

TITLE:

Territories of archiving work for the Compagnie Louis Brouillard

Introduction

My presentation focuses on the archives of a French theater company, called the Compagnie Louis Brouillard, for which I have been doing archiving work since 2019. This company was founded in 1990 by director Joël Pommerat Anne de Amézaga, who became a co-director in 2000, and who is to soon become the co-director of the Festival d'Avignon in France. Joël Pommerat always uses the stage as the starting point of his work: he conceptualizes his productions on stage, and each element of the production is organized jointly on stage. The play is thus written and developed using a palimpsest-like process. Actors improvise based on themes and stage directions decided on at the end of internships. Joël Pommerat guides the improvisation, gives directions, and suggests improvements. The improvisations are entirely filmed every day. Then, Joël Pommerat writes his scripts based on these improvisations, and teaches them to the actors in order to spawn new improvisations, consequently allowing the different scenes to evolve and furthering the play-writing process. Costume designer Isabelle Deffin, set designer Éric Soyer and stage crew members also attend rehearsals, allowing them to work together on writing and developing the production's aesthetics.

This has been Joël Pommerat's creative process since his debut. This lengthy process, comprising rehearsals, rewriting and filming, constitutes, as we will see, one of the founding principles of the archival work at the Compagnie Louis Brouillard. Indeed, all this archival footage generated by the creative process goes hand in hand with Anne de Amézaga's desire to accumulate every record of the creative process and the evolution of live performance, however small it may be. However, the archives which I am going to try to map out today—as there is a profusion of archival footage—are actually the archives of the Compagnie Louis Brouillard. These are not Joël Pommerat's improvisation or playwriting writing archives, which do exist but are currently not kept in the company's offices.

The years of daily archiving work for the Compagnie Louis Brouillard raise the following questions: how do these new archival territories generated and stored by theater companies themselves create a shift in both theater and archive paradigms?

How does this work redefine the notion of theater archives and the place of the archivist's role in the daily life of an active theater company?

I will use the Compagnie Louis Brouillard's archives and creative process as a case study to map out new archival territories in a three-step presentation.

I/ A daily accumulation of archival footage: the archive's daily territory

Let's begin with an overview of the theatrical aesthetics of Joël Pommerat by looking at some of his productions. The images you can see here are photographs that are most commonly chosen by theaters and by the company for promotional brochures, show leaflets and programs. All these photos and visuals are the work of one photographer, Elizabeth Carecchio. The aesthetics of Joël Pommerat's productions is best described by Joëlle Gayot as "reconciling an impalpable form of dreamlike unreality and a concrete presence rarely seen before on stage." This is the aesthetic of turmoil that Elizabeth Carecchio captures in her shots: the actors are illuminated using the "clair-obscur" technique developed by set designer Eric Soyer, while the paired back stage set flesh out the actors' bodies even further. They are constantly teetering between a blurred sense of time and the elusiveness of a past or present.

To conclude this overview of the theatrical aesthetics of Joël Pommerat I would like to specify that the productions I mentioned here are currently still on tour. The first one is *Contes et Légendes*, created in 2019. You can also see here *Ça ira (1) end of Louis*, created in 2015. *Le petit chaperon rouge*, created in 2004 with over a thousand shows, and finally *Cendrillon*, created in 2010.

This first aspect that I want to highlight as it directly influences archival generation. More specifically, the company's daily work routine as productions by Joël Pommerat keep on touring. Let's take the example of *Little Red Riding Hood*, created in 2004, still on tour to this day. This production already belongs to the past. It is, however, a multilayered past, because the audience's memories of the show from 2004 are now overturned by the current performances of the actors who are still on stage. Some have remained the same, some actors have been replaced, but

there is no denying that it is simultaneously the same production and a new one. This is the paradox that, in my opinion, the work of an archivist in contemporary companies is based on. Indeed, how does one archive footage that is a live performance constantly undergoing a new creative process, while necessarily reaching finiteness by the end of each show?

