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»Match the Prop to the Play«: Locating a Theory of the Fundus in the National Theatre London's Hire Department

This contribution will visit a theater space that theater-goers are usually not allowed to visit. I am not concerned, however, with the excitement of the backstage area before a performance begins, nor am I interested in the creative nervousness of the rehearsal room. Fly towers or theater machines are also not part of the tour. Frankly, the tour will not even take us to a space within the theater itself, it will rather ask us to take the Underground to a building a couple of miles away from the actual theater. In the south of London, in Lambeth, we will browse the Costume and Props Hire Department of London's National Theatre (NT). The objects we will encounter here have done their duty, their show is over. Yet is their show really over? Or does their exciting afterlife only begin once the original show has closed?

In the following text I will discuss the NT's Props and Costumes Hire Department to propose a theory of the ›Fundus.‹ In German-speaking theater, the Fundus is the space where props, parts of set designs or costumes are stored.¹ It is also an essential feature of the repertoire system. A theory of the Fundus will therefore serve to locate theories of repertoire² and, additionally, help to broaden perspectives on costumes and stage properties.³ Theatrical objects have largely been underrepresented in thea-

1 I visited the NT Props and Costume Hire Department on 7th July 2015. All my observations are based on photographs and memory notes of that visit.

2 Cf. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Durham, NC / London 2003; Tracy C. Davis, Nineteenth-Century Repertoire, in: *Nineteenth Century Theatre & Film* 36 (2009), pp. 6–28; ead., Introduction: Repertoire, in: ead. (ed.), *The Broadview Anthology of Nineteenth Century British Performance*, Peterborough 2012, pp. 13–26.

3 Cf. Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, Ann Arbor, MI 2003; Frances Teague, *Shakespeare's Speaking Properties*, Lewisburg, PA 1991; Aoife Monks, *The Actor in Costume*, Basingstoke / New York 2010; Ali MacLaurin and Aoife Monks, *Costume. Readings in Theatre Practice*, London / New York 2015; Eleanor Margolies, *Props. Readings in Theatre Practice*, London / New York 2016.

ter and performance studies.⁴ If scholars have investigated them, they often studied either props or costumes on their own. Taking my cues from Alice Rayner's general observations of the prop room and Aiofe Monks' investigation into the »After Effects«⁵ of costumes, I will regard the Fundus as an invitation to shed light on both props and costumes as objects of the theater which come alive on stage, but, crucially, do not simply ›die‹ after having served their purpose in performance. Alice Rayner writes that »[s]tored in a prop room, the objects constitute both an archive of past productions and a promise of possible ones.«⁶ She accounts for props' special state in the prop room, yet even this special state seems always to be lacking. In their »readiness,«⁷ props' do not have a quality in and for themselves, they only exist in representation. However, Monks makes us see an essential quality of a theatrical object post-performance: »The fact that costumes remain, and may be put to use in subsequent productions, sometimes in new forms, suggests that costumes act as a literally material memory of performance, permeated and formed by the work of the performer.«⁸ A theatrical object carries the memories of its past performances even when being used again in a different production. Through the lens of the Fundus, I argue that it is not only the performer animating the object which constitutes the theatrical quality of a prop or a costume. It is also the audience's perception and memories of these objects that contribute to their theatrical quality.

The OED traces the Fundus' etymological roots to the Latin word *fundus* meaning bottom. In the English language it knows two meanings; the first one is anatomical: »The base or bottom of an organ; the part remote from the external aperture.«⁹ The second one, »[f]oundation, groundwork,«¹⁰ is only rare. The German word, too, goes back to the Latin and has the same meaning as the English one, yet, somehow throughout theater history the word has put on another meaning describing the place in a theater where props, costumes, furniture, and parts of set designs are stocked

4 In her volume on *Props* in the *Readings in Theatre Practice* series, Eleanor Margolies makes important distinctions between props, objects, things, and puppets. As the arguments behind these distinctions are, in my eyes, focused on the objects in performance, they do not seem relevant for my perspective. I will use the term ›theatrical object‹ (or the shorter ›object‹) as a joint term for props and costume pieces. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 2–9.

5 Cf. Monks 2010 (note 3), pp. 139–143.

6 Alice Rayner, *Ghosts. Death's Double and the Performance of Theatre*, Minneapolis, MN / London 2006, p. 75.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

8 Monks 2010 (note 3), p. 140.

9 N. N., »fundus, n.«, in: *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2021, URL: <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/75515?redirectedFrom=Fundus#eid> [last accessed: 27th February 2022].

10 *Ibid.*

and stored to be re-used in another production. For my argument, the meaning of *fundus* as a foundation or basis that must be somehow spatially remote is essential because both meanings apply to the Fundus: the objects stored here may serve as the foundation of a theater's repertoire¹¹ and the location of this storage is in some form or the other remote from theater-goers; or in the NT's case, it is literally remote from the actual theater.

