ARQUIVOS, ARTES PERFORMATIVAS E INFRAESTRUTURAS DO CONHECIMENTO:
desafios à historiografia e à criação artística

ARCHIVES, PERFORMING ARTS AND KNOWLEDGE INFRASTRUCTURES:
challenges for historiography and artistic creation

Memory and Identity in Prison Theatre Archival Practices. The Case of Compagnia della Fortezza

Valeria Venturelli

doi.org/10.51427/978-989-9238-13-8.4

Valeria Venturelli orcid.org/0000-0002-8858-5482

Abstract

KEYWORDS
prison theatre
Compagnia della Fortezza
cultural memory
critical historiography
performative methodology

Memory and Identity in Prison Theatre Archival Practices. The Case of Compagnia della Fortezza

As critical discourse increasingly interrogates the role of archives in the performing arts – not only as sites of preservation but of historiographical reconfiguration and epistemological dispute – this paper addresses the challenges posed by archiving theatre practices in contexts of institutional marginality, such as prisons. Taking on a broader rethinking of the archive as a living *dispositif*, it interrogates the tensions between visibility and erasure, documentation and embodiment, identity and dehumanization, through the lens of prison theatre archival practices.

The need to preserve the intangible heritage of performing arts arises from the desire to prevent it from being forgotten and to ensure its transmission to future generations. However, the risk of oblivion is not merely temporal: in more hidden and marginalised contexts, such as "total institutions" (Goffman, 1961), the creation of archives enables not only the preservation and transmission of knowledge and good practices to future generations, but also the establishment of a bridge to the broader society. In this regard, prisons sadly exemplify spaces of erasure – removed from public visibility – where theatre has increasingly emerged as a legally recognised form of educational and cultural activity.

The paper proposes an integrated reflection on the archive of Compagnia della Fortezza, a long-lasting prison theatre company founded by director Armando Punzo in 1988 in the prison of Volterra (Tuscany, Italy): one of the most significant and enduring prison theatre experiences in Europe. The historical archive of the company, comprising thousands of paper, photographic, and audiovisual documents, constitutes a site of convergence for Performance Studies, Digital Humanities, and historiographical inquiry. Drawing upon a multi-year research project and archival practice, the study reconsiders the notion of the archive as an active infrastructure of cultural memory, performative methodology, and critical historiography.

The archive is examined as a historiographical object that both conserves and produces knowledge, arguing for a concept of "functional memory" (Assmann, 1999), in which digital traces do not serve as surrogates for live performance but rather as vectors of aesthetic and socio-political processes. In this sense, the archive becomes a dynamic interface through which the performative legacy of Compagnia della Fortezza can be interpreted and reactivated.

Special attention is given to the dual function of the audiovisual document: as a tool in the creative and pedagogical process (particularly significant when identity and self-awareness are contested terrains), and as a cultural bridge between the prison and the outside world. The archive thus embodies a relational infrastructure that defies the hegemonic silencing of incarcerated bodies, reasserting the right to cultural participation and artistic authorship.

Moreover, the archival process is shown to contribute not only to the preservation of intangible heritage but to the constitution of a new epistemological space in which prison theatre emerges as a field of research. In light of recent legislative efforts and scholarly interest in documenting cultural practices in prisons, the Compagnia della Fortezza archive stands as a model for the convergence of artistic memory, public policy, and historiographical practice.

Valeria Venturelli

A Story to Be Remembered

There are stories that must be remembered. Narratives whose erasure would constitute not merely a cultural loss, but an epistemological failure. Among these is the ongoing history of Armando Punzo and Compagnia della Fortezza[1] within the Volterra Prison: a history that has profoundly transformed the prison itself, its inhabitants, the city that hosts it, and the broader landscape of prison theatre and contemporary performance in Italy. This is a history that emerged from a space marked by marginalization and institutional oblivion, a *place of forgetting*, and which, to this day, continues to exist in a fragile balance, constantly at risk of being reabsorbed into the habitual practices of concealment, isolation, and institutional erasure that are intrinsic to the carceral system.

Such precarity raises urgent questions about how histories like this one might be preserved and transmitted. Questions that increasingly converge around the role of the archive in the performing arts, especially in contemporary times characterized by what Jacques Derrida (1995) has famously theorized as 'mal d'archive' ('archive fever')[2]. These concerns compel a reassessment of performance's ontological status, opening a dialogue with critical perspectives that question whether the ephemerality so often attributed to performance is an inherent trait or a historically contingent assumption shaped by dominant archival logics.

As Peggy Phelan argued, 'performance becomes itself through disappearance' (1993: 146). But is this necessarily the case? Must performance inevitably vanish, leaving behind only traces, or has the equation of performance with disappearance 'too often reiterated performance as self-annihilating' (Schneider, 2001: 101)? If, as Schneider states, *performance remains*, then in the case of Compagnia della Fortezza what remains is not limited to the material traces of theatre-making, but extends to relational, institutional, and political residues that continue to reverberate within networks of relations and power.

Within this dynamic, the archive doesn't function just as a repository for the tangi-

1 Compagnia della Fortezza is a long-standing prison theatre company based in the penitentiary of Volterra, Italy. Founded in 1988 by director Armando Punzo, it has become one of the most enduring and internationally recognised examples of prison-based performance practice, with a repertoire of over forty productions. Its aesthetic rigor and sustained artistic vision distinguish it as a paradigmatic case within the broader field of Prison Theatre.

2 In Derrida's vocabulary, 'archive fever' names the paradoxical, power-laden impulse to accumulate and control traces of the past, inseparable from the institutional authority that decides what may be remembered.

ble remains of performance (e.g. documents, recordings, photographs, testimonies), but may also serve as a critical space for preserving and activating the more intangible dimensions of what endures: social relationships, institutional shifts, political resonances, human transformations catalysed by the theatrical event. This article extends this line of inquiry by focusing on the archiving of prison theatre, a form of theatrical production situated within what Erving Goffman (1961) called 'total institutions'[3].

In examining the challenges and potentials of documenting artistic practices within the carceral sphere, the paper reflects on how such archives perform a dual function: preserving the ephemeral legacy of performance while simultaneously resisting the structural invisibility imposed upon incarcerated individuals. A prison theatre archive, in this sense, operates as a counter-hegemonic gesture, one that reclaims space for artistic authorship and cultural participation within an environment systematically designed to negate both.

