

Structure and Methodologies of Research in the Arnoldo Foà Archive

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Abstract: The focus of this paper is the presentation and description of the Arnoldo Foà archive and its importance as the main documentary source for studying the contemporary actor: through the analysis of the sources contained therein, in fact, it was possible to conduct an in-depth study of theatrical career of Arnoldo Foà. The work is part of the Phd in Storia delle Arti e dello Spettacolo (History of Cinema, Music, Fine and Performing Arts) in Florence, a context in which I carry out a research dedicated to the artistic profile of Arnoldo Foà, protagonist of the theater from the second half of the twentieth century. Starting from the description of the archive in which the research was conducted, some significant examples are examined that can demonstrate how archival sources have managed to reveal unpublished and fundamental information for the study. Furthermore, the value and the high potential that the archive assumes as the main study tool for the performing arts are highlighted.

Keywords: contemporary theatre; performing arts; archiving systems; acting; artistic biography; documentary sources; recitative style; historical memory.

The Arnoldo Foà archive, conserved at the Centro Studi Teatro della Toscana in Florence, currently represents the main archive related to Foà's entire career. He was a protagonist of the performing Italian scene of the second half of the twentieth century, as well as a versatile and polyhedric figure. The Centro Studi of Teatro della Pergola, founded in 2015 in the

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buildings and from the experience of the abandoned Alfonso Spadoni Theatre Library, is the place of preservation and enhancement of the library and archival heritage of the historical Florentine theater, open to an audience of researchers, students and enthusiasts. The library holds more than 20,000 ancient and modern volumes – constantly increasing and updating thanks to donations and new acquisitions – on performing arts and history of costume; the historical archive preserves materials that document the activity of the theater from its foundation, in the mid-seventeenth century, up to the management of the Ente Teatrale Italiano. In addition to the mentioned archive dedicated to Arnolfo Foà, there are also some other archives of personalities related to the florentine theater scene and, more generally, to the local and national artistic-intellectual scene, such as Orazio Costa, Andreina Pagnani, Paolo Emilio Poesio and Antonio Sferlazzo. A place of conservation of artistic memory, but also a rich instrument for the historian who wants to reconstruct moments and episodes as unique as those related to the performing dimension.

The Arnolfo Foà archive was donated to the Centro Studi from February 2016, on the occasion of a photographic exhibition dedicated to the actor, who was particularly attached to the city of Florence; strongly desired by the family, this exhibition collected unpublished pictures from the family archive and recalled some of the fundamental phases of Foà's life, both artistic and private. In this occasion the significant and rich archive was born. The documentation included in the archive keeps track of the entire artistic biography of the actor from Ferrara, his important career articulated both by chronological extension and by variety of experiences: Arnolfo Foà, in fact, begins to work in the theater as an actor, and then devote himself to cinema and television. The archive is therefore divided into three main sections, each dedicated to a sector: theatre, cinema, television. Each of these sections, in turn, has an internal articulation, so the collection is divided according to the reference category.

The research project I'm working on, entitled *L'attore italiano nel secondo Novecento: il profilo artistico di Arnolfo Foà* (*The Italian Actor in the Second Twentieth Century: the artistic profile of Arnolfo Foà*), inserted in the scope of the Phd in Storia delle Arti e dello Spettacolo (History of Cinema, Music, Fine

and Performing Arts) at the University of Florence and followed by Professor Renzo Guardenti, investigates the stages of the theatrical experience carried out by Arnolfo Foà during his long career. The purpose of the research is indeed to reconstruct the artistic path of Foà in his different roles of actor, playwright and director. The study also intends to analyze and evaluate, in the face of individual theater tests, the artistic evolution that the actor accomplished during his career and the multiplicity of interests and skills developed in the theater environment. Although Arnolfo Foà is a well-known figure in the contemporary spectacular panorama (also for his transversal works), yet there is no study dedicated to him able to reconstruct his biography: hence the idea of examining the direct sources kept in the florentine archive and start an in-depth study of his artistic figure.

The research carried out in the first two years of doctorate was divided into several phases, considering the evolution of the theatrical path of Arnolfo Foà, starting from the first moments of his career. The documents related to the years of training were taken into account, as well as the first contacts with the theatre and the world of performing arts in general; and finally, I studied the more mature experiences and the writing experimentation for scene and direction. For all the points here briefly listed, it was necessary to consider, together with the critical bibliography, the high quantity of archival sources that embrace almost entirely the path of the actor since his first moves.

