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ARCHIVING AS ARTISTIC PRACTICE

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This paper looks at the development of an online showcase repository for the ReTAGS (Reimagining Tragedy from Africa and the Global South) practice-as-research artistic productions, *Antigone (not quite/quiet)* and *iKrele leChiza*, and the methodology behind documenting and digitally archiving their processes. The paper reflects on the author's involvement as the digital archivist for the ReTAGS research and the choices made and implemented on the online showcase repository. It considers the strengths and challenges of these archival choices and explores the possibilities of understanding the archive as a means of artistic engagement in its own right.

Introduction

With significant recent developments[1] in practice as research (PaR) in South African academic spaces, it would be remiss to exclude discussing *how* we are documenting the practice, and in turn recognising that archiving is indeed an artistic practice that builds its own performative presence. I am therefore grateful to have been selected to present my work at the ARA2022 Conference.[2]

I will focus specifically on the work I have been involved with in developing my practice of archiving for the Reimagining Tragedy from Africa and the Global South (ReTAGS) research, led by Professor Mark Fleishman at the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies at the University of Cape Town (UCT). My paper will explore the methodology behind documenting and archiving the two ReTAGS practice-as-research artistic productions, *Antigone (not quite/quiet)* and *iKrele leChiza*, and the development of a digital showcase repository.

ReTAGS Context

ReTAGS is an exciting five-year research project that, according to Fleishman's concept proposal (2019), proposes to take the concept of tragedy from the very beginnings of theatre in its European manifestation, and to reimagine it from a perspective in Africa that is at once directed at the complex challenges of our global postcolonial present and towards our possible futures both inside and outside of the theatre discipline.

The project seeks to "create space for an extended interrogation of [the] vast body of tragic works produced in the theatres of Africa" (Fleishman 2019) and from the greater global South. Furthermore, it uses performance methodologies as analytical tools to gain insight into the complex realities of the neo-colonial aftermath by investigating current events in the postcolony beyond the theatre, through the lens of tragedy. Relevant to the context of this paper, the project will produce three artistic outputs as research investigations of tragedy/the tragic, while making an attempt to consolidate and advance thinking on the role of art practice as a research methodology – in a discipline that until now has been "focused in specific geographical domains mostly in the global North" (Fleishman 2019).

Antigone (not quite/quiet), produced in 2019 under the direction of Mark Fleishman, was the first artistic research production. The second was Mandla Mbothwe's, *iKrele leChiza* (The Sword of the Herb), which was produced in 2021, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic was only staged in 2022. In 2023, the project will mount its third and final artistic research production, *Oedipus at Colonus: #aftersophocles*, directed once again by Fleishman.

Living Archive

Until recently, the dominant concern in archiving theatre has been capturing the "final" creative product in forms such as video recordings, photographs, programmes and reviews of the performance. Rarely has there been a focus on extensively capturing the process that leads to that creative product, or indeed the development of "a common or systematic practice" (Ronfard et al. 2015, 1) to capture exhaustive rehearsal footage. However, with the ongoing development of practice as research, where researchers place a greater emphasis on questioning and interrogating the process of artistic creation, how do we begin systematically to capture the process as a method of data collection? What is the data generated on the rehearsal floor? What datasets are we building in a creative process? And could these datasets be utilised by other academic fields to generate further knowledge?

I was hired towards the end of 2019 to document the six-week rehearsal process of *Antigone* (*not quite/quiet*);[3] the nature and extent of the capturing to be undertaken, however, was undetermined. The only known requirement for the documentation process was that the footage could be used alongside the five-year longitudinal study and the other future PaR artistic productions, in order to analyse the questions posed by the ReTAGS project. The process-dependent nature of the ReTAGS research meant that I was to be working with a living archive, best described by media and communications scholar Dr Amalia Sabiescu as the "practices and environments that connect the organisation, curation and transmission of memory with present-bound creative, performative, and participatory processes" (2020). Sabiescu further elaborates on developments "in the democratisation of arts and cultural heritage and the advent of digital media [that] have provided living archives with new creative valences, making them potent means for the performative celebration of the past through contemporary acts of creation and transmission" (2020). This explanation leads us away from the colonial understanding of archives as static, "dormant, disembodied narratives of a dominant culture" (Malmö University n.d.) towards the notion of the postcolonial archive as an agent active in transforming and shaping history and its narratives. This understanding of the ability of the living archive to actively generate narratives strongly influenced my approach to filming the rehearsal process of the first ReTAGS artistic research production. In this regard, I became less worried about what I was recording and more concerned about what I was *not* recording.

