

An Archive within an Archive or, Archive as Repertoire

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Baccio Cecchi's *Descrizione dell' apparato e de gl'intermedi fatti per la storia dell' Esaltazione della Croce rappresentata in Firenze da' giovani della compagni di S. Giovanni Evangelista con l'occasione delle nozze delle altezze serenissime di Toscana nell' anno 1589* (hereafter *Descrizione*) documents several significant technical and artistic aspects related to the festive production of the play, *The Exaltation of the Cross*, written by his father Giovanmaria Cecchi.¹ Politically aware, loyally astute, and a lifelong *notariato* of the Florentine bureaucracy, Giovanmaria Cecchi wrote prolifically from his well-established classical training, producing *L'esaltazione della croce* at the height of his creative powers. Drawing inspiration from the medieval histories and folklore contained in *The Golden Legend*, Giovanmaria derives and elaborates upon the story of the exaltation of the Holy Cross to create contemporary, that is Renaissance, Medici parallels in both function and imagery.² In pre-Baroque times

¹ Written in 1589 and printed in 1592.

² Biancamaria Brumana, "Spettacoli Fiorentini Del Cinquecento: 'L'esaltazione Della Croce' Di Giovanmaria Cecchi e Le Musiche per i Suoi Intermed," in *Catalogo Della Mostra Bibliografica* (Montepulciano: Società Bibliografica Toscana, 2023), 74; Laura A. Lucci and Paul J. Stoesser, "'On the Horizon Appeared from Tuscany a New Light': Mythology and the Medici in Cecchi's *L'esaltazione della croce*," conference presentation delivered at the MLA Annual Convention, online and in Toronto, Ontario, January 10, 2021.

when much theatre production emerged from a medieval-Renaissance hybridization, the 1589 production of *L'esaltazione della croce*, as reported by Baccio, specifically involves the application of reinterpreted classical norms in conjunction with current developments in staging to realize these parallels with the Florentine ruling family, which by extension, demonstrate how art and artistic patronage, functioning as tools of pedagogy and propaganda, also act as enduring expressions of corporate solidarity.³ Both the playwright Giovanmaria Cecchi and his son Baccio were *fratelli* in La Compagnia di San Giovanni Evangelista, from whom late in his life, the elder Cecchi had been commissioned to compose the drama and *intermedi*.

Baccio's treatise on the production, while not an altogether unknown work, until this writing, has been largely overlooked by scholarly consideration.⁴ Our investigation and commentary demonstrates the significance and importance of this unusual document, which is a scarce example of a contemporary, first-hand account and analytical work of Renaissance theatre production. While an object of confounding complexity in both its historical and contemporaneous contexts, the *Descrizione* is on the one hand, an artifact, on the other, a production casebook.⁵ The resulting spectrum of interpretative possibilities necessitates comprehensive archival investigation, while at the same time, invites speculation on the how-to manner of the practical descriptions of the actual production. Additionally, the *Descrizione* is useful in parsing some of the reasoning for the inclusion of the production of *L'esaltazione della croce* at this particular time. However, with these opportune temptations come a caution that "the pleasure of archive work includes experiences that, we are warned, may enchant us."⁶ Mindful of the myriad avenues of investigation regarding the *Descrizione*, Gale and Featherstone's caution to the researcher against investing themselves too deeply in the charm of the archive, however exciting the enterprise is or privileged the position both the labor and its laborer occupy, is as valid for practical investigations as it is for the archival.⁷ Any researcher is well advised by this general admonition. Given the breadth and depth of investigative potential afforded by the *Descrizione*, it is indeed particularly appropriate.

³ Lucci and Stoesser, "'On the Horizon Appeared from Tuscany a New Light.'"

⁴ With one recent exception, a conference proceeding in Italian, concerning the music of the *intermedi*. See Brumana, "Spettacoli fiorentini del Cinquecento," 73-84.

⁵ Although contemporary copies of the *Descrizione* are available in archives, for convenience of use and accessibility, we have relied on Baccio Cecchi, "Descrizione dell'apparato e degl' intermedi," in *Sacre Rappresentazioni Dei Secoli XVI, XV e XVI*, ed. Alessandro D' Ancona (Firenze: Successori Le Monnier, 1872), 121-38.