The Archive as a Threshold: Disappearance, Reproducibility, and Residue

In the expanding and increasingly interdisciplinary field of performance archiving, memory emerges as a critical and multifaceted term. It is no longer conceived as an act of preservation or a nostalgic retrieval of the past; rather, it is seen as a living force that can actively shape both the present and the future.

Italian theatre historiography offers a particularly fertile terrain for exploring these questions, especially through the theoretical lens of Marco De Marinis. His notion of theatre history as a process – rather than as a fixed and finite corpus of textual or material objects – offers a productive entry point into this discussion. According to De Marinis (2008), archival documents (textual, photographic, or audiovisual) do not function as surrogates or stand-ins for the ephemerality of the live event. Instead, they operate as instruments enabling what he calls an 'avvicinamento asintotico' ('asymptotic approximation') to the theatrical object. This approximation does not aspire to fully recapture the totality or immediacy of the performance; rather, it

3 For Goffman, a 'total institution' is a place where many similarly situated individuals, cut off from wider society, live an enclosed and tightly regulated life, a definition that clearly encompasses the prison.

aims to render comprehensible its semiotic, aesthetic, and cultural dynamics, thus allowing for a theoretical and historiographical reconstruction of that which remains empirically inaccessible.

> **La registrazione teatrale [si configura] come *avvicinamento asintotico* a quello oggetto x che è lo spettacolo, cioè un avvicinamento che, in luogo di restituircelo nella sua inattingibile completezza materiale, tenta di rendercelo comprensibile nelle sue dinamiche semiosiche ed estetiche. [De Marinis, 2008: 342][4]**

This perspective resonates with broader debates in American performance studies concerning the ontology of performance and the role of the archive. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Peggy Phelan famously asserts that 'performance's only life is in the present', positing the ontological disappearance of the live event as its defining characteristic and, consequently, resisting the archive as a mechanism of capture or containment (1993: 146). In stark contrast, Philip Auslander (2008, 2012) destabilizes this binary by challenging the essentialist opposition between the live and the mediatized. For Auslander, performance is always already entangled with processes of documentation, mediation, and technological reproduction; in his view, the experience of liveness can, under certain conditions, be generated or extended throughout audiovisual media.

Bridging these apparently antithetical positions, Rebecca Schneider proposes a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between performance and the archive. Her conceptualization of the archive as a site of performative residue reframes the question of disappearance and reproducibility: 'performance remains, but remains differently or *in difference*' (Schneider, 2001: 105-106). What endures is not the performance itself but a trace, a remnant that is capable of reanimating or recontextualizing the original event through its afterlife in documentation. In this sense, the archive becomes not a tomb but a threshold: a space where the spectrality of past performances can be invoked, interrogated, studied, re-discovered and made productive once again; a place where new meanings can be found to so-called ephemeral performative events of the past.

This tripartite framework – disappearance (Phelan), reproducibility (Auslander), and residue (Schneider) – proves especially generative when applied to archival practices in the context of Prison Theatre. The case of Compagnia della Fortezza

4 Translation mine: 'theatrical recording [is configured] as an *asymptotic approach* to that object *x* which is the performance – that is, an approach that, rather than restoring it in its unattainable material completeness, seeks to render it intelligible through its semiotic and aesthetic dynamics'.

offers a paradigmatic example: its audiovisual archive does not aim to preserve the phenomenological immediacy or what Patrice Pavis might call the 'emotional punctuation' of the live event (2004: 10), nor does it function as a legalistic or institutional repository of past productions; rather, it serves as a dynamic and multi-layered system for documenting the artistic, aesthetic, and pedagogical processes. In focusing on rehearsals more than shows, and director's notes or rehearsal journals over finalized scripts, it states the centrality of process over product.

Within this framework, the archivist is not a passive custodian of fixed meanings, but an active agent in the construction of memory, the dissemination of knowledge, and the production of historiographical discourse. In short, quoting Heike Roms's innovative essay on performance remains, 'one *documents* a *piece of work*, but one *archives* a *body* of work' (2013: 36).

> **The question that is thus posited by turning our attention to the archive is not primarily how the documentary remains of performance can (or cannot) offer an insight into a past event [...] but, rather, how those remains speak of performance as an artistic project that is sustained over a body of work, sometimes over the entire professional lifespan of an artist. [Roms, 2013: 36]**

In the case of Prison Theatre, where the boundaries between life, art, and institutional power are constantly negotiated, the archive counters institutional oblivion by affirming memory as an artistic and political strategy. It functions as a space in which the individuality of incarcerated persons is traced and affirmed, where negated or suppressed identities are reconstructed through the artistic act, becoming a form of counter-narration participating in the reconfiguration of subjectivities that the institution seeks to standardize or erase.

Where the records kept by the prison administration (statistics, offences, trial documents, etc.) function as instruments of power, reasserting the authority of the institution over the will of individuals, the creation of an archive that documents artistic work demonstrates that, as Ketelaar suggests in his essay *Archival Temple, Archival Prison*, 'records can also become instruments of empowerment and liberation' (Ketelaar, 2002: 229).

Archiving Against Oblivion

'Ho cominciato fin da subito a fare riprese video nel carcere di Volterra, perché mi sembrava tutto così eccezionale' ('I began filming in the Volterra prison from the very start, because everything seemed so exceptional to me'), explains director Armando Punzo regarding the production of the video material documenting the work of the Compagnia della Fortezza (Punzo, 2025: 343).

Since 1988, the year the company was founded, the intention to document as extensively as possible emerged with growing clarity, driven by the awareness that the project already displayed exceptional features. This is also confirmed by the managing director, Cinzia De Felice: 'Sono sempre stata una persona che conservava tutto: ho cominciato ad archiviare il materiale, sia cartaceo che video, fin dal primo giorno' ('I have always been someone who preserved everything: I began archiving both paper and video materials from the very first day', De Felice, 2025: 341). From the outset of its activity within the prison, therefore, Associazione Carte Blanche – producer of Compagnia della Fortezza – initiated a systematic collection of textual, photographic, and audiovisual materials, which today constitute the historical archive of the company.