This finiteness is materialized in the archives by production tickets, the audience's leaflets, press articles, posts on the internet, etc. collected by the company's administrative team as they follow the production as it travels on tour. The traditional approach to archiving is challenged by this continuous accumulation of documents. Within this archival territory, the archive is no longer a single repository of the past, it is multifaceted and ongoing. Consequently, the role of the archivist is also affected: it is not about selecting or sorting archival material but gathering it to be able to keep up and record the live performance. This need for a continuous collection of related archival material on a representation is best summarized by Alice Folco, in her article "The use of non-artistic sources in theorizing the creative process":

"When we see how much administrative and commercial documents can teach us retrospectively about the material conditions during production, and how any record can create meaning without necessarily being directly linked to the creative process in the artistic sense; today, one would tend to advocate that for the collection and storage of as many documents as possible, including most mundane, on contemporary productions."

The Compagnie Louis Brouillard participates in the logistics of archival collection which must be extensive in order to ensure a continuity of the record. This accumulation is therefore ordered and archived in the second step of archival work. To further define the outlines of these new archival territories, I will now describe how the archiving work is divided within the Compagnie Louis Brouillard.

II/ A shift in the theatrical archival landscape and archival stratification

The archives of the Compagnie Louis Brouillard are divided into two parts: first, each document, whether digital or in paper format, is recorded in the company's database called OTRA, a specific archiving program. Currently, around 6,000 archival documents are listed there. Each archive is sorted by production. An archival document can be a press article, a book, a show booklet, a program, a video, a sound recording, a photo, a letter, etc. Each document must also be labeled with a date and/or an author, as much as possible. It is also possible to enter the source of the document in the software, whether it is a digital format or a paper format. Such indications then make it possible to locate the document, either in the paper archives or in the digital drop box. This archiving work is what allows record-keeping year after year by classifying each show document, and thus allows the company's archives to gradually be collected.

The interest of such rigorous and daily sorting makes it possible to keep track of this evolving creative process. For example, in the company's archives, there are five different recordings of *Ça ira (1) fin de Louis*, including one show dating back to 2015, tracing back the genesis of the show. I'm not talking here about documents recorded for work on set, but about the first public performance of *Ça ira (1) fin de Louis*, filmed in 2015. This footage attests that the show was presented to the audience as a work in progress, from the beginning of its shows open to the public in Mons, France in 2015. More recent footage may show, for example, the changes made by the actors as they perform, but also some small changes in the scripts, and very short moments during which actors improvised. As a consequence, the accumulation of show footage generates a shifting stratification that is best illustrated by the archives' arborescence. This thoroughly organized accumulation finally allows the company to keep track of the ongoing productions and their evolutions.

This variation of each performance is captured by the archives to a certain extent. They give access to all the strata of the creative process of a single production that can then be collected and organized. These strata then form a set of scattered islands, which look, at first sight, like a single set but each element can be analyzed independently in this arborescence structure.

However, the archivist's work to create this archival stratification does not rely on permanent accumulation, but rather on permanent record-keeping. Indeed, this phenomenon of constant addition which creates this stratification paradoxically translates to some form of shortage and difficulty to conceptualize the creative process in theater. Arlette Farge wrote, in *The Allure of the Archives*: "The archive is not a stock in which one would delve into for fun, there is a constant shortage." The archive is a shortage, in the sense that it is doomed to failure. It contains no reality, but it is invested with a reality that is different for everyone. This shortage is manifested further within the performing arts archives, as by definition each production is an ongoing performance that shifts with every show. To paraphrase the words of Arlette Farge, the archive must be analyzed, especially in the case of performing arts. It remains unstable due to its fragmented foundation, as emphasized by its stratified study and archiving. This arborescence of digital archives reveals that the archives of the Compagnie Louis Brouillard, although abundant, ultimately remain very fragmented.

Under such conditions, the archivist's job is always to keep track of all archival data. However, the archivist does not pick and choose; rather, they keep track of the disjointed creative process as best as they can with the only fragments they will ever have. Those who come and pore over the archives will offer an additional interpretation and take them to a new field of inquiry. We thus enter into the new territory of the archivist, whose main task is to keep track of the production's evolution through this ongoing archival stratification. This observation is the last point I will make in this presentation.

III/ The shifting architecture and tectonics of the archive: is taming instability the best way to preserve it?