⁶ Ann Featherstone and Maggie B. Gale, "The Imperative of the Archive: Creative Archive Research," in *Research Methods in Theatre and Performance*, ed. Baz Kershaw and Helen Nicholson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 20.

⁷ Featherstone and Gale, "The Imperative of the Archive," 20.

Furthermore, while the document is undoubtedly archival, Baccio's commemoration of his own liveness – his presence within the space and time of the performance – speaks directly to repertoire. In recording these impressions, particularly those pertaining to the decoration of the theatre space and structure, Baccio both creates a precise record of the appearance of the theatre as well as preserves how it was intended to prepare the audience for what they were about to witness, and attests to the success of the endeavor. Even in its materiality and its longevity, the *Descrizione* is itself a signal of ephemerality. Beyond its wealth of technical information, the production, of which otherwise there are exceedingly limited traces, straddles medieval and Renaissance performance idioms. At its most superficial level, it is a description of the temporary theatre built for the production of Giovanmaria Cecchi's *L'esaltazione della croce* and an account of the six *intermedi* that were written to punctuate the five acts of the primary drama, as well as prefacing and closing the production. Dazzling, biblically inspired *intermedi*, each a tour de force realized with the latest in Renaissance scenic innovation, counterpoint the primary drama. Overall, the production was fit for a king, or, in our case, a Grand Duke. Complete with its *intermedi*, *L'esaltazione* was presented in honor of Ferdinand I de' Medici and his bride, Christine of Lorraine, on the occasion of their 1589 wedding.⁸

The dearth of contemporary information about the production of *L'esaltazione* stands in stark relief against the painstaking records of the wedding celebrations as a whole. Unlike the layers of archival and scholarly work around the wedding or about Giovanmaria Cecchi as a playwright and Medici devotee, there is a pronounced void. James Saslow cannot precisely date the performance and Konrad Eisenbichler suggests, in his cursory examination of the *Descrizione*, that the scale and intricacy of this confraternity performance is an exception because *sacre rappresentazioni* were

⁸ The immediate face-value, political as well as economic, importance of this marriage is easily understandable. A further expansion of the significance of the marriage outside the specific scope of this paper's argument regards its pan-European impact. In the middle of the Counter Reformation, this importance cannot be minimized since the nuptials occur a mere seven years following the notorious St. Bartholomew Day in which Christine's grandmother — the French queen, Catherine de' Medici — was implicated in the foment leading to the religiously motivated atrocities. Accordingly, the marriage is a religious, that is, Catholic closing of the ranks and an overt act of continental consolidation. Notwithstanding Catherine's death short months before the wedding, this union — a dynastic reinforcement of familial bonds — was sanctioned, condoned, endorsed, and encouraged equally by pervasive Medici influences in Rome as in Paris. Mindful of these historical considerations, the themes and imagery employed in the play script and production are both apt and obvious. See Lucci and Stoesser, "'On the Horizon Appeared from Tuscany a New Light,'" citing Konrad Eisenbichler, "Spazi e luoghi nel teatro Fiorentino del Cinquecento: Giovan Maria Cecchi," *Yearbook of Italian Studies* (1987): 51–62.

typically presented under more modest conditions.⁹ Anna Evangelista offers a short overview of the limited records related to the producing confraternity held in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze.¹⁰ Yet, Evangelista's treatment of the *Descrizione* is narrow in scope, arguing that it is of "extreme interest" insofar as it constitutes an "exact reconstruction of the set-up."¹¹ These accounts notwithstanding, further examination of archival records held in various Florentine repositories will be necessary to create a more complete understanding of the Cecchi production. Which is another way of saying that a fuller understanding of the "liveness" of the *L'esaltazione* performance is contingent upon a much more in-depth exploration of Medici records, as well as those of related confraternities among others.