> **Il momento in cui ci siamo davvero resi conto dell'urgenza di creare un archivio è stato quando, un giorno, io e Armando ci siamo trovati in quella che era stata la casa di Carmelo Bene. Lì abbiamo visto, abbandonate sulle mensole e sugli scaffali, cassette su cassette che rappresentavano un patrimonio enorme della vita artistica e professionale di Carmelo Bene. Ho pensato che tutto quello che stavamo facendo e conservando rischiava di fare quella fine o, peggio, di essere buttato via: tutto quel materiale che avrebbe potuto tenere viva la memoria del nostro lavoro e che avrebbe potuto rappresentare un esempio virtuoso per le nuove generazioni. [De Felice, 2025: 341]**[5]

Therefore in 2013, in response to the substantial and steadily growing volume of archival materials produced over twenty-five years of activity, and following increasing requests for access from students, scholars, practitioners, and researchers worldwide, Carte Blanche launched a comprehensive project for the reorganization, valorization, and partial digitization of its archive. The aim was not only to facilitate

5 Translation mine: 'The moment we truly realized the urgency of creating an archive was when Armando and I found ourselves in what had once been Carmelo Bene's house. There we saw, abandoned on shelves and bookcases, cassette after cassette representing a vast heritage of Bene's artistic and professional life. I thought that everything we were doing and preserving risked the same fate: all that material that could keep the memory of our work alive, and that could serve as a virtuous example for new generations'.

accessibility but also to enable remote consultation beyond the prison setting.

From the outset, the initiative was developed in close collaboration with the Department of the Arts at the University of Bologna, under the scientific coordination of Professor Cristina Valenti. After an extended preliminary research phase, the project was formally institutionalized through an agreement signed on December 18, 2013, between the Department, Associazione Carte Blanche, and the 'Soprintendenza archivistica e bibliografica dell'Emilia Romagna' ('Archival Superintendency for Emilia Romagna'), with additional collaboration from the 'Soprintendenza archivistica e bibliografica della Toscana' ('Archival Superintendency for Tuscany'). The process ended in 2015 with the creation of an archival collection comprising paper-based, photographic, and digital materials. Particularly noteworthy is the extensive body of audiovisual documentation which includes recordings of all rehearsals and performances directed by Armando Punzo from 1987 to 2014, as well as third-party video materials produced for research or journalistic purposes. These materials are currently housed both in Volterra and at the Library of the Arts of the University of Bologna.

The cultural and historiographical value of the archive was officially recognized by the Archival Superintendency for Tuscany, which initiated a notification procedure that culminated, on September 30, 2014, in the declaration of the archive as being of 'particular historical importance' (Decree No. 440/2014). This designation conferred national heritage protection status upon the collection.

The establishment of the historical archive of the Compagnia della Fortezza represents a significant achievement not only for the scholarly community but for the broader world of theatre and performative practices within penitentiary institutions. Thanks to this archive, scholars, researchers, practitioners, students, and theatre critics now have access to a vast body of documentation that safeguards the company's archival memory, a repository of knowledge that, in line with Aleida Assmann's theorization, constitutes a 'Funktionsgedächtnis' ('functional memory') of the future (Assmann, 2011).

The project, which relied on the work of archivists Gaia Baglioni and Benedetta Rivalta, and later on the company Kiné – responsible for the digitization of the audiovisual material – was carried out between 2014 and 2015 and unfolded in the following phases: a general survey, reorganization and reconditioning, and the migration of audiovisual materials to digital formats.

The valorisation of theatrical heritage relies fundamentally on the principle of *ar-*

chival openness. This entails the adoption of organizational and accessibility models that actively engage the wider community, encompassing not only theatre companies, artists, and archival institutions but also audiences and end users more broadly. In this framework, the producers of such heritage bear the dual responsibility of preserving their own memory while also systematizing it and ensuring its accessibility beyond the circle of specialists, extending it to the general public. An archive that merely constitutes an unordered accumulation of documents cannot be regarded as a completed or meaningful cultural project.

It is precisely within this conceptual framework that my PhD research situates itself, focusing on the history and development of the archive of the Compagnia della Fortezza. In 2015, the work carried out by professional archivists and the firm responsible for digitizing the company's audiovisual materials led to the creation of a digital audiovisual repository. However, this collection was established without the application of a standardized descriptive methodology, rendering it essentially inaccessible to the broader community.

The central concern of my research project, developed over the course of a three-year doctoral program, was therefore the accessibility and usability of the audiovisual holdings contained within the historical archive of the Compagnia della Fortezza. As Gavrilovich (2017: 29) argues, such a shift is transforming the very conception of the database, originally conceived as a 'container' to facilitate the storage and cataloguing of metadata. By repositioning the end user at the core of the archival process, this approach not only enhances accessibility but also redefines the archive as a dynamic and participatory space of cultural transmission and knowledge production.

The project was articulated in several phases, beginning with the compilation of descriptive metadata for the video files housed in the archive. This process led to the creation of XML files and the development of two separate consultation databases: one comprehensive database, accessible exclusively on-site during in-person visits to the physical archive; and a second, publicly accessible interface containing the principal descriptive metadata, available remotely via the website of the Library of the Arts at the University of Bologna[6].

6 At the time of writing, the website is not yet publicly accessible. It is currently undergoing the final stages of a lengthy development and implementation process, which has involved collaboration between the technical staff of the Library and the Associazione Carte Blanche. For this reason, the URL cannot yet be provided.

