



Theatre History and Performance: the archive's unruliness as method

Isabel Pinto

Universidade Católica Portuguesa – Lisbon, Portugal

ABSTRACT – Theatre History and Performance: the archive's unruliness as method

– By reviewing the notion of archive (Derrida, 1995) that underlies Theatre History research, performance is here presented as a new methodological insight. As such, it allows for a cross disciplinary look into the historical sources, and, at the same time, a renewed embodiment of cultural heritage. This latter aspect, here illustrated by the description of three performances, relates to the international initiative *performing the archive* (Osthoff, 2009; Jackson; Kidd, 2011; Borggreen; Gade, 2013), which aims at both the public and social dimension and the transformative dynamics of artistic and cultural heritage.

Keywords: **Manuscripts. Memory. Performance. Archive. Digital Historicism.**

RÉSUMÉ – Histoire du Théâtre et Performance: l'Insurrection de l'Archive comme Méthode

– Basée sur la notion d'archive (Derrida, 1995), qui sous-tend la recherche de l'Histoire du Théâtre, cet article propose l'utilisation de la performance en tant que méthode de recherche. Investie de cette fonction, illustrée ici par trois initiatives performatives, elle permet à la fois, un nouveau regard, nettement pluridisciplinaire, sur les sources historiques et un autre vécu du patrimoine culturel. Ce dernier se rapporte au mouvement international *performing the archive* (Osthoff, 2009; Jackson; Kidd, 2011; Borggreen; Gade, 2013), qui prévoit simultanément la dimension publique et sociale et la dynamique de renouvellement pour le patrimoine artistique et culturel.

Mots-clés: **Manuscrits. Mémoire. Performance. Archive. Historicisme numérique.**

RESUMO – História do Teatro e Performance: a insurreição do arquivo como método

– A partir do conceito de arquivo (Derrida, 1995), que subjaz à investigação da História do Teatro, propõe-se o uso da performance como método de pesquisa. Encarregada dessa função, aqui exemplificada em três iniciativas performativas, ela possibilita, ao mesmo tempo, um novo olhar, acentuadamente multidisciplinar, sobre as fontes históricas e uma outra vivência do legado cultural. Esta última vertente filia-se ao movimento internacional *performing the archive* (Osthoff, 2009; Jackson; Kidd, 2011; Borggreen; Gade, 2013), que prescreve tanto a dimensão pública e social quanto a dinâmica de renovação para o patrimônio artístico e cultural.

Palavras-chave: **Manuscritos. Memória. Performance. Arquivo. Historicismo Digital.**

Globalization, i.e. the world we live in, can also be viewed as a challenge to think cultural heritage, in particular the archive, at a new level, beyond the limits of borders and nationalities. In light of this context, the concept of identity assumes new directions, and hence the same cultural legacy, with different types of heritage in articulation, acquires a renewed relevance and scope, mainly through recent attempts of appropriation and embodiment.

From the already established New Historicism, and based on the assumption that the archive is constantly evolving and changing, we have to think that the researcher of the performing arts is under the influence of new forms of archive, which is now widely conform to the digital mediation. One can no longer write about events of the past, especially those in the field of the performing arts, regardless of the increasing accessibility of historical information and patent databases, digitization of primary sources, date display standards etc. The current technological dynamism inevitably pervades our forays into the past. In terms of methodology, and in the particular context of theatre and performance studies, it allows us to propose new relationships between identities, events, circumstances, helping to foresee a past also in change towards a future that can only be guessed. In other words, the study of the performing arts relies on a past much closer to the future, a kind of Digital Historicism, as formulated in Fickers:

If we are to move in that direction, future historians cannot escape the productive confrontation with the new technical, economic and social realities of the digital culture. Instead of digital escapism and methodological conventionalism the discipline of history is rather in need of a new digital historicism. This digital historicism should be characterized by collaboration between archivists, computer scientists, historians and the public, with the aim of developing tools for a new digital source criticism (Fickers, 2012, p. 26).

Thus the notion of archive expands to the virtual field. On the one hand, it acquires a domestic and everyday dimension, unthinkable only years ago, and, on the other, it presupposes an interdisciplinary character, one that requires a new critical assessment, encompassing a more thorough and comprehensive approach to the historical sources.

Mal d'Archive (Derrida, 1995) renders two conceptions of identity: one deriving from a psychic and somatic apparatus, memory,

and the other linked to an artificial documental apparatus, the archive. As Derrida inquires the basic conditions of the archive, when dealing with Freud's archive, he suggests a new condition that is the *archive fever*.

Starting with Freud's theory on the subconscious and its dependency on scattered material remains, Derrida argues that there are no original records, or primary sources, but only traces leading to traces. In this way, he is able to rethink the archive in its multiple interfaces, namely as a public space, regulatory source of authority, strategic concept and principle of technological mediation. The archive requires a *mise en ordre*, or a staged order (Derrida, 1995, p. 16). The conditions for archiving bear tensions, contradictions and aporias, mainly due to the combination of a promise of future with the recording and preservation of the past.