The 1589 production of *L'esaltazione* stands, then, as something of an outlier. That this production is largely overlooked in the scholarship and seemingly without corresponding documentation to trace its production history, this performative quality becomes muted. Unlike its counterpart Girolamo Bargagli's *La Pellegrina* (produced at the Medici Theatre in the Uffizi and mounted for the wedding as well), *L'esaltazione's* records are sparse, perhaps because *La Pellegrina* represents a superlative example of 16th-century theatrical arts. Overseen by Bernardo Buontalenti, master of Renaissance scenic spectacle and architect of the Medici Theatre, he was also the production manager responsible for the multiple and various presentational features of the wedding festivities. The *intermedi* of *La Pellegrina*, in addition to their own dazzling scenography, are some of the most influential precursors to opera, a form that would emerge less than a decade later with Jacopo Peri's *La Dafne* (1598) and *L'Euridice* (1600), both staged in Florence. Generally, our present understanding of the form and substance of the 1589 wedding is largely the result of the Medici family's "compulsive record keeping."¹² Saslow details the political and economic underpinnings of this union, the triumphal arches and ceremonial entries that marked Christine as being "of" Florence, and the public performances and sporting events which engaged all levels of the Florentine citizenry.

At this juncture, Baccio's *Descrizione* troubles and is troubled by the archive/repertoire paradigm. It is in the archive that repertoire's characteristic resistance to capture and containment, that this fundamentally ephemeral knowledge

⁹ James M. Saslow, "May 1589: The Wedding As/In Performance," in *The Medici Wedding of 1589: Florentine Festival as Theatrum Mundi* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 171. Eisenbichler, 59.

¹⁰ Anna Evangelista, "L'attività spettacolare della compagnia Di San Giovanni Evangelista Nel Cinquecento," *Medioevo e Rinascimento* 18, no. 15 (2004): 354–59.

¹¹ Evangelista, "L'attività spettacolare," 357. Translation by Laura A. Lucci.

¹² Saslow, "Introduction," 3.

may become separated from the knower across both time and space.¹³ The *Descrizione*'s polarity of possibilities, and all that lies between, attracts scrutiny across history, theory, and practice, possessing a plethora of details – including stagecraft as well as statecraft – between the extremes of historical record and practical procedure. Diana Taylor defines the archival as memory which “exists as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change,” and the repertoire as “[enacting] embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing — in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge.”¹⁴

Yet, some artifacts seem to reside within the space between the titular poles of Taylor's study, such that they resist both the stability of the archive as well as the ephemerality of the repertoire. The *Descrizione*, both enchanting and infuriating, is one of them. The epistemological dimension of the performance and the *Descrizione* itself are both predicated on performer/audience co-presence. If, according to Taylor, performances travel, but are also always “in situ: intelligible in the framework of the immediate environment and issues surrounding them,” then the *Descrizione* is an attempt to demonstrate the comprehensibility of the performance and the playscript in its historical moment.¹⁵ The dimensions of this theatrical performance extend beyond the embodied work of the players to the physical setting of the theatre space and the technical requirements of the scenic effects. This is not to say that the document exists as repertoire – its stability precludes that. But, as a representation of Baccio's co-presence in the theatre, his impressions, and his knowledge received from the space and performance, it exceeds the limits of the archive.

Baccio's *Descrizione* of the production of his father Giovanmaria's play resists simple interpretation insofar as it calls attention to the tension between Taylor's stable archive and ephemeral repertoire. Taylor's framework places these two concepts in constant interaction and she notes, with some consternation, the degree to which the ostensible permanence of the archive elides the ephemeral, embodied knowledge that is emblematic of the repertoire.¹⁶ The repertoire, in its ephemerality and nonreproducibility, locates in embodied practices — that is, performance “vital acts of transfer” and “ways of knowing” that transmit necessary social and civic knowledge and shape identity and culture.¹⁷ The “liveness” of the repertoire “exceeds the

¹³ Diana Taylor, “Acts of Transfer,” in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

¹⁴ Taylor, “Acts of Transfer,” 19.

¹⁵ Taylor, “Acts of Transfer,” 3.

¹⁶ Taylor, “Acts of Transfer,” 21.

¹⁷ Taylor, “Acts of Transfer,” 2-3.

archive's ability to capture it."¹⁸ Baccio Cecchi's *Descrizione* does attempt to preserve in great detail the physical character of the space – its dimensions, colors, materials, and style of decoration. In this way, it is very much an archival document in a doubled sense: as an imprint, it is preserved by and can be accessed in an archive, as well as in the sense that Baccio's record is itself an act of preservation.