1. Definition of metadata categories for comprehensive record description

The initial phase of the project focused on expanding the technical metadata provided by the archivists. Using the ISAD(G) standard as a reference, data elements of description were identified across seven core areas:

1. Identity Statement: Reference Codes (unit ID); Title; Caption; Date; Level of description; Extent and medium;

2. Context: Name (data owner: theatre company/other productions/other); Video Maker; Editor; Performance/Project based on Text/Author;

3. Content and Structure: Information; Description; Duration; Content (show / rehearsal / interview / trailer / other);

4. Condition of Access and Use: Accessibility, Copyright; Usage restrictions;

5. Allied Materials; Existence and location of originals;

6. Notes: Note;

7. Description control: Archivist's Note; Date(s) of descriptions.

2. Viewing and analyzing all videos in the archive and drafting descriptive metadata

The comprehensive viewing of all 1,374 video files stored in the archive, followed by the drafting of descriptive metadata, required nearly two years of work. Each video was analysed in detail to collect and organize key information. Several challenges emerged during this process, particularly due to gaps in the metadata originally produced during the digitization and recovery phases. These were often incomplete, missing, or inaccurate. Notably, identifying basic details such as the year and location of specific recordings proved difficult. To address these issues, supplementary sources – especially print materials (press clippings, directors' notes, administrative documents) – were frequently consulted. In addition to written sources, oral testimonies were crucial, particularly through collaboration with Armando Punzo and Cinzia De Felice, who provided firsthand information regarding the temporal and spatial context of specific recordings.

3. Consultation with Carte Blanche on accessibility policies

In parallel with the metadata drafting, a series of meetings were held with Carte Blanche to define the terms of accessibility and consultation for the audiovisual material. A particularly sensitive issue was the ethical and security management of video footage recorded inside the prison. Everyday moments from rehearsals, if viewed outside of their proper context, could be subject to misinterpretation or even politicized misuse. Ensuring the dignity and rights of the participants, alongside respect for the prison environment, was therefore deemed essential.

A further consideration concerned the artistic nature of the work itself, particularly in light of Armando Punzo's vision. For the director, a performance is never a static, finalized product but rather a stage in a continually evolving process of artistic inquiry. In this light, disseminating video footage of any single performance risks 'crystallizing' a moment in time, potentially misrepresenting a process that is fluid, open-ended, and complex.

In accordance with the wishes of the archive's producers, it was thus decided to restrict video access to on-site consultation at the Library of the Arts of the University of Bologna. Access to the videos will be granted following a justified request and approval. Viewing will be allowed only on a designated library computer with internet and USB ports disabled to prevent unauthorized copying or distribution. Each user will be required to sign a declaration pledging not to disseminate any part of the video material in any form (video, photo, audio, etc.). However, the descriptive metadata for each video will be made accessible remotely to enable users to conduct a preliminary search and select the materials they wish to consult in person.

4. Creation of XML files for metadata preservation

After establishing the policies for access and consultation, the next step involved the creation of XML files to preserve the descriptive metadata, safeguard against technological obsolescence, ensure interoperability, and guarantee independence from specific software platforms. The following international standards were adopted:

- EAD3 (Encoded Archival Description) for archival record description;
- Dublin Core and Dublin Core Terms for digital resource metadata;
- TEI (Text Encoding Initiative) for digital text encoding.

An XML schema based on EAD structure was developed, employing a hierarchical logic from general to specific:

<ead>: root element defining the namespace and start/end of the file
<eadheader>: general archive and provenance information
<archdesc>: description of the archive
<c01>: folder for each performance/project
<c02>: individual objects (files)

This structure mirrors the archive's physical and digital organization, representing each production in a systematic, hierarchical way that ensures coherent consultation aligned with the original arrangement.

5. Creation of a website for remote access to core descriptive metadata

Using HTML and CSS, a user-friendly website was created, featuring a JavaScript script to display and search key descriptive metadata: Title, Caption, Content, Date, Location, Duration, Description, Notes, and Accessibility. The site provides a brief description of the audiovisual materials and the history of the digitization project; a section titled "Browse the Archive" which replicates the folder structure of the archive, allowing the user to navigate via hyperlinks to individual production pages; a footer which includes contact information.

This approach reflects a deliberate curatorial choice: by foregrounding the main descriptive metadata, the platform meets the immediate informational needs of typical users, while reserving more technical and complex details for potential onsite consultation or advanced research. This acknowledges the differing priorities between casual users and specialist researchers, optimizing usability and accessibility without sacrificing the depth and richness of the archival content.

6. Creation of a user-friendly local database for on-site consultation

A searchable database for on-site consultation of the Compagnia della Fortezza's audiovisual documents was developed using FileMaker. Hosted at the Biblioteca delle Arti, the system provides an intuitive interface where users can view a full list of recordings or productions, navigate detailed descriptive records, and conduct

keyword searches. Advanced features include dynamic data views and cross-references among multiple productions.

Through the implementation of a standardized descriptive model for individual archival units and the development of a comprehensive access system, this research has contributed significantly to the enrichment of archival heritage and the expansion of available sources for the study of the Compagnia della Fortezza. Moreover, it opens new avenues for scholarly inquiry into Armando Punzo's creative method, foregrounding the role of video not just as a means of documentation but as an integral component of the artistic process itself.

Documents, Documentation, and 'Raw' Epistemology

The camera's initial entry into the Volterra prison was motivated by the desire to bear witness to an extraordinary phenomenon unfolding within an environment otherwise closed off from external gaze and cultural documentation. However, Punzo quickly recognized that video recordings could fulfil a far more vital role within the carceral context: they were not solely documents of theatrical labour, but vital components actively intertwined into the actors' creative methodology. The camera transcended its archival origins, becoming a transformative catalyst, a surrogate mirror in a context characterized by a lack of traditional forms of self-reflection, and a structuring agent within a method focused on improvisation. This ontological shift in the function of the camera results in an archive that doesn't only preserve a final theatrical product (e.g. a video 'replica' of a performance) but holds witness to an ongoing and evolving creative process, where video recordings constitute an inseparable part of the creative act itself.

That is the reason why Armando Punzo's approach to video recordings at the Compagnia della Fortezza is shaped by a refusal to reduce the archival material to a curated, refined, or polished product intended primarily for public consumption. Unlike many theatrical archives, where editing and post-production are employed to create accessible or marketable versions of performances, Punzo's aim is to preserve as exhaustively and authentically as possible the raw and multifaceted memory of the creative process. This approach gives rise to a 'raw epistemology', in which knowledge emerges not through the refinement and finalization of materials, but through their very incompleteness, their open-ended, processual nature.

