the qualities of technical documentation as impartial, in contrast to a live witness, who is always biased, for it is in the nature of theater that one is always either for or against the performance, and this is stronger than one's own will (which makes absolute impartiality an illusion).

All of which would make the debate over current theatrical documentation very interesting if it were to reignite with its past vigor.

4.

Historical documentation has always been overshadowed by current documentation. The issue of saving the performances well known to the general public has aroused much more interest, at times even passion, than the question of knowledge of past performances and the history of the old theater world.

It cannot be said that the educated general public was not interested in this at all. It is true, however, that the direction of research is sometimes a matter of individual choice in this case, being more dependent on the decisions and inclinations of the researchers (within the framework of their capabilities). The development of current documentation took place to some extent under the pressures of public opinion. The development of historical documentation reflects the awareness of the research community, its interests and initiatives. We all know that the theater research community pays great attention to historical documentation.

The country, which unsuccessfully tried to establish a theater museum before the war [World War II], today has two, perfectly established, eagerly visited institutions. In particular, the Theatre Museum in Warsaw, founded by Arnold Szyfman and run successively by Eugeniusz Szwankowski, Józef Szczublewski, and Ewa Makomaska, should be counted among major achievements of Polish culture after the war (and not only when it comes to theater!). The creation of collections concentrating on the archival sphere also turned out to be of great importance, where the Theater Documentation department at the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences is leading the way.

⁷ This opinion was expressed by Józef Szczublewski in his early discussions on film documentation of theater. Using Modrzejewska as an example, Szczublewski blamed the actress's posed photographs, taken at a photo studio, of having a detrimental effect on our imagination. In reality, she looked different and acted differently than the photos would suggest, and this can be evidenced by countless reliable descriptions. The editors of *Pamiętnik Teatralny* considered this view extreme, but they never downplayed it, and do not intend to do so today.

Active documentation, as we have termed it, also has its field of achievement. An example is the repertoires and other publications of this kind already mentioned here.

Unfortunately, historical documentation is also partially incomplete, and this fact should be concerning. Among examples of such are the gaps in research on actor iconography that should be ranked first. The documentation work in this area started out extremely interestingly, but has now stalled.⁸ In practice, this would concern two kinds of document lists—pre-photographic and photographic.⁹

To this day, many series of lithographic portraits of Polish actors from the first half of the twentieth century have not been inventoried. The series of woodcuts published in illustrated magazines before the invention of the cyanotype are highly valuable, because they were often created based on a drawing made directly on site, from the audience, but still have not been cataloged. We do not have a list of actors' tableaux, which are compositions depicting one actor in his most prominent roles (a fascinating subject!).

There is no doubt that there should be an inventory of all photographic prints from the nineteenth century depicting Polish actors, and that work on such inventories should be initiated quickly. Firstly, an inventory of Modrzejewska's photographs should be created. This is an urgent matter, for many prints are fading as we speak. We know that work on the matter has been undertaken, but was interrupted due to unplanned circumstances. Let's hope it resumes as soon as possible.

The situation is even worse regarding pre-photographic documentation of a pictorial nature. We are aware of a researcher who, with his publications, has proven that he has a predisposition to work on this subject, and an exhaustingly high level of experience (also in the field of art history). However, this researcher stepped away from academic work and took up other endeavors.

He wasn't the first. Although young people find a lot of understanding in theater history and find it interesting, it rarely prompts them to engage in permanent research work. It is becoming increasingly rare for outstanding individuals to fill our ranks. All fields of work are likely to suffer from this, documentation no less than the creative faculties. For it is not true that just anyone can pursue

⁸ For a superbly developed model of a full actor's iconography see Hanna Garlińska-Zembrzuska, "Ikonomia Ludwika Solskiego: Katalog portretów w rolach," *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 25, z. 3 (1976): 239–302; "Ikonomia Ludwika Solskiego: Katalog portretów prywatnych," *Pamiętnik Teatralny* 26, z. 4 (1977): 479–508.

⁹ A separate issue is the Polish theater postcard, its genesis, heyday, and documentary significance. The subject is practically unexamined.

theater documentation. At least three conditions must be met for this work to be done well: one must be knowledgeable in the field, one must have the patience of a saint, and one must enjoy the work. Until now, we have had no difficulty in finding candidates with these skills. Perhaps we will continue to find them, as long as we can wait out this dry spell.

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