

# PERFORMANCE, LEARNING & HERITAGE



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July 2005 - November 2008



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

November 2008



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***Performance, Learning and Heritage***

**Research Report 2008**

**Executive Summary**

This document summarises the contents of the Full Report, available at <http://www.plh.manchester.ac.uk/> ; also available in C D-Rom format together with an illustrative DVD. See project website for details.

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#### ***Why this research?***

The field known generically as ‘museum theatre’ has grown considerably during the past two decades. Its use is sometimes contentious and its practice worldwide almost as diverse as the sites in which it takes place – but it has been notably under-researched.

In putting the learner – the visitor – at the centre of the experience of learning, rather than simply placing information in front of them, museums have been part of a larger move in cultural institutions to ensure that visitors are not just ‘targeted’ but are considered participants in the process. Using drama to engage potential learners has been embraced by many museum/heritage site learning officers and community engagement personnel as a valuable tool in their repertoire of strategies for offering varied and stimulating ‘ways in’ to the subject matter.

Theories of learning have recently advanced our understanding of how, and in what forms, learning in museums takes place – but although evaluation of individual learning programmes is now standard practice in most museum/heritage sites, relatively little has been published on how performance contributes to that learning.

There was clearly a need for sustained, independent and practical research into the benefits (or otherwise) of on-site, theatre-based, informal learning activities at museums and heritage sites. The Centre for Applied Theatre Research, in collaboration with the Centre for Museology, at the University of Manchester, took up the challenge, under the leadership of Professor Tony Jackson, and the Performance, Learning and Heritage (PLH) research project developed.

The PLH project ran from July 2005 to November 2008, funded by an award of £280,213 from the Arts & Humanities Research Council (UK). It built on the shoulders of earlier research, which had looked (in Phase One) at the experience of a single school at one site, and (in Phase Two) at two museums and eight schools. This final phase now broadened the remit in timescale and in groups and sites targeted. Over a three-and-a-half year period, we found it possible, and valuable, to investigate the longer-term impact of theatre-based learning not just on school groups but also on family learners and older learners, and not just at museums but also at historic sites.

Even in three years, we could not cover everything – just four case studies cannot claim to be fully representative of the whole spectrum of the field. But the *range* of work investigated is clear, as is the variety of types of audience researched. This, together with the longitudinal nature of the study, offers some unique and productive insights into the practice, its impact and its potential. We hope the field as a whole – museum educators, directors, curators, performance practitioners, public historians and academics in both performance and museum and heritage studies – will find our conclusions useful and thought-provoking. We hope too that the findings may provide a basis for further development and enhancement, and perhaps expansion, of the repertoire of interpretive and educative strategies available to museums and heritage sites.

### **What was our subject?**

**Museum theatre** is broadly defined as: *‘the use of theatre and theatrical techniques as a means of mediating knowledge and understanding in the context of museum education’* (Jackson & Rees Leahy 2005: 304). We extended the research to include performances presented by professional actors and/or interpreters not only in museums but also at historic sites. Performances can be designed to achieve focused learning objectives (for example for the specific curriculum needs of visiting schoolchildren), or the wider learning and enjoyment of family groups or independent visitors – or all three. They can be used to serve particularly well the generic learning and social outcomes advocated by the Museums, Libraries & Archives Council. And they can be used to further the development of ‘museum as forum’, so that active engagement and participation become central to the learner’s experience.

We use the term **‘performance’** in this research to encompass the whole range of dramatic performances given in museums or historic sites that involve actors in role, generally in costume, performing short plays, monologues, ‘first person’ interpretation or ‘living history’. These latter are generally events where visitors encounter characters purporting to be from the past or another culture, with whom they engage in dialogue – dialogue which will, by its very nature, be unpredictable. All these types of performance operate within a clearly understood frame – the game of ‘let’s pretend’ played by the audience as well as the actors/interpreters – a game which has an element of ‘performance’ in itself. When an event involves the participation of visitors and their interaction with the interpreters, that element of ‘visitor performance’ increases further.