A persistent challenge in archiving the performative arts lies in the fate of rehearsal and training footage: 'the creation of documents is frequently deemed to be enough to document the practical work. Hundreds of hours of video footage from training or rehearsals sit unwatched after they have served their initial purpose' (Sant 2017: 6-7). This leads to the well-known dichotomy between 'documents' as unprocessed audiovisual material and 'documentation' as carefully framed, contextualized records intended for long-term interpretation and access. While this distinction highlights a broader archival dilemma, it risks flattening the overlapping functions that recordings can serve in certain methodologies such as Punzo's, where they operate both as passive agents of memory and as active catalysts of creativity.

But if it is true that training or rehearsals video documents often sit unwatched, it is equally true that they sit unwatched *until someone watches them*. In this sense, their latency does not equate to uselessness, but rather to a deferred potential for activation. Descriptive metadata, essential for making the material accessible and navigable, play a crucial role in this activation process but they can't fully account for the nonlinear, transversal nature of an artistic processes where meaning emerges not through a chronological unfolding, but through the accumulation of gestures, movements, fragments distributed across time. Punzo's methodology follows multiple lines that open at different points in the work, aiming less at linear development and more at cultivating a shared mental and imaginative habitat among the performers. As Punzo wrote: 'Costruiamo un habitat mentale, lavoriamo perché gli attori si lascino progressivamente attraversare da un'idea fino a sfuggire di mano a se stessi, per ritrovare fiamme d'istinto' ('we create a mental habitat, our work aims to lead actors to gradually let themselves be inhabited by an idea, to the point of losing control of themselves, so they may discover instinctive sparks', Punzo, 2013: 327).

Although the vast quantity of unprocessed video material poses obstacles for researchers seeking to locate precise sequences or thematic content, this very 'rawness' and multiplicity is epistemologically integral to the archive's value. What appears as excess or disorder from an external perspective is, in fact, a reflection of the complexity of a specific creative method. The lack of editing is not a lack of care, but rather a deliberate methodological choice that reflects a fidelity to process over product, to experience over representation.

Moreover, the archival materials are profoundly inscribed by their site of production not only through their content but through their very form and materiality. The 'dirty', imperfect, and sometimes fragmented quality of the camera work, including ambient environmental sounds and spontaneous moments captured without techni-

cal polish, speaks directly to the conditions of creation within an oppressive space where theatre unexpectedly *occurred*. The risk of disappearing shapes the archival material not only as a fragile testimony but also as an urgent act of resistance, which captures and preserves traces of creative presence 'stolen' from a place designed to silence and hide its inhabitants. The imperative to preserve and present these archival traces lies precisely in their unrefined, uncompromised state.

This recognition of a 'raw' epistemology challenges scholars to move beyond conventional archival frameworks, engaging with the Compagnia della Fortezza archive differently, as a site where each trace holds multiple meanings, where layers of memory, creative process, and embodied experience coexist.

The Camera as a Catalyst: the Role of Video within the Creative Process

Quando sono entrato in carcere ho deciso di usare tutto ciò che il carcere offriva, in positivo e in negativo, come l'impossibilità di vedere la propria immagine: non c'è, ad esempio, un vero e proprio specchio se non qualche pannello in plastica che deforma il riflesso. Per questo motivo, la possibilità di rivedersi in video attivava le persone. Quando accendevo la telecamera, durante le prove, vedevo che certe persone si accendevano: immortalare il tempo dava, infatti, la possibilità di conservare quello che accadeva, impedendo che tutto sparisse nel dimenticatoio del contenitore-carcere. Se il carcere annulla la persona, la telecamera la rimette al centro fornendo un senso di esistenza e di possibilità.
[Punzo, 2025: 343][7]

The earliest preserved rehearsals recording in the archive dates to February 1993 and documents the work on the show *Marat-Sade*. With the acquisition of a personal video camera in 1994, Punzo gradually developed a true working method: recording (almost compulsively) every rehearsal session, every improvisation, every creative fragment, with the awareness that at any moment something essential and unrepea-

7 Translation mine: 'When I entered the prison, I decided to use everything it offered, both the positive and the negative, such as the impossibility of seeing one's own image: there is, for instance, no proper mirror, only plastic panels that distort one's reflection. For this reason, the opportunity to see oneself on video activated people. When I turned on the camera during rehearsals, I saw certain individuals come alive. Capturing time on film allowed us to preserve what was happening, preventing it from disappearing into the oblivion of the prison-as-container. If prison annihilates the person, the camera restores the individual to the centre, providing a sense of existence and possibility'.

table might occur. While the director's work with the actors ended with his exit from the prison, his work on the recordings continued into the evening, alone, in front of the screen, in a tireless process of viewing, selecting, and editing material, not to prepare for a future product, but as an integral part of the artistic process itself.

If improvisation constitutes a foundational element of Punzo's method, video assumes a central role in working with incarcerated actors who, generally, lack professional training in physical, vocal, and gestural techniques. In this context, video recording contributes to the actor's physical memory by providing a visual aid that allows them to revisit an improvisation carried out days, weeks or even months earlier. But more than this: watching themselves on video enables actors to develop greater self-awareness of their own limitations, and of what may be achieved and surpassed through theatre, beyond the confines of their everyday condition. Viewing improvisations and performative excerpts on video fosters self-reflection and helps actors reactivate the creative conditions of the original moment. It is not simply a matter of memorising and reproducing a previously created scene, but of reigniting the complex creative process that brought the initial improvisation to life.

> **Lavorare con attori non professionisti sull'improvvisazione non è facile: quando durante una prova accade qualcosa di straordinario che non viene in qualche modo catturato, quell'evento sparisce. Se poi cerchi di lavorare sulla memoria di ciò che è accaduto, non ci riesci. La persona stessa lavora solo sulla memoria, svuotando così l'azione e l'idea. Invece, se rivedi in video un'improvvisazione fatta un mese prima, ricolleghi tutte le immagini che ti guidavano: in questo modo, non rifai semplicemente quello che eri, ma rimetti in moto tutto il processo che ti ha portato a quell'improvvisazione. [Punzo, 2025: 343][8]**

Numerous examples of this practice are visible in the video archive: actors watching their own improvisations on a computer, either individually or in groups, stopping to discuss or re-experience specific gestures. This is evident, for instance, in the rehearsal footage for the show *Hamlice* (2009-2010), or in cases of restaging – such as the 2008 replica of *Marat-Sade* where the director and the actors revisit recordings from the original 1993 show to recover and re-embody earlier intuitions.

