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Life Interpretations

Museum Theatre in England

Der Autor geht davon aus, dass Theater im Museum den Exponaten Leben verleihen kann. Er berichtet aus Großbritannien, wo ein an die Zwecke einer Ausstellung angepasstes MuseumsTheater seit einigen Jahren zum Standardrepertoire avanciert ist. Er stellt verschiedene Arten des MuseumsTheaters im Spannungsfeld zwischen Ausstellungszweck und Darbietung vor.

I hope that we are all in agreement with the statement that live interpretation (or museum theatre) really can bring museum collections and historic sites to life, and involve the public interactively, and thus more memorably, with their learning experience. In fact, in the UK perhaps five years ago that was the stage which we had reached: that any form of live interpretation was necessarily a good thing, because, after all, it was live interpretation. Today we have moved on a considerable amount. And we are offering live interpretation solutions, to quote Chris Ford, according to the criterion of »fitness for purpose«. Let me explain: In order to work, the use of the technique needs to be rooted in the mission of your institution, or the perceived objective of a particular exhibition or event. In this way live interpretation becomes meaningful and valuable – and not a frivolous, »additional extra«, adopted simply as the »flavour of the month«.

So what do I mean by live interpretation? It is a serie of techniques for engaging visitors in the collections and associated sub-

ject matter of museums, galleries and historic sites – and thereby enhancing their knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of them, through the medium of a live human being. Live interpretation itself forms a very broad spectrum. It encompasses lectures, guided tours (whether in or out of costume) and the demonstration of skills and processes by craftsmen such as blacksmiths, typesetters and so on. In short, it needn't be »theatrical« at all.

So let's take a run through some different approaches that are to be found in the UK at present. At some sites, you will find interpreters in costume, able to talk about the past and what people used to do, without a specifically theatrical structure to the interaction – examples include *Beamish*. Elsewhere scripted pieces are performed directly on the galleries (such as by *Platform 4 Theatre* at the *National Railway Museum*, York) or in separate dedicated performance spaces (some of the work of the *Museum of the Moving Image* and *Spectrum Theatre Company* at the *National Museum of Science* for example). In these cases – audiences are aware that there is a performance and of its length, while the performances have a beginning, middle and end.

Another technique involves preparation by school-children for a visit – their experience then involves a deep immersion with several hours in role – this approach is adopted by Clark Hall, Wakefield and the *Bradford Industrial Museum*.

Another form of live interpretation that is popular in terms of spectacle is that of large scale historic re-enactment – perhaps of a Viking battle, as is staged by *Regia Angelorum* in York.

Individual interpreters are often deployed on museum galleries to interact directly with visitors. At the *Museum of the Moving Image* – the actors were first person interpreters, characters who live in the time period they represented and knew nothing beyond that. A visitor would encounter six actors on traversing the museum, ranging from a Victorian magic lanternist to a 1940s cinema commissionaire and usherette. Interactions were unscripted but based on extensive research into the collections, social and film history. Solo interpreters may also work in the third person style, as is utilised by Past Pleasures, at the Tower of London for example.

There are a wide a variety of companies, and approaches, and those mentioned above form just a tiny sample of what is going on. But what is important to recognise is that these approaches set out to deliver different experiences, to match different objectives. The deep immersion technique of Clark Hall, for example, is particular-

ly aimed at schoolchildren, who have had ample opportunity to prepare for the experience, and would not be appropriate for a »drop-in« visitor.

The large-scale re-enactment provides a sense of spectacle, perhaps similar to spectating at a major sporting event, but doesn't allow for visitor participation or the opportunity to ask direct questions.

At one point the live interpretation community was fraught with tension and in-fighting. Which was the way to do it? First person or third person interpretation? Scripted plays where content could be controlled and checked or improvisation? Could you use performers at all? Would they be rigorous enough – or could you only depend on academics and historians? But did they have the necessary performance skills? Were performance skills necessary? Etc, etc.

At last, live interpretation has come of age. As I said at the outset, it is now recognised that there are a wide variety of techniques and their suitability can depend on a number of things – the perceived learning objective, the nature of the collection, the character of the space itself, the composition of the likely audience.

So in presenting best practice as live interpreters we need to address what objectives are to be attained by using live interpretation. Is it to present a self-contained performance highlighting issues to an audience who will leave the performance entertained and enlightened? Will the audience have the chance to ask questions? Should there be some form of direct interaction between the performers and the public? Is the purpose of this interaction to supply information? All of these questions will need to be answered and will influence not only the choice of interpretative methods, but the degree and style of preparation required.

The one characteristic that all forms of live interpretation have in common is their flexibility. Unlike a text panel, that becomes effectively »set in stone« when put in place, or a computer interactive, whose flexibility is similarly fixed by its operating program, live interpreters are uniquely flexible. They can change gear – alter the style of their presentation, depending on who they happen to be addressing. They can vary the content of their information in line with the visitor's interests and agenda. If a change of approach is required curatorially, then this can easily be fed through the interpreters.

The other main characteristic of all forms of live interpretation is the simple fact that they use live performers to tell *stories*. This is

what fascinates visitors and makes museum collections relevant to them. What a visitor seeks to do when they visit a museum is, arguably, to expand their understanding, knowledge or experience – and in order for them to be able to do this they need to be able to place the museum collection within a human context. The most common questions I was asked as a gallery actor at *MoMI* were: »How much did this cost?« »Could everyone afford to do this?« or variations of those themes. Questions very much rooted in human experience.

The way a visitor seeks to make sense of an artefact is by looking at its impact and significance on human experience and understanding. So that if the collection is effectively the »hardware« – be it film cameras or aeroplane engines, the role of the live interpreters is not only to interpret the characteristics of the objects but to supply the human stories, the »software« of history if you like, that makes sense of the objects by giving them context and purpose and explaining what effect they had on people.

So, live interpretation is an established series of techniques, ranging from one-on-one interactions to large scale re-enactments. The selection of a particular mode of live interpretation should be decided by reference to your own collection, site, mission statement, philosophy and desired objective or learning outcome.

Live interpretation may be the flavour of the month, but if you make an informed choice about it, and use it wisely, it will still taste good for many years to come.