It is this particular tension that we find interesting exploring in performance studies, as a way of facilitating a present experience of remains of the past, which constitute part of the archive. In this context, the performance fuels another tension: the ephemeral nature of the artistic experience in contrast with the permanence of the archive. Additionally, performing the archive makes the psychic apparatus of the individual memory overlap with the desire for a collective, institutional memory. In between these two dimensions of memory, an area of mutual transformation unfolds. Within the ambivalence between individual memory and the collective notion that permeates the archive, performance redefines the methodology to interpret and then disseminate historical information.

Derrida also questions the unity and homogeneity surrounding the archive (1995, p. 55). He uncovers the demand of the archive for a closed notion of heritage, or legacy, and a seal of authenticity. However, according to his perspective, rather than assume itself as heritage, or legacy – that is, a set of remains, referencing the past – the archive should call upon itself the problem of the future and, in particular, the possible time of its own reinvention. So, in relation to the archive, performance can crave for “[...] think about the future from an archived event¹” (Derrida, 1995, p. 127). Performance owns the power to expand and transform the repetition enclosed by the archive, since while unrepeatable, performance ends up allocating a horizon of future to the archive.

The *archive fever* that Derrida conceptualizes is linked to the violence of institutionalization, along with the unity and homogeneity that usually accompany it. More than a single and dominant national reality, the archive, especially the literary and artistic, should target different communities involved in different forms of interaction: linguistic, technical, material, literary etc. This new social dynamics calls for the practice of *living* the archive, and its conceptualization as fertile ground for both artistic experimentation and research.

This article is divided into four parts: the first, *Perspectives on Archive and Performance*, reviews main contributions about the conceptual and methodological influence uniting the archive and performance studies; in the second section, I present the necessary historical background, focusing on the scribe tradition and the general characteristics of the theatre collection that I investigate, in order to overtly relate the historical information of my research with my initiatives within the field of performing the archive. In the third part, I thoroughly describe and document three performances that I promoted – and, in two of them also participated – to rethink and disseminate my historical research over a theatre archive. In the fourth and last part, I summarize the main theoretical ideas and practices presented throughout the article, overall highlighting the transition from eighteenth-century archive research to the embodied area of performance.

Perspectives on Archive and Performance

In the last decade, the relationship between archive and performance has been actively explored, with systematic engagement from artists, researchers and archivists - that, in a joint effort, seek to combine the narratives emanating from the archive with the communal dimension of performance. In 2002, the journal *Performance Research* featured a special edition *On Archives and Archiving*. This issue brings together varied contributions spanning from the imponderability of writing the history of the theatre to the use of archival concepts in the performances of certain artists.

In that issue, Kobialka (2002) argues that the theatre historian should consider that a document cannot be archived in its wholeness. In other words, there are traces of its discursive realization, and of its

accomplishment as event that the archive cannot work out properly. This reality silenced within the archive can thus be fertile ground for performative endeavors. Although the archived document bears traces of the language of the past, it renders events, or shows much more poorly. This is one of the areas where performative practice can be of good use, not so much to try a reconstruction of the past as to understand that the written source is merely a layer of what constitutes the historical experience. Kobiakka also develops the hypothesis of a historical object rethought in terms of a past event, which can then be recreated through narrative, according to a particular mode of representation. As a new approach to the written sources, it implies the reconfiguration of the historian's relationship with archive objects.

Through performance, an archive object can be put into different perspectives and framed by as many narratives. In this way, the representation modes applying to it are exposed; it is a question of *showing*, more than *reading*. The representation of the archive object gains a reinvented materiality.

Freshwater (2002) focus on Lord Chamberlain's theatre archive, that runs until 1968 and whose nature is censorious. The Lord Chamberlain's office had the power to decide upon which plays could be staged in England. She, then, argues that such an archive illustrates very well the belief in the power of performance beyond its moment of realization. As a matter of fact, for Lord Chamberlain there was no doubt that even after its material end performance held a power over the audience and all the people in touch with it. Considering the general frame of censorship, of course the effects under consideration derived from the negative scope of embodiment that could resemble an epidemic outbreak:

The Lord Chamberlain and his staff were firmly convinced that theatre possessed performative influence. Their interventions were motivated by a belief in the influence of physical enactment; created by a concern over the body-to-body transmission of corrupting imagery and identities; produced because of anxiety that performance did indeed 'remain'; and pursued to such lengths because of fear of a contagious, corrupting – almost viral – spread of repeated acts (Freshwater, 2002, p. 51).

This argument in relation to the Lord Chamberlain's archive also applies to the very own circumstances of production of the manuscript

archive from the National Library of Portugal: in concrete, a society among which the artistic production, namely theatre, classified as potentially dangerous for the national culture and identity. Similarly, in eighteenth-century Portugal, theatre troubled the mind of the censors due to its emotional charge, visualizing ability and embodied transmission of meaning. Based on such evidence, Freshwater even claims that “Far from being a marginal, or a neglected concept, I would suggest that the conviction that performance circulates long after its initial realization is foundational to all projects of censorship which concentrate upon the performing arts” (2002, p. 53).