The NT proves an excellent starting point for a theory of the Fundus because, not only does it produce props, sets and costume pieces on-site and stores them in respective shops, it also, over the last couple of years, has increasingly promoted its Props and Costumes Hire Department and re-used theatrical objects in merchandising products or as part of the interior design of its bars and cafés. As I will argue for linking the Fundus with repertoire, the NT's reliance on the repertory system will add a further perspective to this text. Already in Harley Granville-Barker and William Archer's »Scheme and Estimates for a National Theatre,« the repertory system played an essential role in conceptualizing this institution.¹²

In the first part of this contribution, I will discuss my observations of the NT Hire Department in Lambeth. Especially the praxis of categorization will play a crucial role in my overall analysis. In the next step, I will argue for the importance of repertoire for the theory of Fundus by taking into account the NT as institution. Throughout these subchapters, I will connect my theoretical observations with analyses of the NT Hire Department and other manifestations of theatrical objects at the NT – in the form of merchandising products, the pop-up bar *Propstore* or the restaurant *The Green Room*. Crucially, my text is grounded in a material diversity ranging from props to merchandise from the NT bookshop. Such a diversity calls for an analytical open-mindedness to objects theater-goers and theater-makers encounter within a theater institution. Following a praxeological perspective, my interest does not lie with the aesthetic quality of the material objects but with the objects' potential to, on the one hand, bring about memories and echoes of past performances and, on the other hand, make the craft and labor of the backstage and their workshops visible.

11 Tracy C. Davis writes about the change from playhouse to touring house in the 19th century British theater which resulted in the need for stock scenery and stock costumes and, consequentially, the need for the space to store these stock objects. Cf. Tracy C. Davis, *The Economics of the British Stage 1800–1914*, Cambridge / New York 2000, pp. 322, 345.

12 Cf. Daniel Rosenthal, *The National Theatre Story*, London 2013, pp. 7–10.

Categorizing Objects: The National Theatre Hire Department

When visiting the National Theatre, audiences might spend their time before the curtain goes up strolling through the vast and extensive foyers of the NT's South Bank home, which was designed by Denys Lasdun and opened to the public in 1976. They might look through the different flyers offering information on the current season and upcoming productions until they encounter a turquoise flyer showing white silhouettes of an old-fashioned bicycle, a gramophone and a diver wearing a tutu (fig. 1). The flyer's promotional text reads: »National Theatre Hire. Discover our unique collection of beautifully crafted costumes and props available for hire.«¹³ Turning over the flyer, they will read that »[a]t the end of each run the costumes and props used to bring productions to life on the National's stages, make their way to the Hires Department«, where they are »made available to the public, schools, theatre groups, the film and television industry.«¹⁴

In London Lambeth, the NT Hire Department occupies two ground-level spaces in Kennington Business Park Centre. The bigger space is solely storing costumes and costume props like hats, jewelry, underwear, wigs, or ties. The second space's focus is on props ranging from telephones to furniture such as chairs and sofas. Although the Hire Department is open to the public, »customers«¹⁵ – as an NT brochure on Costumes labels people making use of the Hire Department – will have to contact the department prior to a visit and schedule an appointment. Upon entering either of the shops, customers will have to sign in. Yet, after signing in, customers are free to browse the shops independently and freely. NT staff can use the Hire Department without any restrictions.

The Costume shop consists of two large rooms where costume pieces are hung on rails. All the pieces are stored in assigned categories: firstly, they are categorized by gender (1), secondly, by period (2), thirdly, by the kind of piece or dress (3). Within female costumes (1), there are, for example, sections under the headlines ›1920's/30's (2) Dress Coats & Capes (3)‹ or ›1930's (2) Day Dresses (3)‹. Signs at the top of every aisle help staff and customers alike to orient themselves and to locate the different categories in this big and packed space. Browsing the Costume shop also reveals Western theater's difficult relationship with the depiction of ›other‹ cultures. One section is dedicated to everything »Ethnic / Global« including »Oriental Robes« or »African

¹³ Flyer National Theatre Hire Department, 2017.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Sarah Holmes, *National Theatre Costume*, London 2014, p. 20. I will continue using the term ›customer‹ for external persons using the Hire Department and hiring objects from it.



1. Royal National Theatre, Flyer National Theatre Hire Department, 2017

Print Heavy Weight Male Kaftans.« Whilst the categories of the European period costumes are precise and detailed, categories of these culturally othered costumes are rather generic and stereotypical. It shows how every imagination is rooted in cliché and perpetuates such cliché further when putting it on stage again and again. Thus, a Fundus not only stores material objects but also traces of knowledge, assumptions, and appropriations.

