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Société Internationale des Bibliothèques et des Musées des Arts du Spectacle



Considerations for developing an electronic theatre information system

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One topic at this year's annual meeting of the Bundesverband der Bibliotheken und Museen der Darstellenden Künste (Federal Association of Performing Arts Libraries and Museums), the German SIBMAS Centre, which was held at the Theatermuseum (Theatre Museum) in Düsseldorf, was computerization and archives. The current status of computer-supported theatre documentation in the German-speaking countries was presented and from this ideas regarding considerations for the development of an electronic theatre information system were extrapolated.

1. Status of computer-supported theatre documentation in German-speaking countries.

Up to now there have been individual beginnings for the electronic collection of theatre-relevant data on theatre:

- the TANDEM project of the Deutsches Theatermuseum (German Theatre Museum) in Munich intended to store data on European Theatre productions. At the present the project is in a period of transition; the computerization concept is being reevaluated and with it the hardware basis is being modified. The database is not externally accessible. A drama lexicon is published annually in printed form with a cumulated index.

- THEADOC is a database of Austrian theatre productions at the Computer Center of the Vienna University. An annual publication of the Austrian theatre productions is printed.

- TEWIDOK and TEWIDOK II is a project to collect data of selected seasons of the Vienna Burgtheater with a computer program which was specifically written for the project. TEWIDOK II is an extended version of TEWIDOK. No information could be obtained whether the project will be continued or if the program is available for use by other institutions.

- computer processing is being used in a project to collect data on Berlin theatre productions from 1933 to 1945 at the Theaterwissenschaftliches Institut (Theatre Research Institute of the Free University in Berlin).

- the Theatermuseum (Theatre Museum) in Vienna is currently developing computer programs for recording their holdings

- electronic data processing is being used for theatre historical sociological research (projects on the social history of the theatre) at Erlangen University.

- computer-aided recording of selective parts of their collection is being done at the Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung (Theatre Research

**HOME
ACCUEIL**

**Rules
Statuts**

**Executive Committee
Comité exécutif**

**Institutional Members
Membres institutionnels**

**Joining SIBMAS
Adhérer à la SIBMAS**

**Exhibitions
Expositions**

**International Directory
Répertoire International**

**Conferences
Conférences**

**National Collections
Collections nationales**

**Research Sites
Sites pour la recherche**

**Partner Organisations
Organisations
partenaires**

Information about new
membership:
Membership Secretary

Information about this site:
Webmaster

Renseignements sur l'inscription:
Secrétaire des associés

Renseignements sur ce site:
Webmaster

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Collection) of the Cologne University.

- two databases with literature on theatre are accessible by modem from the Musikhochschule (Music College) in Leipzig. The former Hans Otto Theaterhochschule (Theatre College) has been integrated into it.

- in Switzerland the computerized compilation of data on plays of Swiss authors has been begun with the goal of increasing their circulation, advising theatres in the selection of plays and documenting them for research purposes. The database is currently in the stages of development and is not accessible for external users.

- the Zentrum für Theaterinformation und -dokumentation (Center for Theatre Information and Documentation) in Berlin has begun to build up a database of production documentation, production-related materials and video and audio recordings of productions.

- theatre almanacs and yearbooks as sources for biographical information on actors as well as theatres, etc. have been indexed by Paul S. Ulrich. He has created databases with his own programs and they are being continually updated. The databases are not accessible externally, since the data has not been structured for such usage.

2. And now an electronic theatre information system?

Similar to the situation in the German library, archive and documentation landscape, in the area of the theatre one also finds isolated, in no way coordinated, activities which only focus on holdings or parts of a collection. Furthermore, these are not directly accessible for external users - with perhaps the exception of the theatre database in Leipzig.

For the users and potential users of theatre collections (colleagues in the theatre area, theatre historians, teachers, journalists, students, staff members of publishing houses, radio and television stations and other people with interests on the theatre), this results in tedious and conventional researchs to locate and obtain relevant materials. Modern methods for locating and obtaining information (i.e. the use of online databases, CD-ROM, online ordering and delivery) which are commonplace in other disciplines (for example in the sciences and in technology, but also increasingly in the humanities) cannot be used in the area of theatre since they just do not exist.

Furthermore, it is quite possible if not certain that in the various collections pertaining to theatre history and theatre research duplicate work is being done simply because there is almost no exchange of information and the results of extensive, expensive researchs (role portraits, etc.) as a rule are either filed conventionally (that is, under a specific aspect) or are only internally usable. Even if the types of questions asked by users continually change and a question is seldom asked twice in the same way, in the course of time duplicate work could be avoided by having access to the answers to questions which have already been researched.