## ***What were the aims?***

The project set out to:

- map the extent, style and functions of performance as a learning medium in museums and historic sites throughout the UK and abroad
- observe, document and analyse a variety of performance styles in relation to their site-specific contexts, from 'first person' interpretation to complete plays
- encompass the experience of independent adult visitors and families as well as organised educational groups
- conduct longitudinal audience/visitor research to gauge effectiveness and impact over the longer term
- initiate – and develop methods of assessing – innovative practice, and
- facilitate the wider exchange of ideas and practice in museum performance between scholars and practitioners through a dedicated website, a searchable database, a number of seminars and an international conference.

## ***What were the outcomes?***

Research outcomes from the project include:

- an **international conference** in Manchester in Spring 2008, together with various conference presentations in the UK and abroad
- a **searchable database** of global practice – an ongoing endeavour, available at: [www.manchester.ac.uk/plh](http://www.manchester.ac.uk/plh)
- the **project report**, together with a **DVD** containing edited highlights both of the four case study performances and keynotes from the conference.
- **publications** – journal articles and an edited book, *Performing Heritage: research and practice*, to be published by Manchester University Press in 2009

## ***How was the research undertaken?***

The project involved the study of four distinct performance events at one heritage site and three museums. We employed a mixed-method approach to collecting both qualitative and quantitative data about sites, collections, performance activity and audiences. We were interested in how the *experiences* of groups and individuals (visitors to sites), and of performers and museum personnel can and should inform future practice.

We gathered extensive data using observation, interview, focus groups, questionnaires, video and stills recording. We took a longitudinal approach: sites and visitor groups were observed, interviewed and re-visited over a 12 month period, to test perception, engagement, recall, and learning outcomes. We also took an experimental approach, developing our fourth case study at Manchester Museum to answer some of the issues thrown up by the first three case studies. The research was complemented by a broader mapping of developments in museum theatre practice in the UK and abroad, the results of which are published in our database. (The database is ongoing and will continue to expand

as further data comes in; it is intended to continue it as a 'live' resource until at least September 2010.)

Although it was based in a university drama department which has a strong profile in the field of 'applied theatre', the research approach has been interdisciplinary, moving between museum studies and drama and performance studies. It drew its inspiration from close collaboration between research team, partner museums and heritage organisations, theatre companies and individual performers: our thanks go to all these contributors.

We analysed the data under four main headings:

*Understanding the site:* What is the site and its mission and interpretive aims? How is it used as a backdrop to, and a space for, the performance?

*Understanding the audience:* Who are they? How do they experience the performance and relate to it? How and at what point do they 'engage' with it?

*Understanding the content:* What is the subject matter, and what is its relationship to the surrounding collections/site? What meanings and levels of meanings are the audience drawing from it?

*Understanding the performance:* Who are the characters, what use is made of costume and artefacts, exits and entrances, first person interpretation, and single character or multi-character interaction? How are the audience 'inducted' into the performance? What part do such elements as storytelling, surprise, empathy and conventional plot structure (the 'dramatic arc') play in the process?

## **Where were the study sites?**

### ***Case study 1: The National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.***

The National Maritime Museum (NMM) in Greenwich, London, holds the largest collection of British maritime exhibits anywhere in the world - over 2 million objects and texts. As well as displaying collections in 45 galleries, it has for some ten years run actor-interpreter programmes, usually single-person, 'in character' monologue presentations. Our case study examined four such presentations which had been designed to coincide with a major 'Nelson & Napoleon' exhibition. Our particular focus was on *The Gunner's Tale* and *The Pensioner's Tale*, but all four illustrated different aspects of what it was like to be alive at the time of the Battle of Trafalgar. The pieces were written by, or in close collaboration with, the actors bought-in from professional interpretation companies, and were presented in various locations in the museum.

### ***Case study 2: Llancaiach Fawr Manor, South Wales***

Llancaiach Fawr is a Stuart-era domestic property (originally built in the medieval period), dressed as in 1645. The interpretation strategy immerses visitors in the 'normal', everyday life of the Manor's servants – played by in-role costumed interpreters - as they go about their duties. It encourages visitors to explore, through questioning, conversation and

artefacts, what life was like for the servants and the (absent) family, during the Civil War. Visitors are school groups (20,000 children annually), other large visitor groups, and independent visitors.

