Raise the curtain! Digital theatre archives

How do you keep a memory of theatre performances for future generations? The renowned Italian theatre company Societas Raffaello Sanzio has found a solution. Insight into an astonishingly international archiving project in the world of drama.

It was in the mid-nineties in Paris, that Eleni Papalexiou first entered a performance of the world-famous Italian theatre company Societas Raffaello Sanzio. Experiencing with astonishment their stage creations the Greek research student decided to include them in her Ph.D and later dedicated a book to their work. After that it was only a small step for her to the Teatro Comandini in Cesena, the company’s “home base”, where she carried out further research. In 2011, Eleni Papalexiou together with her colleague Avra Xepapadakou and an international research team managed to get the “ARCH”- project (Archival Research and Cultural Heritage) on the road dealing with the company’s unique archive in the Northern Italian town. It aims to conduct primary research in the field of theatre genetics and cultural documentation, focusing on the artistic work of the Societas Raffaello Sanzio.

The protagonist: the archive
The company’s archive testifies to the artistic activity of the theatre group from its establishment in the 80s until today: hundreds of boxes hold the history of contemporary theatre in the form of projects, scenarios, academic texts, posters, notebooks, programs, calendars, correspondence, photos, videos and publications. The ARCH-project, which is led by the University of Peloponnesse today, emerged in three phases. A large part of the archival research takes place in situ, in Cesena. Two or three field-trips are organized each year, and the Greek team works there for about 15 to 20 days each time. 200,000 items have already been classified, recorded and digitized so far.

Bridging the gap between theatre and archive
On entering the archive the Greek researchers immediately realized that Claudia Castellucci, the director of the archive, had already applied a personal archiving system. Her “method” constituted a solid base on which the new archiving plan was built. Whilst her classification system and her personal vision regarding the history of the artistic œuvre of the Societas Raffaello Sanzio were largely respected it was at the same time necessary to introduce a scientific methodology. However, the work and the documentation methodology of the archivist differs from the point of view of the artist: the latter considers the archival material his/her own creation and handles it in a selective and subjective manner, while the archivist has a holistic approach according to which all the documents are treated without distinction of value or importance. Another particularity of the archive is caused by its specific nature – this is not a historical archive that remains unaffected by artistic creation. It was thus necessary to develop a methodology focusing on the fact that the archive is alive and evolving. In every single of our visits at the Comandini theatre we find with astonishment numerous new impressive artistic items! So today the archive of the Societas Raffaello Sanzio is already a historical reality but beyond, as it recounts some of the history of contemporary theater, it is in fact looking to the future.

Monica Demuru performing in “Buchettino”, one of the most successful theatre productions for children of the Societas Raffaello Sanzio.

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