8 Translation mine: 'Working on improvisation with non-professional actors is not easy. When something extraordinary happens during rehearsal and it isn't somehow captured, it vanishes. If you then try to reconstruct it from memory, you fail. The person themselves ends up relying solely on memory, draining the action and the idea of their force. But if you watch on video an improvisation made a month earlier, you reconnect with all the images that guided you at the time: in this way, you do not merely repeat what you were, but you set in motion once again the whole process that led to that improvisation'.

A seemingly anecdotal episode may help to further illuminate how the eye of the camera can serve to read an actor's work and interpret its developments and potential. Among those who have operated the camera during rehearsals is the Italian film director Matteo Garrone, who entered the Volterra prison on 14 July 2005 at Punzo's invitation to meet the actors of the company and observe the preparation of the performance *Appunti per un film*. This day is documented in several archival videos. On that occasion, Garrone witnessed an improvisation by actor Aniello Arena and was deeply struck by it. Arena himself recalls the encounter in his autobiography: 'Nel 2005, avevo conosciuto Matteo Garrone durante lo spettacolo *Appunti per un film* a Volterra. Armando gli aveva dato la sua telecamera e lui mi aveva ripreso per tutto il tempo' ('In 2005, I met Matteo Garrone during the performance *Appunti per un film* in Volterra. Armando had given him his camera and he filmed me the entire time', Arena & Olati, 2013: 206). In 2011, Garrone contacted Aniello Arena to cast him as the lead in the film *Reality*, a role the actor was able to take on thanks to a semi-freedom regime granted in recognition of his artistic merit. This episode, which began with a small handheld camera in the prison's theatre and Matteo Garrone behind it, marked the beginning of Arena's career in cinema.

A Matter of Identity: the Company and the Prison

The company

The current archival paradigm has been described as one in which 'archival theoretical discourse is shifting from product to process, from structure to function, from archives to archiving, from the record to the recording context' (Cook, 2001: 4). The Fortezza archive exemplifies this movement by foregrounding the functional and relational dimensions of theatre-making rather than only its finished products.

Archival materials, especially audiovisual documentation, offer invaluable insight into the evolving identity and artistic methodology of Armando Punzo's Compagnia della Fortezza. These sources reveal a fundamentally collective and processual working method grounded in the shared reading of texts, improvisation, collaboration among actors and creative staff, the incorporation of extra-dramatic materials, and the gradual accumulation and dramaturgical montage of diverse elements. Crucially, the archive documents how these practices have transformed over time, reflecting the company's own development and playing a decisive role in refining the

periodization of Punzo's artistic trajectory as theorized by Cristina Valenti[9].

Early archival footage captures a creative approach centred on Neapolitan texts and dialect, where language functions not merely as communication but as an aesthetic resource. The actor's body is foregrounded as a living scenery, embodying a minimalist *mise-en-scène* aligned with Grotowskian traditions that prioritize corporeality over scenography embellishment. This stage of the company's work stresses the intimate connection between prisoner-actors and their linguistic-cultural *milieu*. In subsequent phases, documented extensively in video and photographic archives, the company shifts toward international metatheatrical repertoires. The so-called 'trilogia dei corpi' ('Trilogy of Bodies', 1993-1996) foregrounds altered corporeality as a site of political resistance and existential alterity, transcending biographical narration to emphasize the body's social and symbolic presence.

Between 1997 and 2000, during the 'trilogia della sfida' ('Trilogy of Challenge'), the archival record shows increasing theatrical complexity and a self-conscious subversion of the prison environment's symbolic and material constraints. Here, theatricality itself becomes a form of defiance, signalling a move towards a more symbolically charged stage language.

From 2001 onward, archival documentation reveals the emergence of Punzo's 'metodologia della sottrazione' ('Methodology of Subtraction'), an aesthetic and political strategy inspired by Deleuzian philosophy. Archival materials illustrate a progressive removal of literal prison elements, corporeal markers, and fixed dramaturgical authorship. Reality ceases to be a fixed external condition; rather, it becomes a fluid and contested terrain from which one can strategically subtract oneself to enable transformation beyond the limitations of social and institutional frameworks. This radical reimagining of theatrical space and temporality is embodied in productions such as *Pinocchio* (2007-2008) and *Hamlice* (2009-2010).

The archival footage from *Pinocchio* rehearsals offers a crucial insight into this shift, anchored in the enigmatic phrase Punzo repeatedly utters: 'siamo quello che non amiamo, più di quanto non pensiamo' ('we are what we do not love, more than we think', 14 May 2007, Compagnia della Fortezza Archive). This moment marks a decisive turning point in Punzo's artistic philosophy: the abandonment of dialectical conflict in favour of strategic subtraction. The rehearsals reveal a growing scepticism toward the historical repetition of oppositional debate, as Punzo questions its

9 The division into phases – Neapolitan performances, Trilogy of the Bodies, and Trilogy of the Challenge – adopted in this essay is derived from the lectures of Cristina Valenti in the course on Social Theatre, Department of the Arts, University of Bologna.

generative potential and opts instead for withdrawal, stating, 'io non voglio essere più, io voglio sottrarmi da questo meccanismo' ('I no longer want to be, I want to subtract myself from this mechanism', Compagnia della Fortezza Archive, 2007). Further archival documentation from a rehearsal session on 21 May 2007 captures a collective brainstorming where actors identify 'parole mostruosamente umane' ('monstrously human words') to be eliminated, terms tied to violence, suffering, and human misery, culminating in the ironic exclamation: 'fai prima a cancellare l'uomo!' ('better to erase humanity itself!', Compagnia della Fortezza Archive, 2007).

This rejection of the known human condition and the aspiration to invent a new utopic reality underpins the ongoing process of subtraction from reality that defines the company's contemporary identity. From the project *Dopo la tempesta* (2015-2016) onward, the negation of reality has been articulated in many different ways, through a radical questioning of Shakespeare's canonical status, through Borges's 'light' words, through Christian mysticism and reflections on human potential.

Therefore, the archival records are indispensable not only for tracing the evolution of aesthetic and political strategies but also for revealing how the identity of the Compagnia della Fortezza is continually redefined through its shifting relationship with reality, from confrontation and opposition towards subtraction and utopian reinvention.

