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COSTUME ARCHIVES: PROSPECTS AND METHODOLOGIES

The theatrical costume, unlike modern and ancient clothing, is a material object that lives in a specific and peculiar context of use, which is the performing event. The stage costume is thus an object bound to the time factor, a temporal aggregate of elements existing only in a specific lapse of time (in one scene, in one or more acts, for the entire performance), while its single components are morphologically perdurable objects. On the contrary, the costume has always been considered as a remnant, to be integrated between those documents that can allow for even a partial replication of the show. If this is true on one side, on the other the costume can lie about its origin. For example, the costume design is often envisaged as a certain documentary source when the stage costume often undergoes many transformations during the slow metamorphosis from paper to the event. The theatrical costume, besides, – as clothing in general – is made from materials easily perishable, is subject to deterioration, but also reuse. In addition to this, confusion between everyday clothing and stage costumes can often occur, posing problems during the research process. The theatrical costume – even more than the dress – must be understood in the process of signification during the show, in his «purely functional role».[1] When we take the fact that a specific costume was on stage at a particular time and in an exact place as a fundamental assumption, then the costume itself becomes the bearer of the idea of the creator, a 'sign', in fact, of primary importance as tangible evidence of an unrepeatable event – a sign closely related to the time of perception of the viewer, the so called dynamic of the theatrical relationship,[2] which is time-based. Starting from the idea of the three-dimensional and changeable material,[3] therefore, we have conceived a new definition of the stage costume as an unstable four-dimensional object:[4] an object that presents not only three spatial

[1] ROLAND BARTHES, *Le malattie del costume teatrale*, in *Saggi critici* (first ed. in French, 1964), Turin, Einaudi, 2002, pp. 48-49.

[2] MARCO DE MARINIS, *Capire il teatro. Lineamenti di una nuova teatrologia*, Rome, Bulzoni, 1999, pp. 25-32.

[3] CATERINA CHIARELLI, *Dal guardaroba al museo. Dinamismo e metamorfosi della Galleria del Costume*, Livorno, Sillabe, 2009, p. 48.

[4] This argument was discussed in a paper presented at the CIDOC 2006, Gothenburg (Sweden), entitled *From relational metadata standards to CRM ontology: A case study in performing arts documentation* (authors: Paolo Bonora, Charlotte Ossicini, Giuseppe Raffa) – published in *Proceedings CIDOC* 06, 2006 – that contains the results obtained, i.e. the migration process of the relational model, based on the board granted on an experimental basis by the ICCD, to the model developed in the theatrical costume design RADAMES, an object-oriented model, and the definition of its semantics interface based on CIDOC CRM. The unique aspects of this case study have been highlighted as possible guidelines in the cataloging of materials relating to the performing arts. For further details see PAOLO BONORA, *Il computer in sartoria. Il processo di elaborazione di un sistema informatico per la catalogazione*, in *Il quadridimensionale instabile. Manuale per lo*

dimensions (width, height and depth), but also the fourth dimension of time. Hence the theatrical costume can be a relevant document only when its cycle of life on the stage is fixed. The creation of a reliable document that would allow us to observe the theatrical costume during its own lifetime on the scene – in its symbolic and narrative value – is thus fundamental to avoid a reconstruction based on fragmentary and incomplete information; thanks to this document, the cataloguing process would maintain a memory of the structural analysis, in order to create a specific thesaurus linked to the technological evolution of fabrics and materials in the digital age.

The success of the RADAMES project,[5] promoted by the Music section of the Department of Art, Music and Performing Arts (DAMS, University of Bologna), in defining a cataloguing model for various aspects of the operatic event has suggested the opportunity to test its results with a broader range of documenting materials. In particular, the Theatre section of the Department has examined the opportunity to catalogue different material outcomes of the performance in order to obtain an almost accurate documentation of the show.

Because of the massive quantities of materials, during the experimental phase we have concentrated our efforts on the staging area and, in particular, on the theatrical costume. Therefore, we needed to adopt a specific cataloguing schema for the costume as the basis for the data format, on which to build the software model for the theatrical costume. The choice of the BDM model (Beni Demoetnoantropologici Materiali [Demoethnoanthropological Material Goods]), and then the OA model (Oggetti Artistici [Artistic Objects]), was made in order to employ an informed cataloguing standard that would guarantee a wide range of applicability. As a consequence of the agreement made with the Italian ICCD (Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione –Central Institute for Cataloguing and Documentation), the VAC model (Vestimenti Antichi e Contemporanei – Contemporary and Ancient Clothes) was adopted, even though it is still at the experimental stage.

The VAC model takes shape as a specialization of the OA model and maintains a full compatibility with the BDM model. The final aim is to elaborate an 'object oriented' model realized through a software library which allows for the employment of different data models maintaining an interior coherence with already defined standards.

After devising a draft of our cataloguing model for the costume, the second step was to test it in a real environment to validate the adherence of the description to the real object: the theatrical costume onstage. Hence, a collaboration arose between the University and the Teatro Comunale of Bologna. Two different teams of students of laboratory courses, one employed in photography and the other in cataloguing, both coordinated by Charlotte Ossicini, Paola Bignami and Paolo Bonora (Alma Mater Studiorum, University of Bologna), have been working for two years in the theatre itself. Here, in one of the rehearsal halls of

studio del costume teatrale, eds. Paola Bignami e Charlotte Ossicini, Torino, UTET, 2010, pp. 125-143.