The first stage of the research was concentrated mainly in the Arnolfo Foà archive at the Centro Studi Teatro della Toscana: inside the archive I made a first and necessary (although not definitive) selection, that was to focus the investigation only on the theatrical dimension. The section dedicated to the theatre consists of more than 3000 documents; which are divided into as many sectors according to their typology. The work within the archive provided for the finding of these documents, their organization and the beginning of a transcription work, currently in progress. The sections are in total six: press review, scripts, performance programs, correspondence, playbill, contracts: each of them has a further division into folders organized according to a chronological criterion. The press review section, containing 6 folders, contains 1900 digitized articles that start in 1938 and arrive in 2014;

the scripts, in all 220, are divided into 7 folders; the theatre programs are 950 documents divided into 3 folders; the correspondence counts 156 documents, finally, there are about 500 contracts.

The initial operation of finding and digitizing these sources was followed by a register of shows that Arnaldo Foà worked on, through the drafting and compilation of a table that takes into account his entire teatrography. This, together with other work tools made during the research, was a first result of the activity carried out in the location: the intersection, in fact, of the numerous types of documentary sources, it allowed me to put together some key data relating to Foà's theatrical experiences and thus to take the first steps towards the definition of his artistic biography. The lack of a specific critical bibliography related to my subject of research has addressed the work within the archive: here, in fact, I had the opportunity to find and connect between them materials almost never used or studied before and to build, in this way, a series of tables and schemes that shed light on various aspects of Foà's career and, therefore, on his style as an actor, author and director of the twentieth century.

The examination and acquisition of documents revealed the potential of the archive as the main source of documentation on the actor: collecting the materials in their chronological sequence, my work started from the early years lived by Arnaldo Foà in the theatrical context, since his official debut. The years of formation, of which Foà himself speaks in his autobiographies², are marked by a first encounter with the world of performing arts: a young Foà approaches acting through theater and film studies carried out between Florence and Rome. The debut at the theatre is dated 1935, with the play *La serenata al vento* by Carlo Veneziani, directed by Alberto Bracaloni; concerning the first plays, the reviews I found inform us of the fact that he recites using various pseudonyms (such as Puccio Gamma, Arnaldo Galli, Carlo Arnoldi and Alberto Benini), because of his Jewish origins. Early theatre experiences reveal an extremely diverse repertoire: from classical dramas to modern operas, from the role of the prince in *La vita è sogno* by Calderon de la Barca (1939) to that of a servant in Schiller's *The Masndieri* (1941).

2. See his two autobiographies: Arnaldo Foà, *Recitare. I miei primi sessant'anni di teatro*, (Roma: Gremese, 1998); Arnaldo Foà, *Autobiografia di un artista burbero* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2009).

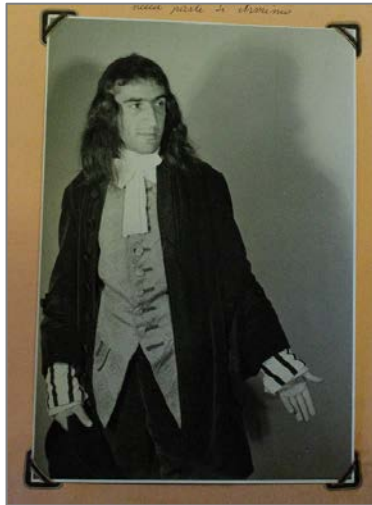


Fig. 1: Arnaldo Foà in the role of the servant Arminio, show *I Masnadieri* by Friedrich Schiller, directed by Guido Salvini, 1941. This image and the following are kept in the Centro Studi's archives. I thank Mrs. Procaccini-Foà for allowing me to publish these photos.



Fig. 2: Performance program relating to the show *La vita è sogno* by Calderon de la Barca, directed by Nino Meloni, 1939. In the list of characters you can see the role of Prince Astolfo played by Puccio Gamma, pseudonym used by Arnaldo Foà to hide his identity.

In the first performances Foà plays mostly secondary roles, the critics spends few words for his acting tests, while immediately praising and in many cases his interpretive qualities; always in these years (except for the forced interruption of theatrical activity, which leads Foà away from the stage for a short time) he works with the most famous companies of the time, such as the company Cervi-Pagnani-Morelli-Stoppa, Ninchi-Barnabò, Adani-Cimara, Maltagliati-Cimara. The period between the 40s and 60s is the most fruitful for the theatrical career of Foà: during these years he had in fact the opportunity to work with the greatest directors of his time, with personalities such as Luchino Visconti, Guido Salvini, but also with Giorgio Strehler, Luigi Squarzina, Luca Ronconi. These events, examined specifically, allow us to understand how the recitative style of Foà is defined.