The prison

The prison of Volterra has undergone a profound transformation through its engagement with theatre. It has shifted, gradually but decisively, from a place of punishment to what director Armando Punzo terms a 'Istituto di Cultura' ('Institute of Culture'), becoming a national and European model. Yet within a total institution, theatre remains constantly at risk of erasure. As Punzo himself warns, 'la nostra battaglia non cessa mai. [...] La Fortezza deve guadagnarsi il suo spazio in continuazione, si ricomincia da zero tutte le mattine' ('our battle never ends. [...] Compagnia della Fortezza must earn its place every day, we start over each morning', Punzo, 2021: 80), because 'nulla è stabile, nulla è fermo' ('nothing is stable, nothing is fixed', Punzo, 2021: 101-102).

The transformation of the prison is not only lived in the present but is also inscribed, preserved, and actively guarded through the archive of the Compagnia della Fortezza. The archive serves as a vital repository of the collective memory, artistic practice, and relational dynamics that have redefined the identity of the prison itself. It's a symbolic 'lieu de mémoire' ('site of memory', Nora, 1989) which functions as a cul-

tural memory device, sustaining the identity of a total institution reshaped through theatrical practice, and safeguarding its existence against the risks of institutional and mnemonic erasure. As such, it also stands as a powerful admonition to other institutions, attesting to the possibility of achieving what once seemed unthinkable.

The archive preserves audiovisual materials, testimonies, photographs, and documents that attest to the daily work of the theatre company, the collaborative atmosphere between detainees, staff, and artists, and the subtle but powerful shifts in interpersonal relationships within the prison. It bears witness to a place-making process (Gieryn, 2000), where the theatrical event becomes a site for reimagining the social fabric, transforming the prison's 'non-lieu' ('non-place') status (Augé, 1992) into a 'third space' of social recomposition (Bhabha, 1994; Soja 1996).

But how can an apparently ephemeral tool such as theatre have such a profound impact on the interpersonal fabric of one of the most rigid total institutions? The creation of a group united by the will to achieve a common goal and, in the case of the Compagnia della Fortezza, accompanied by national and international recognition, is not sufficient by itself.

Within the prison operates an unwritten code of conduct, a system of relationships based on the suppression of emotions, the absence of dialogue, and the elimination of solid, healthy, and constructive human connections. In the theatrical workshop, these codes are overcome and contradicted. The 'theatre *of* the prison' – where each individual wears a mask not chosen but imposed by the institutionalized context – is replaced by 'theatre *in* the prison' (Valenti, 2020). James Thompson (2004) elaborates on this perspective by introducing the concept of the 'performance of the prison', which encompasses a series of performative events that stage various elements of the judicial mechanisms, including the roles of guards, prisoners, and the external society, the broader social audience that experiences punishment as a deterrent.

In this way, new non-hierarchical relational and communicative codes are developed, which, in the case of ongoing experiences, slowly manage to escape the separated context of the theatrical workshop and spread to corridors, cells, and common areas of the institution. 'Il teatro entra in competizione con la rappresentazione del carcere e la contraddice' ('theatre competes with the representation of the prison and contradicts it', Valenti, 2014: 31): the actor no longer represents himself as a detainee but as a person with a biography of their own, personal resources and capacities, a body that rebels against the standardization of the prison and becomes the protagonist of the scenic work, in constant balance between reality and transformation.

In other words, theatre in prison impacts the social and relational fabric of what Hayner and Ash called the 'prisoner community' (1939), and what Clemmer more specifically defines as the 'prison community' (1940), shifting the emphasis from the inmate population to the institution as a whole, with its specific networks of relationships, norms, and cultural practices that involve not only prisoners but also staff members, visitors, volunteers, and the prison administration as a whole.

This profound shift in relational dynamics within the prison community extends beyond the immediate theatrical workshop, permeating the broader institutional environment and challenging traditional power hierarchies. While theatre provides a space for detainees to reclaim their individual identities and foster new modes of communication, this transformation is also reflected in the interactions documented between prisoners and prison officers. Although the presence of staff is limited in the archival materials, the available footage captures moments of genuine mutual respect and cooperation. In one video, for example, one incarcerated actor recites lines from *Il sogno di Faust* (2008) in front of a guard, who listens attentively, like a privileged spectator. In another, assistant director Laura Cleri and her team carry large polystyrene blocks for the show *Hamlice* (2010), while officers calmly open gates and coordinate the logistics. During celebrations after performances like *P.P. Pasolini ovvero Elogio al disimpegno* (2004) and *Appunti per un film (*2005), guards help set up the space, sharing the festive atmosphere with inmates and their families. Such interactions reveal a subtle renegotiation of roles within the prison, where guards are not only custodians of order but become witnesses in the cultural process. This relational shift underlines the potential of theatre to reconfigure the institutional culture, contributing to the gradual emergence of a shared space of recognition and humanity within an otherwise rigid total institution.

The archive of the Compagnia della Fortezza not only safeguards artistic heritage but stands as a bulwark against the erasure of the prison's acquired identity, a memory that must be consciously maintained to ensure the survival and growth of theatre as a transformative force.

In this process, the work of archivists – and my own work as researcher and designer of the metadata model, summaries and keywords – is not merely an 'archival footprint' orienting future readings of the materials, but a constitutive element in a broader process of actively shaping collective memories (Cook, 2001). The descriptive and curatorial choices embedded in the Fortezza metadata system participate in what has been defined as 'the consciously constructed and actively mediated 'archivalisation' of social memory' (Cook, 2001: 5), making visible the processes,

collaborations and institutional negotiations that underlie the company's work. My intervention as researcher and metadata author is therefore inseparable from the ethical and political stakes of the archive, entailing a responsibility to document, as transparently as possible, the criteria, value judgments and constraints that inform these archival decisions.

Memory and Imagination Beyond Prison Walls

Beyond its technical and historiographical functions, the archive of Compagnia della Fortezza enacts an essential, urgent gesture: in keeping tracks of what has happened, it imagines *what might still be possible*. In a space structurally oriented toward negation and erasure, the act of archiving constitutes a space of future-making. Memory is not just a repository of the past; it is, fundamentally, a laboratory for the future.

