

Theatre collections on the offensive - but where does the enemy stand?

When you are interested in the arts, the art museum will provide to you the physical access to art: paintings, sculptures a.s.o. When you are interested in the theatre, what can a theatre museum be useful for?

This question is the most important and must be the starting point for thinking about the work of a theatre museum : If we do not know why and for whom we collect theatraia, we shall not know how and what to collect.

We do not collect in this cultural field because we are hunters and gatherers, because of our nature, because there were people before us who started collecting theatraia. We are not important because we are. We can only be important, when we are important for someone - but for whom.?

### Documentation and Imagination

“Theatre happens in the head of the spectator.” If this thesis is right, what shall we exhibit - and who would like to see it? The first theatre collections and museums in the german speaking countries have their origins in the professional interest of theatre people to record and honour their artistic work. So the first collections contained memorabilia, curiosa, that kept alive the memories of those who had been part of the performing process (as well as actors or as spectators). Memorization as a way of representation of the non-repetable process of the theatre, memorization as a way of imagination (which means nothing more than producing images). At a point where we could not have been part of the action, we cannot remember it, but we can imagine it.

“...exhibits, no matter what kind of, must be interpreted by the visitor. Exhibits, no matter what kind of, do not “speak” for themselves., even audio or video-documents. The reality of the past has to be imagined. Our own experiences (as a spectator or what ever) help to understand an exhibit and to imagine the most complex media of a past theatre event. Every process of interpretation ( that means to organize significance) happens by a certain amount of knowledge. Imagination is a main activity of the museums visitor. To provoke imagination is the most important aim of the theatremuseums work.” With these words my dear colleague Lutz Hennrich, who died in 2003, tried to describe the “mechanism “ of a theatremuseum.

The theatremuseum does not make it easy for its visitors. It demands an experience of theatre and the willingness to link this experience to exhibits, which are related to the process of performance in most different ways, and to create before the very “inner eye” a picture of the gone stages of theatre.

The repertoire of objects carrying significance for the theatre museum is limited. The loss of objects in this field is much higher than in other kind of arts. A performance vanishes from the repertoires as well as from the consciousness of theatre “maker”, when a performance is “acted out”.

“Theatre history - no thank you.”

Theatre is a “transitoric” media, a media of now and here. In the moment of its production it also vanishes. Where does the importance of its existing, but not perceived historical dimension

ly? To get to know the historic changes of the art of theatre can open the mind of the spectator for,

- not to hold on to his "learned" and appreciated habits of seeing and understanding,
- not to blackguard the new and different on the stage, because it does not correspond with his very own theatre experience and -"imprinting."

Often the theatremuseum is in the most embarrassing situation, that the memories caused by a theatre exhibition were outdone most unhistorically against an incommensurate theatre of today. It should be one of our most prominent tasks to make clear that the theatre of today is still or as well theatre as any theatre transfigured in our memory.

It remains debatable, what kind of exhibit in combination with what kind of theatre experience generates what kind of image of the reality of the theatre. Do we accept the thesis that theatre happens in the head of the spectator, so we are concerned with a multitude of theatre "realities", whose truth or untruth is hard to prove because of the transitoriness of the theatre.

In the historically exemplifying presentation the artistic means of the theatre can be "dissected" like in an experiment. To keep the vanishing moment from the not stoppable process of a performance provides the opportunity, to find clarification on the ways how theatre works.

Which kind of exhibit provokes the process of imagination, is at least nearly arbitrarily. Most important is yet for the museum to keep ready a potential of attached significance. That makes the classical way of exhibition to one way of presentation among others.

Our judging of the imaginative powers of an exhibit can only be subjective. So we cannot leave the visitor alone with the exhibit. The exemplifying exhibit can only give occasion for the reflection of theatre. This process of reflection has to be instructed and guided by the specialist.

Hit ratio: target groups

You may be a lifetime theatre subscriber without ever having visited a theatremuseum or -exhibition. . You may however expect theatre experience or an interest at the theatregoer. You may meet theatregoers at the theatre. But how may the theatremuseum come to the theatre?

The (maybe german) experience shows, that the actual theatre has no great interest in dealing with its own history. Sometimes you will even find a kind of fear to be confronted with estimated "golden ages" of theatre history at theatre people. So you may understand, the theatre has not the deepest interest. in theatremuseum.

The coincidence of its geographic situation in the immediate neighbourhood of two of the city of Düsseldorf's theatres helped us. From the Düsseldorf theatremuseum you can look across one of the city's parks to see the Schauspielhaus and the Operahouse. Looking for a performance venue with less than 100 seats the Schauspielhaus took an interest in our lecture room on the first floor.