The contemporary archive in the field of theater and performing arts adapts to its changing medium: there is never one but many creative processes, as you can see on the image of this profusion of audience booklets. This is how we can conceptualize the notion of shifting stratification in keeping a record of contemporary productions: caught between an archival architecture being built and the shifting tectonics of the archival territory is what I call tectonic archival stratification. The archivist's new task consists in accompanying this movement. For this reason, the work of the theater archivist is constantly redefined: no company that is the same as another, and each has its own creative process. Each company has a specific and intimate relationship with its own archives. There may, of course, be a similar archiving protocol, but each company will determine which documents it decides to keep or not. This eclectic choice specific to each company is what makes it possible to keep track of the evolutionary movement of a show and its memory. Today the archive takes on a multimedia form: it is scattered among photographs, audio recordings, films, prospectuses, bibles, press articles, etc. It also often takes on a digital scale that is much greater than the traditional paper medium due to the way it follows the ongoing movement of archival generation and use. The archives capture a screenshot of the company's work in context revolving around a given production. The archives are thus part and parcel of each performance and of the creative process that it required to create it. This reciprocal movement between productions and their archives reveals the horizon of contemporary theater archives. The challenge is to conquer the ever-shifting territory of the archive. The archives of companies should not be denied or ignored, because by leaving them a proper place, it is the instability of research and creation that can be saved. By allowing the archivist to circumscribe the daily life of a company, research and reflection can be brought to the forefront of this new archival landscape.

I would like to conclude this presentation with an etymological reminder: the word *archive* comes from the ancient Greek *archi*, which means *to lead or govern* but more importantly, means *to begin*, as Jacques Derrida writes in *Archive Fever*. *archi* is also a prefix that denotes *multitude*: the archive is thus multiple potential beginnings, but never an end.

This is how the archivist's work and the archive are redefined within the realm of performing arts, in the era of playwriting from the stage, as theorized and practiced by Bruno Tackels in 2015, concerning Roméo Castellucci, Anatoli Vassiliev, Rodrigo Garcia, Pippo Delbono, or even Ariane Mnouchkine. The creative process has become a collective challenge by making use of onstage improvisation in the creative process. It seems more and more difficult to keep track of the density of a production's creative process of a company's work in the long run, with only the fixed documents of scripts and the creative archives. However, the archive has never been multiplied so much, whether on paper or digital media, because this potential of the archive is ever—growing, always revealing new perspectives of analysis, new avenues for interpretations, in short, a new territory that is ever more extensive and quite dizzying for the archive in contemporary theater.

CONCLUSION:

The archives of the Compagnie Louis Brouillard: keeping track of turmoil

The daily archives of the Compagnie Louis Brouillard make it possible to map out a contextual landscape of theater productions and their evolution. These new archives are organized in strata and layers in order to remain legible as the accumulation goes on. A sense of movement thus becomes apparent because this stratification only further highlights all the possible interpretations each production goes through at any given point. The creative process constantly changes and therefore the different strata do too. The task at hand is the record-keeping of this creative motion in order to preserve its momentum. It is by protecting the shifting instability of a company's archives and the impermanence of the archival material that we can best understand the creative challenge of contemporary theater productions. As my example with the Compagnie Louis Brouillard demonstrates:

The archives of the Compagnie Louis Brouillard, mirroring Joël Pommerat's aesthetics of turmoil, will always remain unstable, always on the lookout, open to interpretation and feelings, sensitive to varying ongoing movement. The archival document, which has become a contemporary archive, will always retain a part that is ever-shifting as it hopes to capture reality, the way Joël Pommerat does on stage. Working in the daily archives of this company, and trying to define the aesthetics of

Pommerat's turmoil has been Anne de Amézaga's main task over the years. Indeed, the archive is difficult to circumscribe and must be understood as such, as Jacques Derrida puts it:

“With an irreplaceable singularity of a document to be interpreted, repeated, reproduced, but each time in its original uniqueness, an archive must be idiomatic, and therefore both offered and stolen from translation, opened, and subtracted from iteration and technical reproducibility. Nothing is therefore murkier and more disturbing today than the concept archived in this term *archive*.”