Still, the archives do not archive themselves, and the *Descrizione* ventures into the realm of repertoire in several key ways. Archives are themselves non-neutral. They imply decisions about what is kept, cataloged, accessed, and reassessed. The *Descrizione* is much more than what it appears to be, preserving not just what the theatre and the *intermedi* looked like, but invoking the "vital acts of transfer," which constitute Taylor's repertoire. By communicating what knowledge — political, religious, and civic — that this event was intended to enact, Baccio's *Descrizione* is not only an item housed in an archive, but an archive itself, making it both an archived object as well as an archive in its own right. It likewise invokes the repertoire by way of the necessary co-presence between the observer/archivist/knower and the knowledge that is being embodied and transmitted. And so, the document, in every reading, takes on a performative quality that attempts to revive the didactic quality of the production and the theatre. In this way, the document exists in tension between the archive and repertoire. Baccio's written record of the theatre and the *intermedi* is significant because it is more than a straightforward technical account of the building's scale and appearance or the production's scenic effects. These are, naturally, of interest, but the document itself is a recollection of Baccio's particular impressions of the performance of the *intermedi* and what meanings are embedded in the production including how these aspects were reinforced by the physical theatre space. Any act of preservation and record keeping speaks to the tendency to archive.¹⁹

Central to this tension is the requirement to imagine. A succinct example of the push-pull pressure between archive and repertoire is found in Baccio's account of the Second *Intermedio* which, taking the Exodus as its source, is imbued with the tension of a performance report of columns of fire leading the way to be gradually dispersed and replaced by a cooling cloud. No small scenic matter, and yet in the document itself, we are challenged by the record to (re-) imagine in its mere possibility, the "miraculous" achievement of such an effect.²⁰

Elsewhere Baccio refers to "apparatus," including a red awning or tent, in which coats of arms of the Medici and the House of Lorraine were centered. This was in turn

¹⁸ Taylor, "Acts of Transfer," 20–21.

¹⁹ Baccio does not refer to himself directly in the *Descrizione*, instead speaking of himself in the third person, and directing praise by name to his father Giovanmaria Cecchi and others actually involved in the production.

²⁰ Cecchi, "Descrizione dell'apparato e degl' intermedi," 128.

encircled, at least in part, by a Doric-order frieze that terminated on one side with the seal of the Cardinal and Archbishop of Florence (Alessandro Ottaviano de' Medici, later Pope Leo XI), which was a variation of the Medici family seal and on the other with the Seal of the Medici Family proper. Baccio's description of the theatre's decoration is the primary and most significant act of transfer contained in the *Descrizione*. Baccio's attention to these details recalls for the reader a key aspect of the production – that this *sacre rappresentazione* was made as much for the glory of the Medici as it was for the glory of God. Baccio describes the frieze as representing the Cross in three states: as a gallows, as a relic, and as a reward, with “the furthest at its most base, in the middle, its exaltation, and immediately above the stage, its glorification, in this order.”²¹ Baccio's recollection communicates to the reader that the theatre itself was meant to instruct the audience how to encounter the performance, presenting them with a multiplicity of meanings of the Cross in advance of the beginning of the performance. The images that Baccio describes for the readers clearly make these meanings not only eternal and co-present with each other, but also with Medici power, and in so doing, roots this particular production in a specific moment in history that cannot be reproduced even with the most meticulous historical record.

This irreproducibility is, naturally, true of all theatre. That is the nature of the form. Even video recording loses fidelity in the decisions of where to focus the camera angle and where to make cuts or splice different recordings of the same show. The form is ephemeral and co-created, in its most fundamental configuration, between the performers and the audience members. The *Descrizione* is therefore unique in that it aims to capture the indebtedness of the production to this particular historical moment and to keep animate the knowledge that is otherwise ephemeral. Baccio continues this effort as he turns his attention to the *intermedi*. The *intermedi*, intertwined as they are with the primary drama, likewise adopt a position of continuity between the Church and the Medici as protectors of the faith that is co-present and eternal. Baccio's description of the *intermedi* themselves extend these acts of transfer, almost suggesting a precursor to the “thick description,”²² which derive from Baccio's contextualizations. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the sixth and final *intermedio*. Whereas the first five *intermedi* presented Old Testament narratives and the main drama represented the turmoil of the early church, this final *intermedio* offers a vision of the Church Triumphant, showing the founding and spread of religious

²¹ Cecchi, “Descrizione dell'apparato e degl' intermedi,” 121. All translations from the *Descrizione* are by Laura A. Lucci.