The team chose Llancaiach in order to include one instance where the site itself becomes an integral, and central, part of the visitor experience: once you enter the Manor, you are 'in' 1645, and must 'buy in' to the idea that you are, for a short while, part of a different era, where the people with whom you interact may not appear to understand your 21<sup>st</sup> century assumptions and vocabulary and will expect you to behave differently.

### **Case study 3: The Triangle Theatre Company at the Herbert Art Gallery & Museum, Coventry**

The Herbert is a large, regional museum with a resident company, Triangle Theatre. The case study followed Triangle's performance of the *Pollard Trail*, a five-hour experience which took visitors from the company's temporary base in the Hillfields area, picking up (and losing) people along the way, along a structured 'living history' trail of selected sites in Coventry. It explored the life of Chico the Clown, otherwise known as Irving Pollard (1898-1975), who lived in Coventry. The Museum houses a collection of Pollard ephemera.

Triangle's work at the Museum, including the 'Chico Talks' project, seeks (amongst other things) to provide something of an institutional critique, and is playful in exploring what museums, collections, and performance might 'mean'. Although the structure of the trail and key moments were fixed, much was improvised on a daily basis, and the event was always experimental and often challenging. Audiences were varied in composition and recruitment, and consisted of local Hillfields residents, many of whom were from the Kurdish community through whose area the tour passed, teenage participants (participants in the Chico project who helped shape the original tour), and paying members of the public.

### **Case study 4: The Manchester Museum**

The Museum is part of the University of Manchester and dedicated to research and innovation alongside its role as a major regional museum. As the last of our detailed case studies, this was an opportunity to both test and build upon findings from previous sites/audiences. We commissioned a performance, *This Accursed Thing*, to link into and expand the Museum's 'Revealing Histories: Remembering Slavery' programme.

*This Accursed Thing* was a promenade performance through exhibition spaces spanning the history of the abolition of slavery, using artefacts along the way and exploring this complex and difficult subject in depth. Two actors played a total of six characters, from slave traders to a present-day curator, and also undertook an out-of-character introduction and 'debrief'. Whereas *The Pollard Trail* relied heavily on improvisation and changed daily, this performance was tightly scripted and rehearsed but with specific interactive elements built in. Audiences studied were independent visitors and schools groups.

## Emergent themes

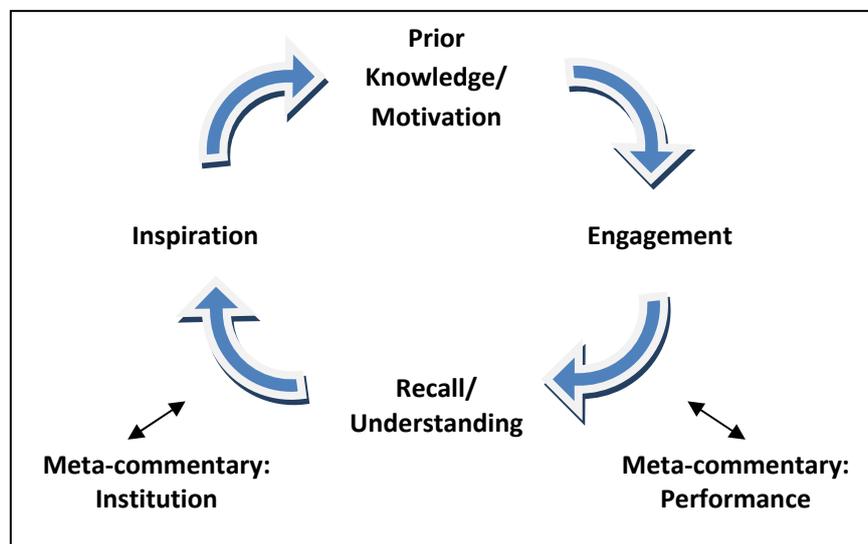
From the process of sifting, analysing and interpreting the vast amount of data gathered from four case study sites, five themes have emerged. These provide an opportunity to reflect *comparatively* on qualities, characteristic features, issues and concerns in museum performance. Although they can only capture a fraction of the documentation, the themes represent not only a productive ‘way in’ to the complex data, but a distillation of topics and issues that have recurred across all the four sites. They are:

- Visitors and audiences
- Performance
- Interactivity and participation
- Learning
- Heritage and authenticity.