However, Freshwater’s work resonates with Schneider’s foundational case of 2001, according to which the long-standing implementation of an archive logics weakens the artistic power of performance. While assuming that performance is essentially ephemeral, vanishing altogether after its taking place, this logic annihilates whatever documental value performance could claim, which, in turn, rests entirely on the archive. On the contrary, Schneider suggests that performance bears within itself the ritual dimension of knowledge transmission across generations that accounts for the impact of oral narratives, dance and gesture amidst certain communities. In this light, Schneider adds, performance should be revised as a specific kind of archive that through mimesis can receive varied discursive and ideological analysis.

Yet the idea of performance as a type of archive remains unsettling to me, since it seems that we are forcing performance and the different analysis that can be called upon it to overlap. Apart from that, although performance is ritual in origin, in many parts of the world it has lost that social and religious role.

As I see it, what makes the interaction between archive and performance so challenging are both the conflict and the complementary nature of their pursuits. The conflict results from the opposition between embodiment and archive; the archive can be constrained through systems of reference, prompts certain linguistic assessments and reinvents itself in time by aiming to fill in the gap between its parts; performance, on the other hand, assures memory transmission, both at an individual and collective level, by featuring a certain kind of visuality that as a composition demands to be imagined and interpreted and no so much reconstructed. While the

archive takes a big share in the public sphere, since it is from all of us to all people, performance reinstates an individual as much as an intimate effect, because it calls out for each one of us.

The body as category exceeds the archive; as both a natural and artificial strength, it bears an individual memory, frequently unspoken. Performance relies on the body as an ontological category, while the archive has come to be the remains of the body. It is from here that we can dare to rethink the relationship between performance and archive: the aliveness of the body against a background of the residual traces that constitute the archive, even if one cares to look at the archive as evidence of the ability of the body to elude death. The body anticipates the archive, thus performance grounds the archive. To a certain extent, one might think of a never-ending tension between performance and the archive, in the sense that the former is production, invention and the creation of the necessary social space for memory to reinvent itself while the latter is the artifact, the remain, an uncompleted assortment depending on its actualization.

About the ephemeral nature of performance, Elaine Aston systematizes: “It is possible for performance to ‘house’ a culture resistant to and different from the dominant cultural order that would prefer to mark it absent rather than present” (2002, p. 78). Therefore, it is upon the ephemeral nature of performance to resist the dominant culture, blended in overspread consumerism. In this sense, performance does not last long enough to be assimilated to another product of consumption. It is through its non durability that performance manages to fight back against the trend of fast consumption: “[...] the inability to be reproduced and repeated is the strength of performance because it resists the economics of reproduction and remains traceless within the ideologies of capital” (Borggreen; Gade, 2013, p. 13).

The contributions in Jackson and Kidd (2011), a volume of essays, date back to an international conference linked to the project *Performance, Learning and Heritage* (2005-2008), from Manchester University. Overall, the essays deal with several experiences combining performance and museum assets. The common endeavor animating the contributors resides in the pedagogical trend approach that justifies a performative approach to the museum. As expected, performance was used to highlight the cultural relevance and meaning of the museum artifacts to the visitors.

In this same volume, Johnson nevertheless calls our attention to the fact that the concept behind the expression *performing heritage* must be broadly conceived, enough to encompass many different types of legacy and heritage and as many varied forms of performance that must not be subsumed under a pedagogical bias:

The term 'performing heritage' can include an array of different types of heritage and a multiplicity of performances. It can take place in historic sites, appropriated or purpose built buildings such as galleries or museums, in archives or libraries, or it can be more elusive and hidden amongst communities, either real or virtual. The heritage component can be social, cultural, political, artistic, architectural, industrial, scientific, botanic or some combination of these. The interpretation of it through performance can be radical or reactionary, open or closed, educational or artistic, participatory or pedagogic. The performances can be first or third person, scripted or improvised, on a stage or site-specific, fixed or promenade, open or closed, solo or ensemble, unique or recurring, flamboyant or subdued, devised or written, central to the interpretative strategies or peripheral to them (Johnson, 2011, p. 53).

He further adds that similarly to the changes introduced in artifacts by space conventions, performance also alters the objects in use, since they are thereby reframed and redefined. This kind of reasoning underlies every proposal within the interaction between archive and performance, as it refuses a linear understanding of time and history: whenever the present dares to reframe the past, a glance of future is elicited.

Taking this assumption further, Smith (2011) discusses to what extent the concept of legacy and heritage depends upon cultural performance, inasmuch as its legitimacy rests on a range of uses and applications. As a result, heritage corresponds both to a sample of social processes and cultural actions.

In Borggreen and Gade (2013), the increasing closeness between performance, archive and research is thoroughly revised problematized. This approach reflects common conceptual endeavors enhanced by interdisciplinary categories: "Literally performing the archive here attests not only to a will to push the boundaries, but to a more fundamental understanding of the archive as a medium and an organism rather than a stable repository" (Borggreen; Gade, 2013, p. 22). In this light, the archive as means to artistic invention and

action transforms itself and contributes decisively to the reevaluation of its constituting objects.