Capturing the Process as a Method of Data Collection

Academic and anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995, 26) warns of four crucial points in history-making where narratives can either be silenced or allowed to pass into historical production. These are: "the moments of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance)."

I was initially wary of silencing any narratives or imposing my own (by selecting what to film). Consequently, I decided to record everything on the rehearsal day, from a static position in the rehearsal room with a wide-angle shot, to avoid even panning the camera and thereby omitting to film the less-obvious events unfolding in the room. I also placed an audio recorder on the floor or a chair, closer to the performers, considering that perhaps a different medium of recording might capture an interesting alternative quality or affective experience for interpreting the spoken or sung text without seeing the visuals. Of course, we could choose to philosophise as to whether it is even possible for a camera to capture everything, and question whether the nuances of an embodied, affective process on the rehearsal floor include unobservable forces and structures that cannot be recorded. Another pertinent question that arises is whether those observed in the documented rehearsal process, in this instance the performers and creative collaborators, would have been or behaved differently as in an undocumented rehearsal process?

While I was attempting to capture all that I could on video and audio, I was also trying to mitigate the potential for people to perform for the camera through my choice of an unobtrusive set-up. At the same time, I was trying to remove myself from the narrative, by never stepping into frame, never having my voice captured on any recording device or having the artists acknowledge my presence on camera. I was purposefully attempting to silence myself out of the archive altogether, in the hopes of producing an objective documentation of the rehearsal process. I was satisfied with my attempts at "perceived absence" in capturing the rehearsals in the

first two moments of historical production, that of fact creation and fact assembly. However, this unravelled when it came to capturing the metadata, especially regarding keywording the video and audio footage.

Data(set) Generated on the Rehearsal Floor

Systematically capturing every rehearsal in the six-week process led to the collection of 1.8 TB of data, which included the above-mentioned documented video and audio footage, still images taken by photographers, rehearsal schedules, texts generated, digital audio-visual material used in the production, costume and stage design illustrations and related press material. To keep track of all the data generated, comprehensive spreadsheets[4] had to be developed and manually populated with metadata; specifically to navigate the hours of video and audio recordings, a dataset that at times I thought only I would ever access in its entirety. In this regard, keywording or tagging presented itself as a crucial piece of metadata because it enables others to access and navigate their way through the archive of material. Ultimately, their journey is constructed by the archivist's ability to identify and categorise moments on the rehearsal floor and summarise them in comprehensible keywords. It was in this "historical production … moment of fact retrieval" (Trouillot) that I realised it was not possible to be a disembodied archivist, objective and invisible. I retroactively acknowledged that my presence in shaping the archive perceptibly remained even in my perceived physical absence. In 2021 and 2022 with *iKrele leChiza*, this historical production moment became even more pronounced, when in an isiXhosa-dominated rehearsal space I was unable to identify nuanced thematic keywords and consequently produced a less rich dataset.[5] *iKrele leChiza* was also led by a different director and understandably presented a different rehearsal process: rehearsal schedules would shift continually, many of the conversations around the creative ideas happened after hours between cast members, and there was a vibrant Whatsapp group where ideas and opinions were constantly exchanged. This PaR production also deviated[6] in direction from the first, by drawing heavily on visual design elements, movement vocabularies and metaphysical references from the archive of Mbothwe's creative repertoire.[7] This created a wonderful speaking back to a theatrical archive of the past, to generate new material in the present and feed the expanding living archive of ReTAGS. As the archivist I therefore needed constantly to make adjustments to my forms of capturing and become more flexible to the needs of the rehearsal space and the process of the individual director.