With regard to Arnaldo Foà's first theatre experiences and the early stage of his career, the consultation of the archive has oriented my research towards a specific direction, that is the evaluation and analysis of the link between the actor and the voice. The vocal style represents one of the traits of the recitation used to define the style of an interpreter: in the case of Foà, the insistence by the critics on his vocal skills and, in general, on the sound dimension, (insistence that is noticed since his first performances), is a valuable element to decipher the actor characteristics. Although in the reviews of early plays there are sporadic and brief references to his acting (often limited to simple appreciations), it's possible to identify in them a leitmotif: starting from these documents, and within a specific chapter included in the thesis, the research deepens the relationship of Foà with his voice, even beyond the specifically theatrical experiences (think of the work on radio and television). To shed light on this aspect and to motivate the choice to investigate its developments, I have selected some examples in which the vocal datum emerges as a peculiarity of the recitation of Arnold Foà. In a passage of the article *Pagine eroiche di lotte fratricide*, review of the play *La quinta colonna* by Ernest Hemingway, directed by Luchino Visconti in 1945, we refer to the expressive modes of Foà, and how his way of reciting a line had been so well executed that he obtained silence in the audience: «... you will remember how the actor Foà said this joke. Admirably, and you will remember that silence in the room and that sense of tragedy in the air»³. Two other reviews, still from the same period, focus on the same aspect: the shows in question are *Non rinuncio all'amore*

3. *Pagine eroiche di lotte fratricide*, in «Il popolo», (Roma, 23 marzo 1945).

of Giovanni Bokay and *Enrico IV* by Luigi Pirandello. Ten years after his debut on the theatrical scene, the critics express a first unanimous judgment on an actor still "minor" compared to others – if you think that in this period Foà plays alongside Luigi Cimara, Laura Adani or Paolo Stoppa – but whose qualities are well found. In both documents, in fact, the authors speak of the young actor and praise, among his most evident qualities, the tone rude and pleasant, with an energetic style and they exalt his perfect diction. The sources briefly described here represents examples of how the archival materials consulted were able to open a "trail" in the research conducted, of how they shed light on a fact that, compared with the critical bibliography⁴, is able to direct research towards unexpected outcomes. Starting from these suggestions, my work has been so oriented towards a new perspective, that it will be deepened thanks to the use of further documents and materials from other archives.

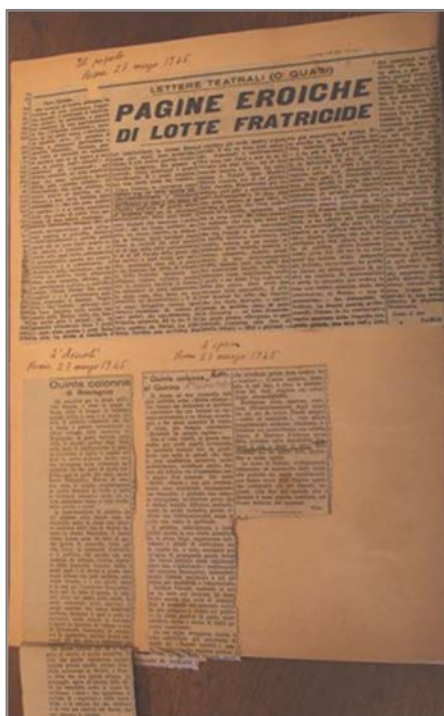


Fig. 3: Review *Pagine eroiche di lotte fratricide*, in «Il popolo», Rome, 23 march 1945.
Here we refer to the vocal skills of Arnolddo Foà.