According to Roms (2013), one must recognize that archive objects come wrapped in a special intellectual and affective meaning resulting from an active promise of knowledge. This idea leads to my defense of the politics involved in the use of archive objects in performance. In this sense, archive objects in performance blur the boundaries between the institutional stance and the individual statement. The artistic reinvention of the archive manages to resize both the institutional and the personal. National legacy is thus reframed and understood through individual appropriation. Portuguese identity, as an example, is no longer a matter of unity and hegemony, but an inquiry articulating a personal experience, the public sphere and the archive.

The project *Undercover* (2010-2013), by the Danish ensemble Hotel Pro Forma, consisted in an installation in the basement of the *Royal Library*, in Copenhagen. The installation was developed in straight collaboration with the Danish National Archive (Kuhlmann, 2013). Its main goal was to mediate between the visitor and the archive, while uncovering certain spaces of the archive and, at the same time, suggesting their condition as revealed legacy. Furthermore, as the installation encouraged interaction with the objects in display, the visitor was driven to a personal anchoring of the archive. In this way, the visitor becomes the performer, since the survival and the maintenance of the archive fall within this course of action.

To close the section, I would like to pick up on an overarching question posed by Clarke:

Why not re-perform art history, as well as rewriting it through art history? What about an embodied approach to historiography, experiential ways of understanding and remembering performance? How can we understand, intervene and get mixed up in art history by doing it physically, as well as researching and writing about it? (Clarke, 2013, p. 370).

Fundamentally, he recognizes new horizons for history based on new forms of artistic interaction, further arguing that history as a discipline should not be restrained by the over-empowerment of formal research and written narrative. In alternative, the historian can choose to enact, perform and embody historical events and

perspectives. In the whole, it is another way of rethinking the semantics of the archive and reframing its objects as much as the gaps between them.

The Historical Link between Three Performances

Now, I will concentrate on the historical background that framed the three performances within *performing the archive* presented in the next section. In concrete, modes, practices and events from the past are evoked to clarify the historical nexus of the performances produced, and to what extent they aimed to inquiry the troublesome relationship between the past and the future. Starting with eighteenth-century drama manuscripts, I will trace their way into a flourishing theatrical marketplace, in which different agents, like scribes, authors/translators, actors, directors and booksellers contributed to the selection of productions, genres, seasons and spaces.

The Scribe's Tradition: technique and methods

In a very detailed study, Love (1998) addresses the scribe's tradition, with special reference to seventeenth-century England. Interestingly, the reported techniques and methods provide a general overview of the main principles of regulation within this professional group.

Side by side with the increasing circulation and dissemination of print during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, manuscripts were also highly demanded as an alternative form of publication. Scribes as a professional group assured that a particular text could circulate widely without the intervention of print (Lisboa, 2005). With this goal in mind, manuscripts production obeyed some rules and norms related to the presentation and distribution of the text in the page. The format of the page and its irreproachable regularity changed according to the type of copy in demand.

The copies produced reflected the flows of the literary marketplace, and were usually free from print competition. However, the continuity of a censorship regime in Portugal, from 1536, with the arrival of the Inquisition, to the Constitution of 1822 deeply influenced the production and circulation of manuscripts. To better

situate these activities, it is worth recalling that from 1768 on, with the official establishment of *Real Mesa Censória* every play or script, as every written work in general, had to be submitted to the censorship court in order to obtain the necessary license to be printed or staged. As a result, the professional activity of the scribe António José de Oliveira, responsible for the production of more than two hundred drama manuscripts, between 1780 and 1797, must be considered in the light of these constraints (Pinto, 2013).

Without surprise, manuscript circulation obeyed a wide range of reading needs and practices. Namely, the habit of submitting a manuscript to the critical assessment of a network composed of intellectuals, friends, admirers, patrons anticipated its foray into the public sphere of the print. Manuel de Figueiredo, a prolific eighteenth-century Portuguese playwright, illustrates this procedure rather well, since by 1775 he trusted his translation of *Le Cid*, by Corneille, to Isidoro Soares de Ataíde. He envisioned that Ataíde could add the benefits of critical judgment and literary review to his manuscript.

Another case worth mentioning, Alexandre António de Lima, also a Portuguese playwright and poet, sent a letter and a libretto to Pedro José da Silva Botelho, a servant of the king D. José I. Due to Botelho's absence from the court in January 1755, Lima intends to offer him some piece of news, specifically about the puppet opera at Bairro Alto Theatre. The letter in particular was later on copied by the scribe António Correia Viana who compiled the Works of Lima in 1780².

Patronage is also much at stake by this time. In fact, a great number of works depended on a patron's approval to reach print. The distinguished position of the patron in the society just waiting to be fully addressed in a dedicatory accounted for the cultural relevance and literary merit of the work. In search of a patron, the author found himself in need of submitting a copy of his work for approval. Hoping to please and obtain favor, the author would subscribe attentively and place himself under the auspices of the patron's magnanimity.