As the above-mentioned categories have already shown, pragmatism is more important than original design approaches to costumes. Costumes are therefore separated into pieces of different types of clothing: trousers are hung with other trousers from the same period, a jacket will go into the jackets section etc. Consequently, costumes turn into individual costume pieces which will be arranged by the structural logic of the NT Hire Department. Monks describes the »logic employed to order the myriad materials« as »an unexpected poetry. The stock coordinator's work relies on mysterious systems of classification [...]. The costume supervisors are heavily dependent on this system, as are the staff of Running Wardrobe teams, who must source belts, bras, or buttons with a minute's notice.«¹⁶ As the functionality for other departments, such as Wardrobe, is a priority, mere practical reasons determine the ordering of objects rather than dramaturgical approaches to an embodiment of a

¹⁶ Aoife Monks, *Costume at the National Theatre*, London 2019, p. 186.

character. In the Costume shop's armor section, knight helmets are next to construction, motorcycle and police helmets. In the Fundus, the practical use of an object as a helmet is the essential feature, not its potential dramaturgical use as, say, the headgear of Joan of Arc in Friedrich Schiller's *The Maid of Orleans*.

An advertisement displayed in the Costume shop asks customers: »Do you need props or furniture for your production? Ask staff for details for our Props Store – situated less than a minute away!« This Props shop, housed in the building opposite to the Costume shop, is set up differently: specific types of objects or their material condition determine categorization. For example, all kinds of metal boxes, chairs or picture frames are piled together, but also all kinds of metal things are put on the same shelf: enamel pots, tubs, buckets etc. Unlike in the Costume shop, there are no signs indicating the categories; only by identifying the objects categories become apparent. Due to different sizes and volumes of props, storing them is much more difficult, giving the Props shop quite a messy appearance. Baskets are stuck under the ceiling, flagpoles are lying on the floor in front of a desk and other ›stuff‹ just hangs on walls or is put into a place that had not been occupied before. Shelves store actual books in sections such as ›Albums/Menus‹ or ›Law/Science and Maths.‹ Like in a book store, the books are arranged by topic, thereby allowing some form of dramaturgical categorization as specific kinds of books could be used to represent a character's trait when being used by them or occupying the book shelves of that character's set design.

Frances Teague, in *Shakespeare's Speaking Properties*, writes about a prop's changing functions: on stage, it has a »*dislocated function*; the property has a function, but it is not the same function it has offstage (though it may imitate that ordinary function). The ordinary function of the object does not disappear.«¹⁷ Back in the Fundus, that ›ordinary function‹ is the primary reason for categorizing the object. Pragmatic reasoning of the backstage operations foregoes dramaturgical thinking of the rehearsal stage. Thus, the NT Hire Department is not an archive for a specific production's history, but a place for objects produced at this institution waiting to be used again to serve a practical role which will then serve a production aesthetically. Distinguishing between these functions is a fine line better understood as a spectrum. Eleanor Margolies, referring to Jiří Veltruský, calls the »range of possible interactions« with a prop a »spectrum of animation.«¹⁸ The term ›spectrum‹ proves valuable for the manifold roles props and costume pieces play between praxis, practice and aesthetics. A theory

¹⁷ Teague 1991 (note 3), pp. 17–18, original emphasis.

¹⁸ Margolies 2016 (note 3), p. 23.

of the Fundus allows theater studies to see even more components of such a spectrum that go beyond actors' and directors' interactions.

Institution and Repertoire: National Theatre London

The above-mentioned flyer promoting the NT Hire Department continues: »Relive memories of our most popular productions such as *Oh What a Lovely War!*, *Our Country's God*, *Coram Boy*, *His Dark Materials* [...].«¹⁹ The NT invites audiences to remember past productions by encountering graphic representations of props and costume pieces that are kept in the NT Hire Department. Furthermore, the flyer inspires audience members to also think of props or costumes they might remember from other performances. Ever since Granville-Barker and Archer's foundational thoughts for a British National Theatre, one central feature was the repertory system. The theater's new building in the South Bank was built specifically with the repertory system in mind and therefore includes workshops as well as space to store sets and objects from the productions that run in a season's repertory. Thus, the flyer's prompt is not calling for a singular memory, it rather invites audience members to relive a network of memories of past performances that itself includes multiple theatrical objects.

A few years ago, when the National Theatre, in cooperation with Mini Moderns,²⁰ launched its merchandising line »NT Props,« the props' mnemonic potential was turned into a design idea for a range of products, which were themselves offered as material souvenirs of the NT (fig. 2). Graphic representations of several props from the theater's past productions, such as an angel's wing from *Angels in America* (1992/1993), a goose from *War Horse* (2007) or a trumpet from *Guys and Dolls* (1982), were printed onto mugs, tea towels or tote bags. In the packaging of a set of coasters, a note asked customers to »Match the Prop to the Play.« The NT's loyal theater-goers might have accepted the challenge, rummaged through their memories and linked the prop's illustration with performances they had seen at the NT (further connecting the props with personal memories of these nights).

¹⁹ Flyer National Theatre Hire Department, 2017.