4. See, for example, the volume Leonardo Bragaglia, *Pirandello e i suoi interpreti* (Siena: Trevi, 1984).

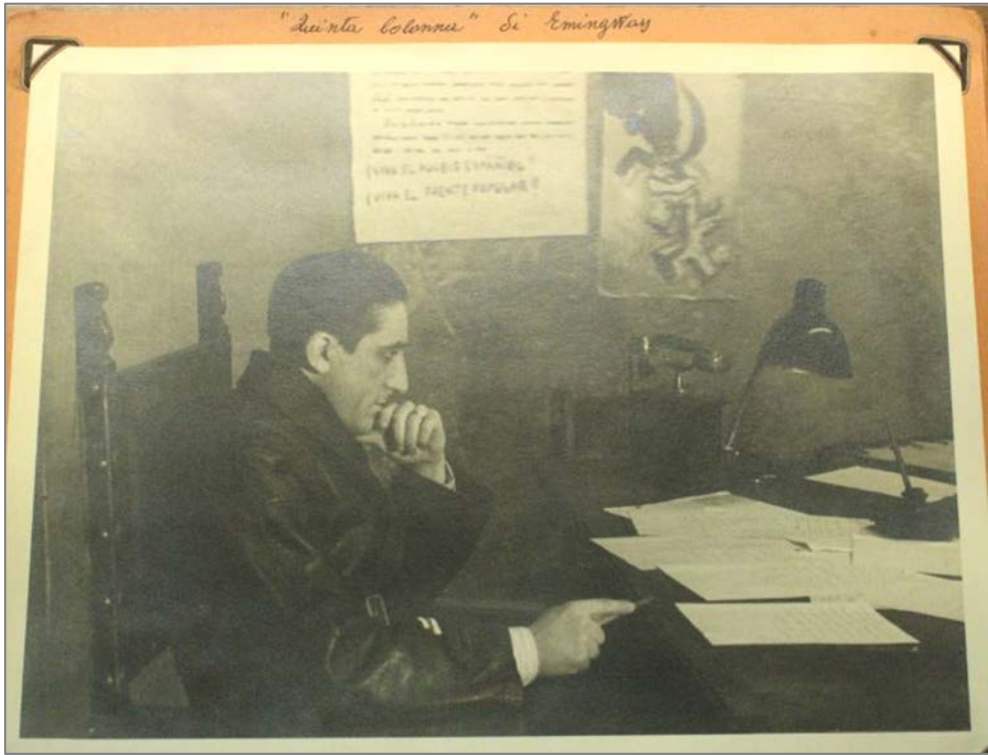


Fig. 4: Arnaldo Foà plays the role of the head of security in the show *La quinta colonna* by Ernest Hemingway, directed by Luchino Visconti in 1945.

If the beginning of my study coincided with the preliminary phase of Arnaldo Foà's career, at a later moment the research project will examine further aspects of his theatrical career, namely those relating to the dramaturgical and the directional dimensions. The object of study from which this path starts corresponds to the opera *Signori, buonasera*, staged for the first time at the Teatro Odeon in Milan on 18 March 1957 with the company Pagnani-Villi-Foà-Ferzetti. It is the first time that Foà engages with both writing and directing; the main information about the show derives, once again, from archive materials. Through the examination of the two scripts preserved it emerges, thus, that Foà plays inside the comedy and plays the role of the playwright Lele, the protagonist of the opera; Foà imagines that the author is present on stage along with the characters he gave birth to (in total four) and that he will manipulate them at his pleasure, but they will not obey him,

but rather rebel against his will, developing their own life. The immediate reference to the Pirandellian style and themes is confirmed by the consultation of the reviews following the first performance: a title, among all, becomes explanatory to this similarity. The article published in the magazine «La notte» on March 19, 1957, has as its title *È una variazione pirandelliana sugli attori e sui personaggi* (*It's a Pirandello variation on the actors and characters*)⁵ and makes, therefore, explicit reference to the sicilian playwright, in particular to his most famous work, the *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*. To confirm this analogy are also other reviews, which recall the echoes of Pirandello; in general, the performance gets several criticisms and the opinions are divided, as the work of Foà is appreciated (we have to underline at this time he was already a well-known and esteemed actor), but overall it is not convincing and incisive. Starting from this first experience, the research will continue on this direction and will be investigated the work of Foà who becomes a playwright and director of numerous operas (the last direction dates back to 2005); it will be necessary to isolate some significant episodes able to describe the artistic idea developed by Foà and also the position he occupies as a writer and director in the contemporary theatrical landscape. In order to identify the specific cases, my research relies on the documents belonging to the archive, which are able not only to complete the overall picture of the subject, providing information and details, but also and especially, if properly interrogated, reveal new and interesting aspects and facets.