In this way, it came to seem naïve to think of the archivist as external to the creative process. Despite being almost invisible, their role is integral as they are responsible for how the memories and narratives will be captured and showcased in perpetuity. Indeed, not only are they a part of the process, but they also need to develop a practice that I would argue is artistic in nature. If the creative act of storytelling can be understood as "organizing the three worlds of history, imagination, and audience into a semblance of unity" (Scheub 1996, 57), is not the archive then a storyteller, a performer; with the archivist akin to the director? Like the director, the archivist constantly needs to be making decisions to answer questions like: What am I keeping in or out of the final product? How am I deciding to frame/contextualise this moment? How am I communicating this and presenting it to an "audience"? In this scenario, the audience consists of online users who are engaging with the showcase repository. To this extent, being on the rehearsal floor, from the first historical production moment of fact creation, the archivist holds subjectivity and agency, and can no longer be understood, according to the philosopher Robin George Collingwood, as merely "a 'passive' keeper of 'documentary residue' but rather [an] active shaper of … archival heritage" (cited in Griffiths 2017, 273). As an archivist privileged

to be embedded in the research and the history-making of two PaR productions, I still do not have a satisfactory solution to the question of the best methodology to approach capturing the rehearsal footage. While I continue to resist capturing close-ups or only certain moments or sections of rehearsals, acknowledging that I am not invisible in the archive, I still do not wish to assume active artistic authorship in the first stages of fact creation. I prefer the archival artistic practice to be revealed in showcasing the data generated on the rehearsal floor.

Showcasing the Rehearsal Dataset as a Digital Archive

I have described how, as an embedded archivist, I am responsible for developing, maintaining and curating the ReTAGS archive. I have also suggested how these responsibilities required my becoming creatively intertwined with the archival project. I would now like to discuss the process involved in producing the ReTAGS online showcase repository.[8] This process entailed merging the artistic knowledge produced on the rehearsal floor with the digital humanities practices of ensuring that the data produced accords with the digital principles of making data F.A.I.R. (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable). The digital showcasing objectives of presenting a living archive, as outlined by the *Living Archives*[9] research project run by Malmö University in Sweden, are centred around "enhancing the role of the public archive by performing memory, open data access and participatory design" (Malmö University n.d.). Digital showcasing also involves an investigation into "how digital archives for cultural heritage can become social resources, facilitate social change, create cultural awareness and collective collaboration" (Malmö University n.d.).

The ReTAGS showcase repository is built on the web publishing platform called Omeka S,[10] an exhibition tool for the GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) sector to showcase Digital Collections. Omeka S brands itself as "a next-generation web publishing platform for institutions interested in connecting digital cultural heritage collections with other resources online" (Omeka S n.d.) The 'S' in Omeka S stands for "semantic," "as in connecting to the semantic web, where data in web pages is structured and tagged" (Batzofin and Muftić 2022). Its primary focus is on organising elements of a collection such that the links between items and the greater elements of the internet are strengthened, allowing for more precise searches and deeper explorations. These links can be made through categories such as performer, keyword, rehearsal day, venue, Greek Tragic text, etc. Currently on the ReTAGS site, all aspects of the research are being housed in the repository: field interviews, public presentations, archival productions of global South theatre productions based on classic Greek texts, as well as artistic research productions.[11]

Datasets Generating Further Knowledge

One of the other useful tools of Omeka S is that it allows the archive to be interactive; it is not merely a presentation of digital objects. Just as a theatre director works collaboratively in a workshopped theatre production, so too as an archivist do I wish to work collaboratively with a wider global community. Omeka S provides options for those visiting to talk back to the archive, through the use of comments and submission forms to add to and/or to clarify any aspect of the archive. In this way, the digital datasets that have been captured and showcased are part of an ever-expanding, living archive, with the flexibility of the digital space decentring the notion of the archivist as a singular entity and distributing the role among a community of digital citizens. The notion of this potential community as an archivist's audience is

taken further by the design researcher Laurene Vaughan (2016, 59), who thought-provokingly compares the digital community to the live performers themselves:

> The live performer in this context is not the person on stage, but the archive user who controls the keyboard and the mouse. The actions of their searching and viewing, collecting and narrating are their modes of performance [...] these practices enliven the material of the archive through actions of use.