²⁰ »Mini Moderns is an interiors brand specialising in applied pattern across a range of products including wallpapers, fabrics, cushions, rugs and ceramics.« (N. N., About Us, in: *Mini Moderns*, URL: <http://www.minimoderns.com/about-us>, [last accessed: 13th February 2022]).



2. Mini Modern and Royal National Theatre,
»Props« merchandising products, mug and coaster

Like the productions the NT Props merchandise seems to run in repertoire. In her 2009 article »Nineteenth-Century Repertoire«, Tracy C. Davis defines repertoires as

»multiple circulating recombinative discourses of intelligibility that create a means by which audiences are habituated to understand one or more kinds or combinations of performative tropes and then recognise and interpret others that are unfamiliar, so that the new may be incorporated into repertoire. Thus repertoire – as a semiotic of showing and a phenomenology of experiencing – involves processes of reiteration, revision, citation and incorporation. It accounts for durable meanings, not as memory per se but in the improvisation of naming which sustains intelligibility.«²¹

Although Davis examines repertoires in a broader sense than concrete repertoires within a singular theater institution, her definition of repertoire as a more conceptual

21 Davis 2009 (note 2), p. 7. Davis has published an edited version of this article as the introduction to *The Broadview Anthology of Nineteenth Century British Performance*. Cf. ead. 2012 (note 2), pp. 13–26.

approach is integral to understanding the special relationship audiences have with the NT – and how epistemology and memory affect this relationship with its traces in theatrical objects. Most of the above-mentioned productions from the flyer were, at the time of their first nights, innovative stagings made intelligible because of the NT's repertoire. An integral component of the repertoire, they in turn made subsequent innovations intelligible.

The relationship between repertoire and audiences also affects the perception of the diverse objects from the productions that were – and, because of the Fundus, still are – part of the repertoire. When audiences can take a NT prop home and own a part of the repertoire – even if that part is just a stand-in for a concrete object – the Props merchandise products combine in their graphic representation a ›semiotic of showing‹ with a ›phenomenology of experiencing.‹ Davis continues to describe the repertoire as »associational, polytextual, intertheatrically citational, recombinant patterns.«²² A theory of the Fundus takes its cue from this observation. It will therefore not only ask for concrete links – as explained with the NT Props coasters –, but be open to more associational combinations between object, altered object, personal memory, institutional history, and media (re)presentation. Furthermore, Davis draws attention to the everyday, not only to the innovative and unique events in theater history: the Fundus, too, draws attention to all kinds of theatrical objects, not only to *Hamlet's* iconic skull or *Hedda Gabler's* pistols. My interest here also includes every ordinary and random metal box, chair, trousers or leather belt that have been used in a theater's past. An exhibition, designed by Vicki Mortimer as part of the NT's Sherling Backstage Walkway, informs about the workshop's labor and craft that must take place to produce a play and that goes into every theatrical object, no matter how iconic or not it ends up being. In this way, the theater also emphasizes the singularity of the objects produced on-site. Thanks to this exhibition, the NT makes visible what it advertised on an envelope that came with every ticket (fig. 3): »A unique *theatre factory*, the building also houses everything required to bring a show to the stage, including rehearsal rooms and experts who make costumes, wigs, scenery and props.«²³

In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor calls for a new understanding of transfers of knowledge for which she examines the term repertoire. In addition to »patterns of cultural expression in terms of texts and narratives,«²⁴ she regards

²² Ead. 2009 (note 2), p. 24. With her theory of repertoire, Tracy C. Davis is developing Jacky Bratton's concept of intertheatricality further, cf. Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History*, Cambridge 2003, p. 37.

²³ N. N., Welcome, in: Envelope for tickets booked in advance, National Theatre, 2017, emphasis mine.

²⁴ Taylor 2003 (note 2), p. 16.



3. Royal National Theatre, Envelope for tickets booked in advance, 2017

embodied practices as acts which transfer knowledge. These acts form what Taylor labels as repertoire. This repertoire is less stable than the archive because the archive consists of fixed patterns and fixed knowledge. This is represented by the objects that are kept in the archive to conserve their fixed and assigned meaning. Yet, the repertoire's lack of stability is not a disadvantage, rather, it encourages thinking about history differently and being open to constant transformations of knowledge. The synchrony of transfer and transformation is, I argue, an important notion for the knowledge that is inscribed into the objects stored in the Fundus: these objects will be re-used and thereby transformed. A theatrical object is never really fixed, rather, it is always open to becoming something else while still staying the same. In calling its Fundus a Hire Department, the NT is emphasizing the objects' potential to be re-used either within a repertoire or outside of it.