The development of an integrated electronic theatre information system is appropriate when it takes into account the status quo of the activities in the area of theatre documentation and when, in addition, it attempts to reduce the recognized deficits. Such a project could be attached to various organizations:

- to a theatre (with the main emphasis on the collection of the actual theatre work and the documentation of the artistic process), whereby here it will probably be necessary to awake the awareness in the theatre of the value of archiving;

- to a theatre research collection (with the main emphasis on the more retrospectively-focused theatre research in connection with research and teaching), probably within the framework of recording and evaluating holdings in relationship to preparations for exhibitions and research projects;

- to a cultural historical museum with a theatre department (with the main emphasis on the cultural historical aspect and the cooperation with other disciplines), here also in the framework of cataloging and describing the holdings;

- to a library or documentary institution (with the main emphasis on methods of cataloging, archiving, description and information retrieval), perhaps in connection with the training of students in the area of information and documentation as well as during the introduction to methods of academic work in the area of theatre research.

Depending on who is financing the project, a different thematic emphasis for the electronic theatre information system will be created. It is conceivable that there could be cooperation between the different institutions. In doing so, the knowledge of the different experts - for example, those from the area of theatre science and the area of information/documentation - could be introduced and utilized.

The procedure would always be similar: the documents are cataloged formally (i.e. author, title, publication information, size, physical form, eventually source, location, etc.) and if possible also contentually, using a category schema in one operation.

Above and beyond this, it is necessary to consider which materials need to be completely recorded for the purpose of electronic security or for conservatory reasons, i.e. as complete text or picture. With the help of the corresponding technology and sufficient electronic storage space these materials (for example repertoires and playbills with casting information) or parts thereof (such as table of contents and indexes) can be completely recorded and if necessary be made accessible. In this manner large amounts of material could be electronically recorded, cataloged and used.

3. Advantages of such an electronic theatre information system.

The implementation, setting up and maintenance of such an information system offers many advantages in regard to:

- rationalizing work processes via a decentral access to a continually updated pool of data and the direct transfer of necessary information in the form of facts, texts or pictures for one's own work;

- a qualitative improvement of the work: the computer-aided compilation permits a more differentiated access to the available material and as a result leads to a better use of the holdings;

- the possibility, possibly in cooperation with other institutions, of effectively presenting and making the activities of the institution more understandable in academics, politics and the press and to document them for the future;

- the direct exchange of data and information - for example with electronic mail;

- offering services to interested users (making information in the form of a database, profile services, etc. available);

- the use of external on-line services and transfer of external data (for example, queries in news databases, use of services of the German Library Institute, etc.)

4. Prerequisites for an electronic theatre information system.

Such a theatre information system can only be developed slowly and in cooperation with diverse institutions which have an interest in developing and using such a system.

An example of what can be done is to be found in the questionnaire of the German Bundesverband der Bibliotheken und Museen der Darstellenden Künste (Federal Association of Libraries and Museums of the Performing Arts), which is being sent in preparation for the next edition of its directory

of archives, libraries, museums, collections and memorials with performing arts holdings. The questionnaire asks the institution to provide information regarding the planning, status and extent of computer-assisted collection and cataloging projects. Furthermore, they are asked to send informational material regarding the status quo of computerization in their institutions which will be gathered, actualized and made available to other interested institutions in the Theatermuseum Düsseldorf.

A suggestion of the Hochschule für Musik und Theater (College for Music and Theatre) in Leipzig at the above-mentioned meeting in Düsseldorf resulted in the formation of a working group "German-language Theatre Thesaurus". The database being developed in Leipzig has encountered thesaurus problems and the working group will concentrate on these problems; in the past this problem was already begun to be dealt with at the Deutsches Theatermuseum (German Theatre Museum) in Munich.

The meeting in Düsseldorf was also the occasion for the cooperation between Paul S. Ulrich and myself to develop fundamental guidelines for the structure of data-exchange structures for the above-mentioned theatre information system. The considerations are to extend beyond the needs of the German-speaking area and are to take into consideration international tendencies and needs:

- already existent rules for data entry (for example, those of TANDEM);
- valid national and international standards (in regard to the exchange of data - similar to MARC for bibliographic data);
- aspects of practicability in data entry;
- the incompleteness and inexactness of the information relating to the objects which have to be cataloged and described;
- the perspective of cooperation in a network-association;
- different technical and personnel prerequisites.

The important thing here is that standards need to be developed for cataloging and description which are universally applicable. This needs to be done both for the definition of the objects which are being cataloged (bibliographical data, biographical data, productions, scene designs, records, etc.) as well as for the data-exchange structure (required and optional categories, relational possibilities, etc.). These standards must be such that they are not antiquated by new developments and needs.

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