[5] RADAMES (Repertoriazione e Archiviazione di Documenti Attinenti al Melodramma E allo Spettacolo) is an integrated research project launched at the University of Bologna in 2001.

the first balcony level, a photographic set has been prepared, where the costumes are photographed on dressmaker's dummies. We have chosen to catalogue only the costumes of the operas of the season, immediately after the first night of the performance, as the first aim was to observe not only the objects as remnants, but also as physical evidence of a performing event in a precise place and time. In fact, theatrical costumes can undergo countless modifications when the opera is staged in diverse environments. Because of copyright issues, only the costumes owned by the Teatro Comunale have been catalogued, even in cases of co-productions. From the iconographical point of view, the costume has been documented as it appears on stage during the opera: for example, if between acts the actor takes off one of the components of the costume (for example, a jacket), both 'variants' have been photographed. Do these variants have to be considered as two different costumes or only one? Thanks to theatrical costumes outlines, we have decided to apply a fine distinction: we have two costumes if the variant is documented in two different outlines, only one if variant is only a marginal note on the paper.

The VAC model was conceived for ancient and modern clothing with a museological approach and is therefore used to catalogue objects as historical testimonies. As we have seen, however, the theatrical costume is an ephemeral object and in this respect the VAC model presents some limitations:

- Since, in most cases, cataloguing ancient garnment does not take into account the accessories – almost always lost – we have decided to eliminate all props ('properties' in theatrical slang).
- While every VAC file catalogues only one object, the costume is an aggregate entity. We have decided to insert for every costume a series of subareas which contain the technical features and sizes of the single components, so as to accomplish a double function: on the one hand, document the costume as 'object' in a definite theatrical event, on the other, offer detailed information prefiguring a possible reuse of the whole costume or of the single component.
- The VAC model is subdivided in different thematic areas: OBJECT, CHRONOLOGY, AUTHOR, DRESSMAKING CONTEXT, PURCHASERS, USER, METERIALS, SIZE, CONSERVATION, and DECORATIVE ELEMENTS. In CHRONOLOGY we have included the date of the first night of the performance and details about the moment in the opera in which the costume appears. For two of these, OBJECT and DECORATIVE ELEMENTS, it has been necessary to create a new glossary for the specific context. In the OBJECT data field, the theatrical costume is catalogued as an aggregate entity. In one of the items (MODEL TYPOLOGY), in case of everyday clothes, only the models belonging to the history of fashion were provided, while in case of the theatrical costumes these models are not strictly followed; besides, in theatre, the costume can convey abstract concepts. Thus, a new glossary for this item has been introduced, including four different definitions: ETHNIC (e.g.: dress in the Indian style), FANCY (when it is a pure creation without possible cross-references), HISTORICAL (e.g.: dress in the medieval style), CONTEMPORARY (e.g.: an Armani's outfit). In the item KIND AND AGE,

the definition UNISEX has been included. In the data field DECORATIVE ELEMENTS, in the item TYPOLOGY, new definitions have been inserted for the so called 'tricks of the trade' (for example to describe the effect of a 'damask silk' obtained through painting).

The model underlying the VAC data structure takes into consideration the context of use of daily clothes as a mere attribute of the good, whereas in the case of theatrical costume, its own existence is strictly bound to the performing event. The theatrical costume, therefore, is not only an 'aggregate entity' but also, so to speak, a 'temporal aggregate'. The resulting final version of our model had to take into account this methodological approach and resulted in a 'hybrid': in part directly derived from the traditional approach of the VAC data structure, in part deeply influenced by the 'time-based' nature of the performing arts collections.

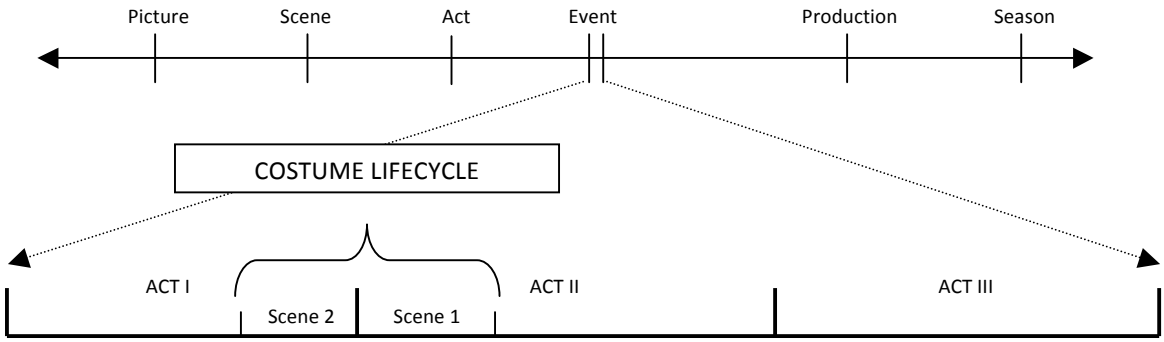

Fig. 1 – Performing Arts Timescale

A costume description must attempt to settle, as much as possible, informative fragments pertinent to the costume's existence onstage during a specific event, in which the variations assume, in first place, an iconological result. An effective cataloguing system, pertaining to the performing arts, should be able to formalize the dynamics of the object on the stage. This level of descriptive complexity introduces a considerable gap from the cataloguing standards not based on the temporal coordinates (i.e. the VAC model), with important consequences in terms of interoperability.

As final result of this roadmap, there could be the creation of a documental system able to describe, even partially, some of the elements of the original context of use of the costume and then suitable to support a reconstruction of its existence on stage, even in a completely different environment, such as a museum.