»Hire« as Horizon of Re-Usage

Whereas the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) is calling its Fundus space Prop Shop, RSC costumes are stored in Costume Hire in a »brand new Costume Store in The Other Place.«²⁵ London's Royal Opera House locates all costumes, props and furniture in their Production Workshop in Thurrock where they also build sets. The Birmingham Rep has also installed a Prop & Costume Hire. Looking into the diverse ways a Fundus is called in anglophone theater proves effective. Often the verb ›hire‹ is included in the department's name, thereby already indicating and inviting the re-use of the objects. In German, the Fundus is often a place without access to the public, ›hire‹ however implies openness. It refers both to the active use of that object and to the potential of an object to be (re-)used.²⁶ I want to characterize such a potential as a ›horizon of (re-)usage.‹ In his 2013 book *Audience Participation in Theatre*, Gareth White, referring to reception theory's notion of »horizon of expectation,«²⁷ proposes a ›horizon of participation:‹ »The horizon of participation, like the horizon of expectation, is a limit and range of potentials within that limit, both gaps to be filled and choices to be made.«²⁸ Props and costume pieces know such limits and ranges of potentials as well. In contrast to everyday objects, theatrical objects' horizon of usage entails both practical use (a book as a book) and narrative / dramaturgical use (a book as a means to represent the intellectual character of a Chekhov play). Thus, limits and potentials are intersecting differently and in more complex ways. In *The Haunted Stage*, Marvin Carlson describes his idea of »recycling«²⁹ in the theater where tropes, narratives or objects are used again. This shows that the horizon of usage is actually a horizon of (re-)usage. This horizon opens the limits of an object's potential within the Fundus to be re-used – as it can also always be altered to fit the new function.

This horizon of (re-)usage also asks us to consider the actual re-usages of an object in performances or in other projects like the interior design of a theater bar. In the summer months of 2012 and 2013, the NT installed a pop-up bar in front of its building: *Propstore*. The bar's name points to the foundational design idea behind

25 N. N., Costume Hire, in: *Royal Shakespeare Company*, URL: <https://www.rsc.org.uk/costume-hire> [last accessed: 13th February 2022].

26 Says Monks: »Costume is a constant reminder that the theatre's illusions are made of materials and things that need to be organized, ordered, and then re-used.« Monks 2019 (note 16), p. 186.

27 On the ›horizon of expectation‹ in theater semiotics see for example: Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences. A Theory of Production and Perception*, London / New York 1990, pp. 52–54.

28 Gareth White, *Audience Participation in Theatre. Aesthetics of the Invitation*, Basingstoke / New York 2013, p. 59.

29 Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage. The Theatre as Memory Machine*, Ann Arbor, MI 2003, p. 165.

it: props, pieces of scenery and technical plans from previous productions were re-used to create a design that mirrored the Props shop while turning it into a hip London chic interior. In its 2013 installment, coordinated by Emma Morris and Mark Simpson, the façade was decorated with wooden illustrations of London sights and landmark buildings, which were originally used in the set design for *The Magistrate* (2012). On top of the outside walls, display cabinets presented different props from various productions of the NT's history. Upon entering *Propstore*, visitors could walk on the stage floor covering from *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2012). Under the ceiling they could not only see the model railway used in the same production but also light bulbs from *Frankenstein's* (2011) enormous cloud of light bulbs, which hung between the Olivier's stage and auditorium. Furniture came from various productions, tables were decorated with copies of stage plans and the inside walls too were decorated with diverse scenic elements and props.

The objects in *Propstore* were mostly categorized in the same way they are categorized in the Props shop in Lambeth – radios, tableware etc. were grouped together by their everyday function or by their material condition. In its review of *Propstore*, the *Time Out* London blog wrote: »How many plays have you been to see at the National Theatre this year? For any seasoned theatre-goer, playing ›spot the prop‹ at the National Theatre's new pop-up riverside bar should be a piece of cake.«³⁰ According to this blog post, anyone familiar with the NT's repertoire should have been able to identify the productions the objects had been used in. Without the knowledge of the repertoire, the objects would have seemed like funny gimmicks without further meaning. A blackboard in front of the bar informed everyone passing by that *Propstore* was »[t]he NT café bar built from sets and props of our productions.« Consequently, tourists, who were just walking along the Queen's Walk³¹ and who were not familiar with the performances at the NT, were informed to perceive the objects in the bar as special stuff. They might have even tried to guess which play could have inspired which prop despite not knowing the actual productions.

In *Propstore*, the objects were re-used in a different way than in a new production at the NT or in a school play. The objects lacked dramaturgical context, their new meaning was more akin to souvenirs. Even though, in combination with the design of the bar, they hinted at their original use, the way they functioned in *Propstore* was different. In addition to their scenographic meaning within their original performance,

30 N. N., Prop up the bar at the National Theatre's riverfront pop-up, in: *Now. Here This*, 3rd March 2015, URL: <http://now-here-this.timeout.com/2013/05/03/propstore> [last accessed: 28th July 2015].

