

Space, time, and agents in theatre: Digital documentation of the transience of performances through theatrical agents in time and space

Space in theatre

Theatre is studied based on two different, but related types of expressions: text and performance. There is a significant variation in spatiotemporality in theatre which is connected to the complexity in how agents populate theatrical spaces, which makes theatre collections interesting cases for digital information integration.

Text is essential to modern theatre and is also an important source to knowledge of less text based theatre forms such as greek antique drama (Rehm 2002). A written theatre text is similar in form to other narrative fictional forms such as novel and works can fairly easily be translated between these media. The space *of* the text is rarely seen as important to the content of the play but is key to understanding the structure: who is the speaker of which parts, where is the form of and objects on the stage described, etc. A competent reader can often identify accurately these functions also when she does not understand the language in which the text of the play is written.

The space *in* the text, on the other hand, is the space understood by reading the text. Based on the textual meaning two quite different spaces are established: what is described as the intended space on stage of a performance, and what is described as the space off stage, which is indirectly accessible only. This is different from film—as Lang points out, theatre speaks out, whereas film points to. What is said in the theatre can be shown with pictures in the film (Lang 2006, 53).

In modern theatre the text is usually seen as the point of departure for a performance and is used as the basis for the staging, which is always happening somewhere.¹ This *space on stage* is also present in performative arts which are not based on written texts, e.g., jester and clown shows. The stage can be a constructed one or it can be another space temporarily made into a stage, such as a street corner or a flat. The border between performance and real life is usually, but not always clear to the participants.² The *space off stage* is the fictional space depicted in the play. This space is never directly seen, even if the on stage space can be quite similar. It is the same type of space as one "seen" through reading fictional texts or listening to oral stories.

¹ In some cases this place is not visible to the audience, such as in radio theatre. It still takes places somewhere, visible to the actors, technical crew, etc.

² History and politics include many real life events which can be understood as performances and where written documents and other types of sources are used to reconstruct and understand them after they took place.

Theatre documentation

A collection of theatre documentation is documenting something ephemeral. While this in a strict sense is similar for all cultural artefacts—a textual document is different from the literature work it carries—it is still at a different level. Theatre texts are usually stored in the library parts of theatre collections. These documents are seen as various ways (manuscripts, editions, etc.) to materialise the work itself. Performances are also documented in theatre collections but none of the documents materialises the performance.³ The documentation of performances is always secondary and consists of many different types of material in different formats such as textual notes, drawings, audio and video recordings, programmes and posters, etc.

The theatre collection at the University of Cologne⁴ was founded in 1919 by Carl Niessen (1880-1969). He was a key figure in establishing an independent new discipline by detaching theatre studies from literary studies through a focus on study of performances rather than text. The objects of investigation in his work, and later for the theatre studies in general, is characterized by heterogeneous theater artefacts (Fischer-Lichte 2013: 13). TWS as one of the leading theatre collections in Europe today accommodates a significant number of objects with a potential for use in research through 3D digitalisation and visualisations.

Integrating the collections

Theatre collections have always been organised based on the main category of play, linked to authors of the works and directors, instructors, and actors. Technical personnel such as painters, carpenters, rope pullers, etc. have been seen as less important. Performances are documented in theatre collections and thereby they can be the basis for collection based research.⁵ Digital media gives further possibilities for understanding the role of space, time, and actors in theatre history than what we see in current systems, as will be shown in the presentation through the examples introduced briefly below.

3D scans of selected objects from the TWS (e.g. masks and stage models) have been made available for research purposes through the online repository *Kompakkt*.⁶ Standardised metadata are documented and accessible and annotations also enrich the dataset. Through the annotations, a system for interactive exploration and embedding which can also be used for storytelling is made available. Objects can be interlinked and used as sources referring to performances marked by transience and partial predetermined by text. The relics of performances are used to re-perform a history of theatre.

Expressions of theatre texts and stories through transformations do not only happen through classical theatre performances on stage. During the last years more and more experiments

³ A possible exception is audio recordings of radio theatre and video recordings of TV theatre, given a recipient oriented view on these theatre forms, and given they are seen as forms of theatre and not other art forms such as film.

⁴ Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung der Universität zu Köln (TWS), <https://tws.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de> (checked 2020-03-09).

⁵ A recent example is Hanssen (2018).

⁶ <https://kompakkt.de/> (checked 2020-03-09).

with virtual reality technologies can be observed.⁷ A materialization through events in the physical and digital allow a rearrangement of known conventions (Eide and Schubert 2021).⁸ This poses a challenge and opens up a new perspective on documentation in the area of (theatre) performances. As shown through the project Re-Collecting Theatre History,⁹ theatre performance is the result of an intensive and often months-long collaboration of different professions: Actors, dramaturgy, directing, performance, stage and costume design, stage technology, etc. form a complex network that exists for a limited period of time and realizes a production idea on stage through organised interaction. A structured and standardized documentation allows us to investigate these complex networks and generate new knowledge about past events.

Common for these examples is the operationalisation of the models found and developed as part of theatre documentation. Thus, the integration of the material found in the collections can be used to present new knowledge, while taking into consideration the complex media and spatiotemporal reality of theatre history. What is data and how they can be connected is still a matter of trial and error in this area.

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⁷ See, e.g., <https://www.heise.de/newsticker/meldung/Augsburger-Theater-will-erstmal-Opernauffuehrung-mit-Virtual-Reality-mischen-4678951.html> (checked 2020-03-09).

⁸ <http://www.theatrevr.net/> (checked 2020-03-09).

⁹ <https://tws.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de/index.php?id=34619> (checked 2020-03-09).

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