To archive theatre in prison is not only to preserve an aesthetic gesture, it is to claim that imagination itself has a right to exist even where the conditions of life seem to deny it. This archive affirms that artistic processes born within systems of control can generate new epistemologies, new relational forms, and ultimately new realities. It is a material and symbolic space in which the idea of transformation is not merely recorded but continually rehearsed and kept alive.

In its most radical dimension, the archive refuses the logic of disappearance and affirms that performance, even when fragile, ephemeral, and institutionally marginal, holds within it the power to envision and enact alternative worlds. If theatre can challenge the ontology of the prison, then the archive can challenge the ontology of history, by insisting that what has been imagined and lived within the walls of Volterra can resonate beyond its confines, shaping modes of thinking that reach far outside the prison walls.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Assmann, Aleida. 1999. *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (München: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung).

Assmann, Aleida. 2012. *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Augé, Marc. 1992. *Non-lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Seuil).

Auslander, Philip. 2008. *Liveness. Performance in Mediatized Culture* (London and New York: Routledge).

Auslander, Philip. 2012. 'Digital Liveness. A historical-philosophical perspective', *PAJ. A Journal of Performance and Art*, 34, no. 3: 3–11. https://doi.org/10.1162/PAJJ_a_00106.

Balfour, Michael. 2004. *Theatre in Prison. Theory and Practice* (Bristol: Intellect Ltd).

Berlangieri, Maria Grazia. 2017. 'Performing Arts, gli archivi digitali e la narrazione interattiva', *Arti dello Spettacolo / Performing Arts*, 3, no. 1: 16–27.

Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge).

Borelli, Maria Giacobbe. 2013. 'Come cambia la memoria dello spettacolo nell'era digitale', *Mimesis Journal*, 2, no. 1: 149–61, https://doi.org/10.4000/mimesis.301.

Burdick, Anne, Johanna Drucker, Peter Lunenfeld, Todd Presner, e Jeffrey Schnapp. 2016. *Digital_Humanities* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press).

Clemmer, Donald. 1940. *The Prison Community* (Boston: Christopher Publishing House).

Cook, Terry. 2001. 'Archival Science and Postmodernism. New Formulations for Old Concepts', *Archival Science*, 1: 3–24.

De Felice, Cinzia. 'Intervista a Cinzia De Felice', in 'L'archivio storico della Compagnia della Fortezza. Il documento audiovisivo come memoria dinamica dello spettacolo e oggetto storiografico', Valeria Venturelli (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Bologna, 2025), 336–42.

De Marinis, Marco. 2008. *Capire il teatro. Lineamenti di una nuova teatrologia* (Roma: Bulzoni).

Derrida, Jacques. 1995. *Mal d'archive. Une impression freudienne* (Paris: Galilée).

Gavrilovich, Donatella. 2017. 'Performing Arts Archives. Dal Database al Knowledge base: stato dell'arte e nuove frontiere di ricerca', *Arti dello Spettacolo / Performing Arts*, 3, no. 1: 28–39.

Gieryn, Thomas F. 2000. 'A Space for Place in Sociology', *Annual Review of Sociology,* 26: 463–96. http://www.jstor.org/stable/223453.

Goffman, Erving. 1961. *Asylums: Essays on the Condition of the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Doubleday-Anchor).

Hayner, Norman. and Ellis Ash. 1939. 'The Prisoner Community as a Social Group', *American Sociological Review*, 4, n.º 3: 362–69. https://doi.org/10.2307/2084923.

Jimerson, Randall C. 2021. *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Chicago: ALA).

Ketelaar, Eric. 2002. 'Archival Temples, Archival Prisons. Modes of Power and Protection', *Archival Science*, 2: 221–38. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435623.

McAvinchey, Caoimhe. 2018. *Theatre and Prison* (New York: Bloomsbury).

Nora, Pierre. 1989. 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, 26: 7–24. https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520.

Pavis, Patrice. 2003. *Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance, and Film* (Ann Arbor. MI: University of Michigan Press).

Phelan, Peggy. 1993. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge).

Punzo, Armando. 2013. *È ai vinti che va il suo amore. I primi venticinque anni di autoreclusione con la Compagnia della Fortezza di Volterra* (Firenze: Clichy).

Punzo, Armando. 2019. *Un'idea più grande di me. Conversazioni con Rossella Menna* (Roma: Luca Sossella).

Punzo, Armando. 2025. 'Intervista ad Armando Punzo', in 'L'archivio storico della Compagnia della Fortezza. Il documento audiovisivo come memoria dinamica dello spettacolo e oggetto storiografico', Valeria Venturelli

(unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Bologna, 2025), 343–58.

Roms, Heike. 2013. 'Archiving Legacies: Who Cares for Performance Remains?', in *Performing Archives/ Archives of Performance*, ed. by Gunhild Borggreen and Rune Gade (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press), 35–52.

Sant, Toni. 2017. *Documenting Performance. The Context and Processes of Digital Curation and Archiving* (Londres and New York: Bloomsbury).

Schneider, Rebecca. 2001. 'Performance remains', *A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 6, no. 2: 100–108. https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2001.10871792.

Soja, Edward W. 1996. *Thirdspace. Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell).

Taylor, Diana. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press).

Thompson, James. 2004. 'Prison Theatre and the Theatre of Prison', in *Theatre in Prison. Theory and Practice*, ed. by Michael Balfour (Bristol: Intellect Ltd), 57–76.

Valenti, Cristina. 2014. 'Teatri di interazione sociale: fondamenti di una definizione euristica', *Prove di drammaturgia*, 29, no. 1–2 (2014): 29–33.

Valenti, Cristina. 2016. 'Shakespeare per la Compagnia della Fortezza', *Prove di drammaturgia*, 21, no. 1 (2016): 4–12.

Valenti, Cristina. 2020. 'Fare teatro in carcere: valenze formative, psicosociali e artistiche', *Il saggiatore musicale*.

Venturelli, Valeria. 2025. 'L'archivio storico della Compagnia della Fortezza. Il documento audiovisivo come memoria dinamica dello spettacolo e oggetto storiografico' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Bologna.