31 Cf. Susan Bennett, *Universal Experience: The City as Tourist Stage*, in: Tracy C. Davis (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, Cambridge / New York 2008, pp. 76–90.

they were ›recycled‹ and gained meaning as objects of a trendy pop-up bar's interior design.

With the publication of his seminal study *The Stage Life of Props*, Andrew Sofer prompted theater studies to have a fundamental new perspective on props.³² Though props have been mostly marginalized in theater and performance studies, Sofer brought his readers' attention to props' relevance for a play's narrative and dramaturgy. Yet, even though he argues for the importance of props and theatrical objects for the stage, he does not investigate concrete material objects. Informed by Judith Milhous' and Robert D. Hume's approaches to production and performance analysis, Sofer rather analyses a prop's role within a playtext and follows the routes specific props have taken throughout dramatic history.³³ The Fundus however directs scholarly attention to the material perspectives that must be added to the study of props and other theatrical objects. It also prompts theater studies to connect the work of playwrights, directors and actors with the labor of the workshops. Sofer instead emphasizes the importance of the prop's animation by an actor: »A prop can be more rigorously defined as a *discrete, material, inanimate object that is visibly manipulated by an actor in the course of performance*.«³⁴ The play in performance bestows upon the prop dramaturgical meaning and thus makes the prop a prop. But the notion of Fundus proves that even without an actor animating the object a prop is a prop – especially by bearing memories, yet also by being located in a designated space of the theater. Furthermore, I argue for including the praxis of production into the study of props: workshops make or buy a prop. From the moment of its production – especially in a ›theater factory‹ like the NT –, an object is a prop because it is made or purchased to fulfill the theatrical function of a prop. Stored in a Fundus, the prop stays a prop whose integral quality of being re-used remains within the object, especially because of its location.

In his study, Sofer also states that »[p]rops are haunted mediums.«³⁵ Within a play's narrative a prop stands in for »voices of the past.«³⁶ They become mediums that »ventriloquize an absent, offstage subject.«³⁷ But props might also be haunted by their own past and former histories as I have shown in my analysis of *Propstore*. In June 2015, British-German performance arts collective Gob Squad premiered *My Square Lady* at Komische Oper Berlin. In the performance, Gob Squad was using

³² Cf. Sofer 2003 (note 3).

³³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 4–5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11, original emphasis.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27, original emphasis.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

costumes, scenery and props from previous or current productions from the opera house's repertoire. The re-used objects triggered the audience's memories of those shows. Props and costumes are a thing of a ghostly universe, they are haunted and haunt simultaneously. Thus, the knowledge of theatrical objects' pasts influences the interplay of the horizon of (re-)usage on stage and in the workshops with the corresponding, and oftentimes associational, perception in the auditorium.

Labelling and Epistemology

In the NT's Costume shop, especially British period costumes are categorized with an eye to detail. The categories, in tandem with the objects, can be read as historiographies of British fashion. The shop's customers will be able to refer to laminated sheets informing them about the specifics of a 1940s suit or several other fashion items from the Victorian period. Using contemporary newspaper illustrations as references, the information sheets explain various types of clothing. Thus, customers learn about historic fashion and ways to put together different costume pieces with historical accuracy. Browsing the Costume shop therefore means browsing through material witnesses of historical appropriations by costume designers of past clothing. As such witnesses, costume pieces inform about a point of view on a period at a specific point in time. These points of view are themselves based on research which, in the Costume shop, is interlinked with the research and knowledge of the Hire Department's staff. Hence, multiple traces of past knowledge are also stored in the Fundus, writes Alice Rayner: »The things collected in a prop room thus offer a model for materialist history.«³⁸

Most costume pieces in the NT Hire Department display labels naming the original production they were created or bought for. The labels, in some form or the other, state, firstly, the theater (at the NT's Costume shop, mostly the National Theatre, but sometimes others as well), secondly, the production's title, thirdly, the name of the character, fourthly, the name of the actor and, fifthly, a stock number, sometimes, sixthly, even the period. Yet, the labels are not some forms of archival filing, they are traces of a costume's practical use in production, they follow the logic of the backstage: »As characters will often wear more than one costume, and actors sometimes play more than one character, this frequently translates into many items of clothing. Each costume item therefore needs to be labelled with the name of the show, actor

³⁸ Rayner 2006 (note 6), p. 85.

and character.«³⁹ Not originally meant as an archival tool, the labels may however turn into one. As a theater historian, the information on the label allows me to research the costume's original production and find photos of it being worn on stage. They will also give me clues of other actors being cast in the same role or of other productions the costume piece was re-used for; and maybe even put together with a piece from a different costume. For a customer of the NT Hire Department, the label might trigger memories of past performances and that costume's appearance on stage and might therefore spark their interest in wearing exactly this costume together with the ghosts of its predecessors.