For example, the PaR rehearsal material can be accessed in a multitude of ways, depending on who is engaging with it and what they are interested in researching/discovering; each time different narratives will be constructed. Since the material is under a creative commons licence[12] it can be reused and repurposed. The aim of producing and expanding on such a rich and open-access source of comprehensive datasets is the hope of broadening the extent to which critical engagement and interrogation can promote academic research across any sector of the Humanities. This is one of the research objectives ReTAGS desires to achieve, in setting a precedent for expansive possibilities of using performance practice-based research in producing and publishing academically rigorous data.

Conclusion

Just as with developing any artistic practice, there is in this context a necessary process of exploration, trial and error, revision, and re-exploration. My first attempt at curating and archiving *Antigone* (*not quite/quiet)* was about laying the foundational groundwork for my thinking about archiving the performing arts and imagining the multitude of ways of capturing the ephemeral aspects of its nature. With *iKrele leChiza*, I could test out those ideas once again and create a comparative analysis of my process, interrogating how the methodologies succeeded or failed on another rehearsal floor, while also becoming more flexible and responsive to the needs of a different rehearsal process. With the third artistic research production, *Oedipus at Colonus: #aftersophocles*, I will have another opportunity to explore my artistic process and make adjustments, while also retroactively revisiting the entire archive to update, improve and enrich the metadata. I am excited about working with the five-year longitudinal dataset for the ReTAGS research and seeing how I can deepen my artistic exploration of presenting the archive to an external audience.

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Notes

1. See Baxter (2013), Mäkelä and Farber (2011) and Stewart (2021).
2. An edited recording of this paper presentation can be accessed via UCT's open data repository *Zivahub*. Batzofin, Jayne. *Archiving as Artistic Practice*. University of Cape Town. Media, 2022. https://doi.org/10.25375/uct.21360921.v1.
3. I am a trained Theatre Director and Stage and Costume Designer by profession. This employment opportunity was my first professional foray into archiving.
4. The spreadsheets were populated with detailed information, capturing date of the rehearsal, where it was recorded, the duration of the audio/visual clip, a description of what was happening, who was in it, who led the rehearsal, keywords, any references made to other works or artists, permission to publish, etc.
5. This consideration also indicates the danger of working with the archivist as a singular entity to capture and preserve multilingual, multicultural means of expression; recourse for potentially addressing this shortfall will be addressed later in the paper.
6. I had access to this Whatsapp group and have captured the conversations and images in a word document, with audio files being saved in a separate folder. As a result of most of the conversations being in isiXhosa, I have chosen to keep the document private until such time as it can be translated, and an informed choice can be made as to whether it should be published.
7. Notably referenced in the rehearsal was Mbothwe's *Inxeba Lomphilisi* (Wound of a Healer) and *Ingdwaba Lendoda Lise Cankwe Ndlela* (The Grave of the Man is Next to the Road).
8. https://ibali.uct.ac.za/s/RETAGS/page/home.
9. The official title of the project is *Living Archives: Enhancing the Role of the Public Archive by Performing Memory, Open Data Access, and Participatory Design*. This research project was funded by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet) and run by Malmö University, led by Prof. Susan Kozel.
10. UCT have renamed the publishing platform Ibali, the isiXhosa word for "story."
11. https://ibali.uct.ac.za/s/RETAGS/page/artistic-research-productions.
12. https://creativecommons.org/.