About the director's experiences and the relationship with Pirandello, one of the depths within my research is dedicated to the relationship between the Ferrara actor and the Sicilian playwright. The first part of the study concerns the Pirandello interpretations in the repertoire of Arnaldo Foà (altogether he works in six plays from the works of Pirandello) and refers to his acting activity. In a second phase, the study focuses on Foà's work on *Diana e la Tuda*. The presence of the Pirandellian theatre in the course examined is primarily determined by the predilection expressed by Foà himself⁶ towards his repertoire. In particular, the choice to study specifically the case of *Diana e la Tuda* was the examination of the materials related to the plays of Foà: the recurrence of the opera emerged, to which the director Foà dedicates himself three times in his career, with a time gap

5. E. Ferdinando Palmieri, *È una variazione pirandelliana sugli attori e sui personaggi*, in «La notte», (19 marzo 1957).

6. See the biography Anna Procaccini, *Io, il teatro. Arnaldo Foà racconta se stesso* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubettino, 2014).

of about ten years. This fact has attracted my attention, leading me to ask the reason for this artistic choice, the reason that encouraged Foà to return to the same work: from here the decision to shed light on any similarities and differences between the different versions. The play was staged for the first time at the Teatro Stabile in Palermo on 6 February 1971, while the other two premieres were performed in Rome in 1979, and in Milan in 1999; in all three versions Arnaldo Foà always plays the same role, that of the old sculptor Nono Giuncano, while, in every direction, the female protagonists change. The consistency of the materials found in the archive allows this case study to rest on solid foundations: we have access to various and diversified types of documents (in different quantities according to the direction to which they refer), from stage photography to sketches of the scenography, from the scripts to the reviews up to the DVD of the last show of 1999. The intersection of archival sources – both between them as well as associated with the bibliographic ones – is the main criterion in which the work is articulated and the starting point for clarifying a decisive aspect in Foà's theatrical career.



Fig. 5: Performance program of the first performance of *Diana e la Tuda*, staged at the Teatro Stabile in Palermo on February 6, 1971.



Fig. 6: Sketch of the costume of the character Nono Giuncano designed by Arnaldo Foà himself for the direction of *Diana e la Tuda*.

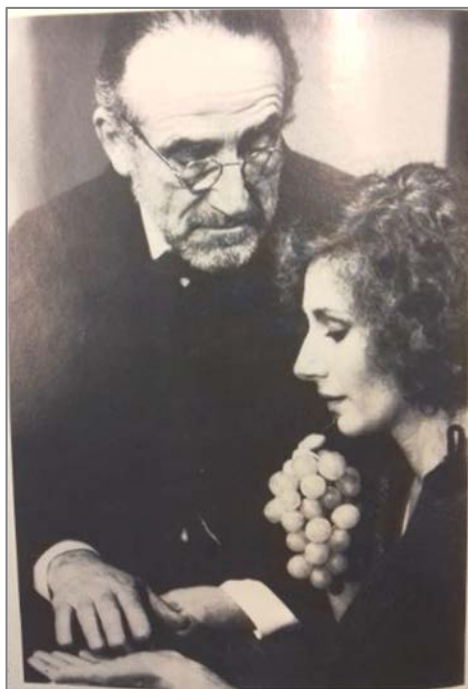


Fig. 7: Scene photo of *Diana e la Tuda*, represented in the 1983/84 theatrical season. In the photo we see the two protagonists: Arnaldo Foà in the role of the old sculptor Giuncano and Paola Pitagora in the role of the model Tuda.

The examples dealt specifically here and the principles on which my doctoral project is based are part of a broader discourse related to the enhancement and preservation of archives, in particular those that preserve the "delicate" performative memory. My research wouldn't have been possible without Arnaldo Foà's archive and the documentation here stored and organized. Arnaldo Foà himself worked in this perspective, creating memories of his theatrical career, putting together, physically, the traces of his figure as an actor, playwright and director. The study of contemporary theatre takes advantage of many more archival materials than the past and this represents, at the same time, a potential but also a great risk: the high quantity of sources available and their heterogeneity expose research to the danger of easy misunderstandings and it requires the use of a rigorous historical method. Hence the need to make the necessary selections, which privilege documents and leave others aside, as well as deepen only some of the many aspects related to the study of the actor. The aim behind my project is to reconstruct the theatrical biography of an artist who has worked for about seventy years and to exploits the potential of the archive Arnaldo Foà and, at the same time, intends to give a new and more functional placement to the numerous and precious documents that compose it.

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