While browsing the NT's Costume shop, I came across a green jacket which carried two labels. One identified the costume as that of Long John Silver, played by Glyn Kerslake in a Derby Playhouse production of *Treasure Island* from 2007. The second label referred to Tom Peters' embodiment of Third Watchman in a 1998 production of *The London Cuckolds* at the National Theatre. After nine years in storage, the jacket was re-used, slightly altered to fit the new actor in a different production in another city. This theatrical object travelled to be used differently on a new stage; and then travelled back to the Fundus waiting to be re-used again. In this example, the jacket does not sustain intelligibility within the NT repertoire because its re-use took place at another venue. Yet it proves the observation of theatrical objects being re-used and of traces of previous use being inscribed into the object, here by literally sewing new labels into the piece. These nine years between the jacket's two appearances on stage demonstrate that being on pause is part of a prop's and costume piece's characteristics. Therefore, Alice Rayner compares props to »items in a lost and found« because they, the »props backstage[,] implicate a history without an obvious order.«⁴⁰ In the Fundus, props can feel left behind, yet because of the above-mentioned ›promise of possible‹ re-uses, their hiatus is a productive and essential state of theatrical objects.

In the Props shop however, there are no labels accounting for the production the prop was made or bought for. Nevertheless, some objects carried little stickers stating a name and a date, but nothing else. The stickers bear traces of a prop having been hired. They are witnesses of the props' manifold usages without offering any concrete information about it or the original use. At the same time, they are ephemeral traces and can easily be stripped off. Exploring their different appearances becomes a quasi-archaeological task: by looking through the administrative files of hiring, historians might start digging through the layers of the manifold re-uses. For the NT Props

³⁹ Holmes 2014 (note 15), p. 10.

⁴⁰ Rayner 2006 (note 6), p. 75.

merchandise products, the storing logics of the Costume and Props shops had been combined: on most products, the props' illustrations carried labels that stated the title of the production they had been used in. Thanks to these labels, audiences were able to complete the missing information on the names of a character or the actor who used the prop in that production.

In her study *The Actor in Costume*, theater and costume scholar Aoife Monks investigates the interconnection between the representation of bodies on stage and the costumes those bodies are wearing. She points to the ambiguity theatrical objects, like costumes, have on stage: »By thinking about costuming we can imagine theatre as a contradictory place of illusion where audiences can look at real clothes.«⁴¹ Such an ambiguity is part of most theatrical objects, be it a prop, a costume or furniture. Props may even further complicate the ambiguity when they are not made of real material but, say, of styrofoam which is treated in ways to make it look like another material, such as wood or stone. Margolies writes: »Prop-making deploys techniques that make cheap materials look expensive and new materials look old – and so the craft has always been associated with illusion, reproduction and imitation.«⁴² Theatrical objects, therefore, have a peculiar relationship with mimesis. Theaters need expert propmakers to implement the mimetic demands of a production. Hence, the NT calls these members of staff proudly »experts« who contribute to the before-mentioned ›theater factory.«

Concluding *Actors in Costume*, Monks is debating costumes' ›After Effects‹ that also contain re-use. Here, she understands costumes as mnemonic devices: »The fact that costumes remain, and may be put to use in subsequent productions, sometimes in new forms, suggests that costumes act as a literally material memory of performance, permeated and formed by the work of the performer.«⁴³ Because of her interest in the actors' bodies wearing the costume, Monks points out their traces within a costume:

»The work may appear to disappear, but the imprint of that work, as if in a faulty wax mould, continues in the textures, smells and shapes of the fabric left behind. [...] These traces [sweat marks, frayed edges, etc.] are clues to the past performance, and invoke the presence of something that has gone, but tell us very little about how the costume was used, and how the audience might have felt about it in the production. The costume in the archive stands as a testament

⁴¹ Monks 2010 (note 3), p. 3.

⁴² Margolies 2016 (note 3), p. 99.

⁴³ Monks 2010 (note 3), p. 140.

to a performance that has gone but is stubbornly mute in its unwillingness to tell us ›what really happened.«⁴⁴

Monks, here, argues for including concrete traces of a performer's body – sweat and smell – into the discussion of costumes as signs of their previous use in performance. The Fundus complicates such a notion because in hiring a costume more and more people, be it actors or amateurs, will leave their bodily traces behind. Monks emphasizes the potential re-use of costumes post-performance, yet the only location she names is an archive.⁴⁵ In a theater archive however, the costume becomes an object that stands in for one production, it bears one meaning and should tell one story. In the Fundus, however, the costume can stand in for one production, but, as highlighted in the case of the *Treasure Island / The London Cuckolds* jacket, it might also stand in for two or more productions, might tell multiple stories and might even experience new uses, might become part of another production, might be worn by another actor and thus be meaningfully transformed through transfer. In the Fundus, theatrical objects are witnesses of manifold pasts while they still manage material encounters in the present and are open to diverse futures. What Taylor calls transformation in repertoire, a brochure on the costumes at the NT calls adaptation: »Costumes from previous productions, covering all historical time periods, are also re-used and need a skilled maker to adapt costumes to fit.«⁴⁶