The very proliferation of literary academies such as the Academy of the Applied (1722), the Academy of the Hidden Ones (1745) – to which Alexandre António de Lima allegedly belonged (Barbosa Machado, 1741) – and the Lusitanian Arcadia (1757-1774) etc., relied

on the exchange of manuscript copies to feed the desired literary and aesthetic discussion. The emphasis on the discussion of novel literary ideas and principles also corresponded to an intense exchange of manuscripts, which were instruments for reading and criticism. It is also important to mention that regular theatres also commissioned copies of the plays in their entirety or only partially, in this last case only containing, separately, the speech set for each character of the show. It, then, follows that the eighteenth-century theatre industry both supported and encouraged the circulation of manuscripts.

As for the professional hand a scribe ought to exhibit, Love (1998) specifies that it does not involve the virtuosity that today we are prone to associate to an exemplary handwriting – but rather what was asked of the scribe was limited to a handwriting both easily readable and regular. In addition, the scribe would have to carefully consider the purposes for which the copy was intended and the typology and genre of the text: in terms of distribution of the text by page, copy a speech on a particular topic was not the same as copying a dramatic text, with its division into acts and scenes and the corresponding stage directions of different types. By principle, regardless of the degree of skill and virtuosity of the scribe, he should be a mere facilitator, the most inconspicuous and unobtrusive as possible, between the reader and the work, cultivating a deliberately impersonal register.

The copies of Antonio José de Oliveira affiliate themselves to this tradition (Image 1). They reveal a readable and regular calligraphy, with the cover page of the manuscript showing a remarkable regularity, uniform distribution of the text by page throughout the manuscript and, in general, with few or no amendments – and, by rule, this scribe signed the copies in the end.



Image 1 – Manuscript of the play *A Noiva Fingida* [The Fake Bride]. Copy by António José de Oliveira, 1793, BNP COD. 1396//6.

The scribe's expertise unfolded from different practices and concerns that went from the preparation of the ink paint to the grouping of the quires:

The 'Writing School' taught spelling, arithmetic, the elements of accounting and in some cases shorthand; however, the main emphasis was on training in the customary business hands, and its head was normally an acknowledged writing master. At all levels beyond the elementary, instruction would also cover such matters as the cutting of pens, the mixing of ink, the folding of paper into quires, the ruling of margins, the ensuring of equal lineation, the casting-off of copy, and the correct placing of catchwords and page numbers (Love, 1998, p. 93-94).

This technical proficiency constituted the basis of a scribe's maintenance, which, for instance, also implied choosing the right light in which to master the copy. It was a world with its own rules and principles, but ruled by the relentless law of supply and demand. It can be added that manuscript copies were not cheap products, with the average price of copy reaching two thousand *réis* (Contas..., 1761-1766).

From this historical overview, it is possible to grasp that manuscripts preserve body representation codes: in the first instance, the body of the scribe itself, adjusted to the need of copy production and dissemination; on a second level, the social body that claimed for manuscripts in order to support different cultural and economic

practices. In the particular case of theatre manuscripts, there is still to be considered the body of the characters that articulates the different scenes.

The Theatre Collection of António José de Oliveira (1780-1797)

From the vast theatrical scene of the eighteenth century emerges the figure of António José de Oliveira. Between 1780 and 1797, he was a committed scribe of approximately two hundred dramatic texts – considering only the dated ones – kept in thirty-four volumes, with about five to six plays each, at the National Library of Portugal.

Most of the plays in this collection entered the National Library between 1836 and 1910, considering the mark stamp in the codices. They are mainly translations/adaptations from originals by Spanish, French and Italian authors, except for an English and a Swiss ones: Alvaro Cubillo de Aragón, Apostolo Zeno, Carlo Goldoni, Diderot, Edward Young, Filippo Livigni, Giovanni Guarini, Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, Jean Racine, Molière, Pedro Calderon de la Barca, Pietro Metastasio, Salomon Gessner, Voltaire, among others. As for Portuguese authors/translators, although the list review is smaller it includes Alexandre António de Lima, António Ferreira, António José de Paula – also an actor and theatre impresario – António José da Silva – the Jew, prominent figure of the puppet opera, whose popularity lasted until the end of the eighteenth century – Domingos dos Reis Quita, Francisco José Freire, Jerónima Luísa da Silveira and Teresa de Mello Breyner.

The genres are equally numerous and thereby form an eclectic array. They range from the pastoral and historical, through opera, comedy, drama, burleta and tragedy to farce and tragicomedy. The theatrical spaces associated with such diversity are the Theatre of Salitre, Theatre of Bairro Alto, Theatre of Rua dos Condes, and the S. Carlos Theatre – opened in 1793 – among others with regular programming, conveniently varied and complementary to one another.

Manuscript Performance

As a contribution to the archive's dynamics, I document three performances, two live and one on video, occurred in very different spaces. Through them, I wanted to expose the historical link that

guides my postdoctoral research, echoing the everyday relevance of theatre manuscripts in my life and further asserting how, for me, manuscripts are no longer confined to a specialized knowledge, but rather configure a way of living, in analogy to what prevailed in the eighteenth century. The problem of time – the broader significance that certain objects can acquire in the individual life but not in society in general – and the will to culturally reconfigure the manuscripts of my study prompted me to act beyond the documentary research. In this sense, the promoted performances, besides being a privileged means of disseminating my theatre history project, reconfigure my desk research around eighteenth-century theatre. Therefore, this section signals the transition from the individual research in the performing arts into the public domain of performance.