In 2001 the Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus built a studio theatre like an amphitheatre with 60 seats in three rows on a movable podium, a stage at groundlevel and lighting equipment. The opening performance with Neill LaBute's "Bash" made clear, that impressive theatre could be made at this place and since then three more productions were staged here by the Schauspielhaus paralleled by numerous performances of other professionals, fringe groups, schools. Nearly every guided tour starts on the stage. A lot of different workshops were held by using the experience of the stage. Actors and spectators as well appreciate the most intense atmosphere of this room. On every performance day up to sixty visitors find their way to the theatremuseum..

But the theatremuseum gave more than 90 square meters into this cooperation. The theatremuseum changed its opening hours: instead from 11 to 5 the theatremuseum is open from 1 to 8.30 pm. Spectators of the studio in the theatremuseum but also spectators of the nearby Schauspielhaus and Operahouse have free entrance to the permanent and the special

exhibitions at the theatremuseum. Before 1 pm classes or a other groups can be attended without affecting the single visitor.

An additional offer makes the theatremuseum to his visitors. Under the keyowrd "spotlight" the theatremuseum offers halv an hour before the beginning of the performance a fifteenminute guided tour with a special topic linking the evenings peformance with various kinds of historical perspectives.

The Schauspielhaus communicates in their media not only the own performances in theatremuseum but also the theatermuseums program of exhibtions and activities. The monthly meetings of Schauspielhaus and theatremuseum provide opportunities for the partners, to get to know and to understand problems and questions of the other side, to detect and to work on joint actions. These meetings bring the theatremuseum closer to its subject and give us an insight into the working process of the theatre - more than academic reflection. Important condition for the success of this cooperation concept is the willingness to be open to the questions of the opposite.

From its beginning the cooperation between Schauspielhaus and theatremuseum was open to other partners. The studio is now used for various kinds of events as well as performances of other theatres from Düsseldorf and the region. The theatremuseum started to become a "platform", a center for various interests related to the theatre of the city and the region. Three to four times a year the "Düsseldorf theatre conference"- initiated by the theatremuseum - takes place here and debates and organizes joint actions to help the theatre to become more attractive. In 2005 a special exhibition on "Love & Death in Northrhine-Westfalia" focussed on the 25 official theatres of the state of Northrhine-Westafalia by showing videoclips with the most striking scenes of love and death from the latest 80 productions on four 8 to 4 meter screens silmultaneously. This so-called exhibition was designed by the set-designer Florian Etti and controlled by computer.

This change in the approach to the theatre has also to satisfy new requirements to the classical work in the collections and the library as well as in the museum itself. When we tried to imitate the museums for visual arts by presenting the works of set and costume designers, photographers, graphic artists or exhibitions on actors or directors we only met an appriacable interest of visitors when we presented real "big names". We learned more and more that the "art" of the theatre could not be represented congruously only by the means of exhibtions.

In the last years the theatremuseum focuses more and more on various offers to communicate theatre - for various targetgroups, with various partners:

Workshops for seniors in cooperation of the seniors networks, Schauspielhaus and Operahouse to understand theatre and special performances are a regular part of the program of the theatremuseum.. Events from the repertoire of Schauspielhaus and Operahouse give the subject for monthly series of workshops, where infomation from theatre history helps to understand nowadays theatre.

The "theatreschool" project helps children and young adults to understand how theatre works by playing theatre on a non-professional level - with masks, with the techniques of the improvisational theatre, with various kinds of puppet theatre.

Focusing on the communicational aspects of a museum the exhibit loose their muselological nimbus. Wether a visitor gets an information on present or past theatre by an original, a reproduction, printed or as data or even told by a competent member of the staff, the visitor does not care, when the information helps him to understand theatre. It is our competence, how appealing, inciting, motivating we can give this information. Museums departements until now more "offstage" become new significance: collections and library were implied into the lively process of "information brokerage". With their informational offers they are an active part of the profile and program of the theatremuseum.

A vision: meet me at the theatremuseum

On a beautiful day in our outdoor cafeteria “the theatral” with a small list of beverages a spectator comes across interlocutors or informations about theatre or the program of the theatremuseum.

In the intrance hall theatres of the city and the region display their programs. The theatre offers printed or data information on performances and artists. The library presents the latest theatrebooks which he can buy in the museums shop. Souvenirs, curiosa, presents for theatre enthusiasts he will also find there.

In the exhibition space he will go on a time travel to elisabethan or greek theatre and he will learn about the power of the art of theatre and how it is created.

In a reading room he can study intensely, in another room listen to actors voices or view theatrevideos. He can ask friendly staff if he needs more or other information. At regular hours he can also meet theatrepeople at the bar designed by set designer Florian Etti. If this all takes him a fancy for theatre he can buy his ticket for a delightful evening right here.

Perhaps this does not sound to you like the theatremuseum you know - but it might work - for the theatre.