Theatrical Objects Up Close: The Green Room

Following the success of *Propstore*, the NT opened the restaurant *The Green Room* in 2015 and, yet again, included props and other theatrical objects in the design. It is located not on-site, but at the back of the NT, thus inviting primarily the neighborhood, and not the theater-goers, to visit the restaurant. At the same time, the restaurant's name clearly proves its relationship to theater. The theater's green room, as the place where actors can rest before or during a show, is here linked with the notion of the color ›green‹ highlighting a sustainable and ecological approach to materials used in the design and to the menu. In *The Green Room*, the interior design is defined by simple and bright wooden tables and chairs which include theatrical interventions, such as posters, programs and props. For instance, menus are

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 139, 142.

⁴⁶ Holmes 2014 (note 15), p. 10, emphasis mine.

presented within covers of programs from past NT productions and selected tables featuring inlaid glass cases to exhibit props. In exhibiting such a variety of objects previously in use on and off stage, *The Green Room* reflects museums' approaches to open their collections to the public in the form of open depots. Visiting these becomes a social experience that allows for more direct encounters with museum artifacts which can result in more personal connections with objects from the cultural institutions, be it a museum or a theater.⁴⁷

In his review for *The Guardian*, restaurant critic Jay Rayner enjoyed the opportunity of taking a closer look at props because »For anybody who's seen, say, *War Horse*, it is genuinely intriguing to witness the care that has gone into props – documents, paper-wrapped packages of tea, carrots for the horses – the details of which will pass the vast majority of the audience by.«⁴⁸ Jay Rayner's satisfaction with the interior design is grounded in the quality of the craft that goes into the production of props at the NT. *The Green Room's* exhibition of props turns the audience's distance to the objects upside-down. As Margolies points out, in producing a prop propmakers work for the »distance senses:«⁴⁹ the look and feel of the prop are made with spectators in mind who will sit far away from the object. Props only need to display their illusion in the auditorium, not really on the stage itself. Regarding the mimetic quality of a theatrical object, it is therefore more important how the audience perceives the object than how it looks like to the actors. What can seem too rough or simplistic up close, might have the perfect visual impact from afar. The cabinet table including props at *The Green Room*, then, allows audiences to take a closer look at this specific craft in turning its appearance from ›distance senses‹ to a close-up. Jay Rayner's reference to *War Horse* also confirms the fact that the knowledge of the NT's repertoire will haunt the theatrical object.

47 Cf. Martina Griesser-Stermscheg, *Tabu Depot. Das Museumsdepot in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Vienna / Cologne / Weimar 2012, p. 108.

48 Jay Rayner, *The Green Room: restaurant review*, in: *The Guardian*, 18th January 2015, URL: <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/jan/18/green-room-restaurant-review-jay-rayner> [last accessed: 13th February 2022].

49 Margolies 2016 (note 3), p. 20.

Conclusion

Concluding this contribution, I must acknowledge that the economic dimension of the Fundus has not been fully discussed. When the NT Hire Department calls its users customers, ›hiring‹ objects is also understood as a transaction. On the one hand, the metaphor of the ›theater factory‹ is one of the multiple ways the NT is communicating its brand which furthermore motivated the creation of the merchandising products. On the other hand, the NT as a brand reveals a further dimension to the ways audiences perceive objects at this theater. The ways the props and costumes at the NT are created is articulated as special and high-quality, thereby, in a way, devaluating other theater workshops' excellent crafts and efforts.

Yet in discussing the NT Hire Department, I proposed a theory of the Fundus and located theories of repertoire to shed new light on props and theatrical objects. The Fundus proves how theatrical objects remain theatrical objects outside the time-frame of a performance and are thus not solely dependent on actors animating or wearing them. Within repertoire, they also carry a special meaning for personal memories as well as institutional stories. In categorizing the objects by function, the Fundus opens props and costume pieces to horizons of re-usage in different and unexpected ways. Waiting to be re-used is not a default, but an essential feature of theatrical objects. Moreover, the Fundus highlights the craft of the workshop staff, whose labor and creative work are often overlooked all too easily. Therefore, it also demonstrates how art is reliant on backstage practices – and that studying theatrical objects should include praxeological and institutional knowledge. In understanding these specific characteristics, it will become clear that a theatrical object's show is never really over, or, to echo Aoife Monks, it will »return to the spotlight.«⁵⁰

Credits

1–3 Anne Blankenberg

Sascha Förster, »Match the Prop to the Play«: Locating a Theory of the Fundus in the National Theatre London's Hire Department, in: Requisiten. Die Inszenierung von Objekten auf der ›Bühne der Kunst‹, hg. von Joanna Olchawa und Julia Saviello, Merzhausen: ad picturam 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.1186.c16890>

⁵⁰ Cf. Monks 2019 (note 16), p. 186.