²² In the sense of Clifford Geertz, building upon the work of Gilbert Ryle. Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, (Reprint, New York, NY: Basic Books, 2009), 3–30; Gilbert Ryle, “The Thinking of Thoughts: What Is ‘Le Penseur’ Doing? (1968),” in *Collected Papers 2* (London: Hutchinson, 1971), 480–96.

orders throughout the world. Religion²³ — specifically, an allegorical portrayal of Roman Catholicism — descends from the heavens, seated within a red cloth pavilion on “a most bright cloud [...] dressed in a habit white and pure, full of majesty, with the crown of the Most High Pontiff on her head and two crossed keys, one of gold and the other of silver.”²⁴ At the sight of the splendid, jewel-encrusted cross Religion holds in her hand, all the knights and religious assemblages kneel in adulation, and angels sing. Altogether, the space and production reinforces a cosmological vision in which all places, times, and things are united under a divine plan and that the present proliferation of the faith is timeless in continuity between both the ancient world and the future one. This production of Giovanmaria Cecchi’s *L’esaltazione* is a cohesive vision of Christianity, as well as of Florence and the Medici’s place in the preservation and advancement of the Faith.

In short, we contend that Baccio’s *Descrizione* is simultaneously indebted to its “knower,” as much as it is to its interpreters. In wrestling with the archive, we necessarily rejuvenate it. In this *Descrizione*, there is a unique opportunity, as it confronts us not just with the absence of what once was, but with the traces of human intervention that nonetheless operate on both facets of the archive/repertoire framework. Predicated as it is on the individual’s presence in the space and their involvement in the production part of the wedding, the *Descrizione* itself functions as an act of transfer, collapsing the push-pull of the archive/repertoire framework. Taylor’s paradigm holds that performances are, as previously noted, “always in situ” and consequently resistant to capture.²⁵ The value of the repertoire is affirmed in the “doing,” that is, in the action. The efficaciousness of performance is the conduit through which vital, unique information passes.

Yet, the archive, in its non-neutrality, is something to be acted upon and with. Baccio’s *Descrizione*, especially when paired with the elder Cecchi’s drama, invites us to (re)situate this production. Not in space — the location of the temporary theatre remains unclear — nor in time — there is no definitive date in the available records or the scholarship — but within the networks that made this production possible in its moment and are still intelligible over four centuries later. Baccio’s *Descrizione* functions at times as both archive — in its attempts to preserve, to fix, the visual characteristic of the production — as well as repertoire, insofar as it engenders in the reader the vital

²³ Lynnette Muir contends this is the Pope, in spite of Baccio’s description suggesting a much more allegorical presentation of Mother Church. Lynnette R. Muir, “The exaltation of the Holy Cross,” in *Love and Conflict in Medieval Drama: The Plays and Their Legacy* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 161.

²⁴ Cecchi, *Descrizione*, 138.

²⁵ Taylor, “Acts of Transfer,” citing Peggy Phelan, 3-5.

political, social, and spiritual knowledge embedded in the event.²⁶ Baccio's *Descrizione* at once confronts us with the expansive possibilities of the archive/repertoire framework and simultaneously singularizes it in its attempts to preserve and (re)enact what has passed, standing as a uniquely enchanting, and equally unruly, artifact in its invitation to (re)member that which first appears to us as dismembered from its time, place, and larger historical record.

²⁶ To the degree that the *Descrizione* attempts to do something, we may even call it "performative" in its demand that we attend to the confraternal, political, religious, and economic contexts from which the production is otherwise divorced. J.L. Austin, "Performative Utterances," in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al (New York: WW Norton & Co., Inc, 2001), 1432–33.

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