Manuscripts, or The Upheaval of the Body

On December 20 2013, I premiered “Manuscript Play” at Boavista Gallery, in Lisbon, with another performer, Eunice da Silva, from Freya group. It was an event organized by DEMIMONDE, a group of performance practitioners from different backgrounds. The setting was rather unpretentious, with a table, a few chairs and a pillar ‘supporting’ manuscripts. Mostly, I wanted the audience to become interested in my research work, and, in particular, I wanted them to be willing to “try out” the manuscripts I have embraced for some years now. I started the performance with a short presentation of myself and my research work, underlying the circumstance that we, I and the audience, shared a social order of production and consumption where my work was expected to consist in the reading of eighteenth-century drama manuscripts. This was the general background intended to contextualize what followed.

I interacted with the manuscripts through physical actions: I carried them around, laid my upper body on them, sheltered behind them, escaping from exposing too much of myself (Image 2), and pushed them through... all my movements were driven by and towards them. On the one hand, I wanted to experience the collection in a renewed fashion that did not entail reading, analyzing, studying, but rather expressed closeness and a sense of belonging. On the other hand, my goal was to defy manuscript conceptualization as a steady and solemn object of knowledge, an icon of the immutable past.

The manuscripts moved widely, as much as I could, so as to transform them into a symbol of mobility and rapid change. Nevertheless, they were always close to me as if complementing my body on the move. In this way, they no longer pertained to the silent, distant and ambiguous past, or either merely to my personal world, but were by then a part of the globalised world in which we all live. By this time, the boundaries between past, present, and future, and the borders separating identities were flattened by means of both a redefinition of space and place, and a relocation of heritage. Framed by a subjective perspective, manuscripts were used to reach the Other, a complete stranger, with whom I shared a space for engagement and a place of encounter. Heritage was the bound, the missing link.

It was important that someone noticed what I was doing, and how special and unique that could be. I succeeded insofar as the Other was trying to follow me, to get where I was heading, to give the right response to what I was demanding. At a certain point, we were even able to engage together in a kind of sculpture using manuscripts and chairs, rediscovering uses and figures, in an attempt to challenge the audience's perception. However, as the performance goes on disclosing the centrality of manuscripts to interpersonal communication, the audience cannot avoid noticing the hesitation and awkwardness on the part of the other performer, as if moving into a world where almost everything was out of place. Nevertheless, I was able to create a new landscape, full of physical engagement with something that has a long tradition of being steady, unshakable and immutable.

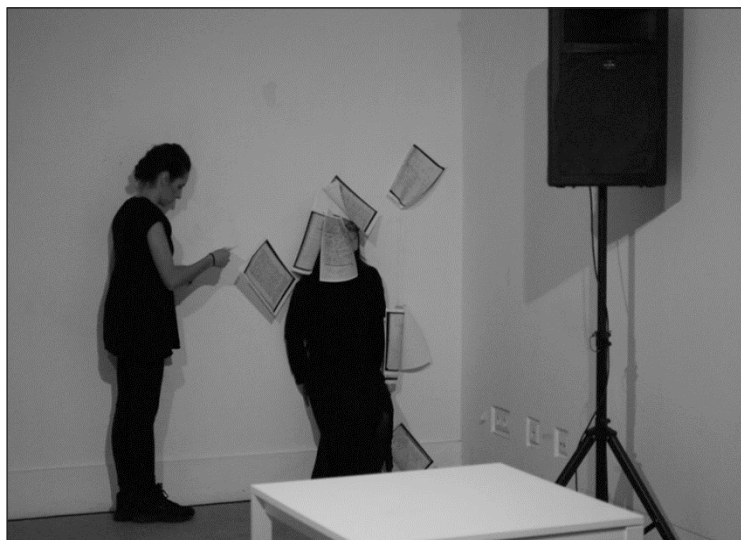


Image 2 – Isabel Pinto at *Demimonde*, Boavista Gallery, on 20 December 2013. Photo: Freya group.

What to Do when Everything Is Both Manuscript and Digital?

What about digital manuscripts? How does the body react to digital stimulation, specifically to eighteenth-century drama manuscripts, digitally manipulated, with varied forms and positions? The archive is thus technologically reconfigured, integrating the video of a performance, held at the studio of the Foundation for National Scientific Computation on April 18 2014, and designed precisely for this context of media art (Osthoff, 2009).

The intention behind this project was to question the premise that the complex universe of digital objects leads to generalized disembodiment. To achieve that, I looked for different responses in and through the body to extend, expand and transform the digital stimuli - in this case, the manuscripts. I sought to bring them to the surface of a new sensitivity, based on body movements that responded to each arrival of stimuli in a regular rhythm.

The sequence of digital manuscripts (Image 3), with forms ranging from stellar to reversed, gave rise to a choreography in cadence, one under which the movement was processed in response to the arrival of a new digital stimuli, and thus originating little moments of rupture in the transition between stimuli. The movements sought to highlight the different situations, mediated by digital forms, related to the difficulty of bodily interaction with the digital. This challenge calls for the acceptance of the protocols of a never-ceasing visual and iconographic world, which, in turn, urges for a fresh way of perceiving.

For this solo, I chose a full-length black dress, with disproportionately long red sleeves at the end. I wanted to resemble a black silhouette – although wearing the possibility of color against the gray landscape of digital manuscripts, so that the movement was highlighted and emphasized. My appearance predicted an undetermined origin between the world of video games, or the circus art, and the postmodern eccentricity.

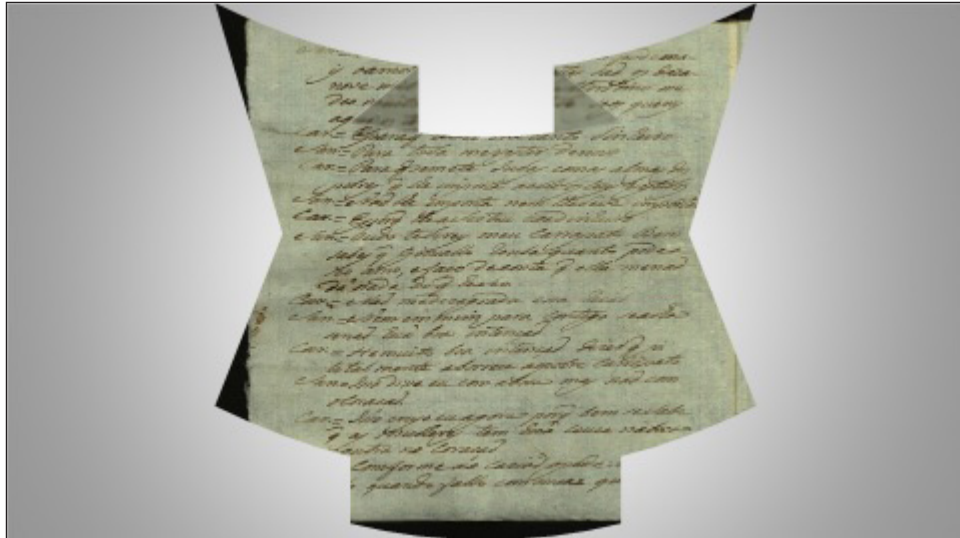


Image 3 – One of the manuscript forms of the video performance, recorded at the studio of the Foundation for National Scientific Computation, on 18 April 2014. Photo: Isabel Pinto.

The Nymph Syrinx, or The Love Between Pan and Syrinx (1741)

The last performance took place on October 8 2014, at the National Library of Portugal, as part of the exhibition *From Manuscript to Performance: the collection of António José de Oliveira*, on display from October 1 to December 31 2014. I worked with Sérgio das Neves and Eunice da Silva, actors from the Freya group, to stage an excerpt of each act of the opera *The Nymph Syrinx, or The Love Between Pan and Syrinx*, by Alexandre António de Lima, first published in 1760, although premiered earlier, for the Carnival of 1741, at Bairro Alto Theatre.

An important and fundamental assumption was that the exhibition area should work and be articulated as the setting, where all the subsequent action would unfold. The exhibition was composed of six display sets, with a selection of drama manuscripts from the collection of António José de Oliveira, and an advertising poster.

The opera excerpts were chosen by me but were received with enthusiasm by the performers, who described them as comical and funny. The performance lasted about ten minutes, and it featured the main characters in the play of Alexandre António de Lima, namely Pan, Syrinx, Wafer and Gulosina. Sérgio played the roles of Pan and Gulosina, and Eunice, Syrinx and Wafer. Syrinx and Pan are the masters, while Wafer and Gulosina are the servants who provide domestic service and any kind of assistance.

Mythology plays its role in the plot, since the episode of Pan and Syrinx comes from there. Pan is in love with Syrinx, who insists on despising him, not leaving him any other choice but to complain of his misfortune to Wafer, who, in turn, mocks Pan, assuming an unruly attitude toward the master. Gulosina, on the other hand, mirrors the behavior of her mistress, Syrinx, also ignoring Wafer, who constantly proposes to her in the most lighthearted ways. The language of the play is full of ambiguities, unfolding primarily from the performance of the servants, Wafer and Gulosina, as they question class division and introduce a sexual and erotic dimension to the discourse.

The performance resulted provocative and historical, at the same time, because it appropriated ambiguity through a physical engagement that this opera lacked in its origin as shadow theatre with puppets (Ameno, 1759). However, I still believe that the same ambiguity could have been the object of an even more effective interpretation, and this is, in fact, part of an ongoing work. The physical aspect of the performance established an interesting contrast with the confined space of the exhibition, with the display sets relatively close to each other. The space in between could be explored as paths, for both the encounter and the mismatch of the characters (Image 4): Pan sought Syrinx; Wafer found him, but then Wafer escaped; Syrinx was finally found, but then to prevent the match, she turned into reeds and was never to be seen again, only heard; but, after all, it was only Wafer hiding from Pan once more...

The artificiality of the comic opera of the first half of the eighteenth century influenced the characterization of the performers whose exaggerated makeup made them resemble puppets, although they were not cork made and moved by wire, like the originals. Their black costumes were also an allusion to the shadow shows of Bairro Alto and Mouraria Theatres during the decades of 1730 and 1740. Additionally, singing moments underlined the formal specificities of the genre.



Image 4 – Sérgio das Neves and Eunice da Silva in *The Nymph Syrinx, or The Love Between Pan and Syrinx*, at the National Library of Portugal, on 8 October 2014. Photo: Isabel Pinto.

Overall, these three performative moments are intended to reflect an experimental way of rewriting the history of the theatre, as Kobińska (2002) and Clarke (2013) proposed. In order to try to bridge the silent gap between documents, they were converted into actual art objects, participating in visual compositions that expanded the dynamics of the archive. In this way, the lasting effect of performance, beyond its material realization (Schneider, 2001; Freshwater, 2002), was also tested, since the use of historical objects makes time periods overlap. Accordingly, two different memory levels are at stake: the memory of the performance and its transmission and dissemination; and the one that comes from the appropriated objects.

About the practical implications of the concept of performance as a different type of archive, as suggested by Schneider (2001), I can only attest that the featured movements in the first two performances are part of my personal choreographic repertoire, and I cannot separate them from the Western world in which I live in. As for the final performance, the current reactivation of eighteenth-century theatre practices will prevail, inasmuch as the memory of the performance remains alive and in frank transmission.

The intellectual and emotional charge of the archive objects (Roms, 2013) drove the performance and mediated the relationship with the Other. The archive acquired then a personal dimension, escaping from the institutional space to permeate another level of

reality, as it gave way to a personal narrative, though invested with the echoes of other past events. The permeability of time is a direct result of the interaction between performance and archive. According to Smith (2011), we are thus extending the reinvention of heritage by choosing to remember the manuscripts of António José de Oliveira, as evidence of a technical art accompanied by the eclecticism of eighteenth-century theatre.

Conclusion

This article focused on the relationship between archive and performance studies, reviewing key concepts, which, on the one hand, date back to Derrida (1995) and his theorizing about the nature of the archive and, on the other hand, confirm the vigor of the new digital historicism (Fickers, 2012). The dynamics of the archive and its desirable *disunity* (Osthoff, 2009; Jackson and Kidd, 2011; Borggreen and Gade, 2013), the temporality of performance (Schneider, 2001; Aston, 2002; Freshwater, 2002) and its resistance to a dominant cultural order feed the vital tension between archive and performance, bearing in mind, as noted before in the second part of this article, the aliveness of the body against a background of the residual traces that constitute the archive, even if one cares to look at the archive as evidence of the ability of the body to elude death.

I also had the opportunity to affiliate myself to a broader and cross-disciplinary approach to historical knowledge, one which reiterates the importance of performance both as method and means of dissemination (Kobialka, 2002; Clarke, 2013). According to this perspective, research in theatre history requires a new type of interaction with the sources, involving embodiment and the particular experience of the performing arts.

Since this article is based on a theatre archive, namely a collection of eighteenth-century drama manuscripts, it became essential to wrap it with a historical narrative, though necessarily synthetic, centered on the scribe's tradition (Love, 1998) and the theatrical milieu of the time (Pinto, 2013). This information, gathered over years of contact with the archive, resulted in the impetus for the performance that calls for, questions and transforms the archive. It is all about conjuring up a different methodological approach to theatre history.

Finally, I documented three instances of the practical relationship between archive and performance, as examples of *performing the archive*, which reflect the use of performance as a methodology to expand the semantics of a theatre collection, and of drama manuscripts, in particular. In the whole, they aim to convey the idea of manuscripts and historical research in general as object of a personal narrative about a self that occupies her days reading drama manuscripts, allegedly of difficult accessibility and deciphering. The documentary research around the plays led to visual realities that express, at the same time, both legacy and the transformation of historical knowledge. The transition from the individual research to the public performative act assures the renewal of the historical approach itself.

In short, the three performances described above aim to support the idea that through manuscript performance, it is possible to make the individual experience of archival research overlap with the social body that frames performance. Here, rests an opportunity for mutual transformation and, at the same time, for a new experience, public and disseminated, of the theatrical legacy, through the multicultural paths of globalization.

Notes

¹ In the French original: “[...] pense-t-on l’avenir à partir d’un événement archivé” (Derrida, 1995, p. 127).

² Biblioteca da Ajuda, pasta 50, I-13, nº 12, ff.171-194.

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Isabel Pinto is currently a postdoctoral research fellow at the Research Centre for Communication and Culture, from the Universidade Católica Portuguesa. She has a Ph.D. in Artistic Studies, from the Faculty of Letters of the Universidade de Lisboa. She is a member of the *Society for Textual Scholarship*.
E-mail: vilhalpandos@gmail.com

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