Here we touch on some of the key points to emerge under these headings. We look first, however, at understanding the process of audience engagement with a performance, and how the culture, aims, promotion and physical space of each institution affect the response.

### Audience engagement

Audience reaction clearly depends upon the ‘entry narrative’ (Falk 2006) which each person brings to an event – preconceptions and expectations which are shaped by prevailing cultural norms and assumptions, as well as by visitors’ own social and educational background and prior experience. We identified several categories in visitors’ engagement, which form a cycle of response over time. In diagrammatic form they can be represented as follows:



Our research attempted to capture the first reactions, but also through re-interviewing respondents weeks and then many months later, to pick up their longer-term recall and understanding.

It is frequently at the ‘recall’ stage, when an audience member is remembering, making sense of and reinterpreting (‘conceptualising’) their experiences, that we find the most revealing indicators of the values and meanings they have drawn from an event. The opportunity to reflect on the performance and its connections with the rest of the site, and

to reflect with others (via focus group discussion, interviews, etc), was valued by visitors. This reflection enriched their experience of the performance and of the visit as a whole. We argue that, if this opportunity is missing, or insufficiently catered for, then the full richness of the learning experience which performance can generate is likely to remain unfulfilled. The ‘meta-commentaries’ – reflections by visitors on the *making* of the events and critiques of interpretive strategies encountered – also proved extraordinarily rich and illuminating. [See main report, section 4, for fuller details.]

### **The institutional context**

In the attempt to understand how performance is placed within the context of the institution, we refer to the idea of ‘framing’. There are a number of ‘frames’ within which performance activity takes place at museums and heritage sites.

- The **institutional frame**: in any museum or the historic site, this will include the architectural style of the building and its permutation of spaces, the style and focus of the collections, its location (urban, rural, metropolitan, etc), the aims and perceived benefits of holding such performances – and the wider cultural climate within which it operates. It also includes the promotion and marketing of a performance.
- The **performance frame**: that which marks out the event itself *as* theatre, signalling where and how the audience will position itself, and the role (if any) expected of audience members. For example, what is the entry point into the performance area, are there tickets, formal seating, a promenade, a formal stage or a more playful, ‘maverick’ approach?
- The **internal frame**: once the ‘performance’ is underway (or entry into the world of 1645 at Llancaiach Fawr, for example), what devices are used to signal shifts of time, place, character and relationship with the audience, including invitations to interact?

### **Theme 1: Visitors and audiences**

Most visitors to museums or historic sites do not go expressly to see a performance, so their expectations and the choices they make differ fundamentally from those of a conventional theatre audience. How does someone shift from being a general site visitor to an audience member, engaged with a performance? The evidence showed there will usually be ‘**tiers of engagement**’, from those who immediately sign-up to being an audience, and who may volunteer to participate, to some who will resist the process of becoming involved – remaining physically at the back, or holding back from active participation or interaction with the interpreters/actors.

There is also an unwritten ‘**audience contract**’: a moment where a visitor agrees (literally by sitting down, or internally by deciding to join in) to ‘contract-in’ – if you agree to participate, by implication you agree to give licence to the actors (within reason) to take you on their metaphorical (sometimes actual) journey through time and space. Importantly, you can – as and when circumstances permit – opt out of that contract at any time during the performance, or change your level of engagement.

Sites need to consider carefully how they ‘induct’ visitors into this (unwritten) contract, with advance marketing or on-site promotion, with a formal introduction by the actor or neutral facilitator or using other devices. The potential audience will not *necessarily* be aware of, or understand, the conventions being deployed; some will be wary until they gain some reassurance of exactly what they are letting themselves in for. Conventions will

often have to be introduced and negotiated as the performance progresses. This is not to minimise the value and power of surprise, challenge, even confrontation, where the subject-matter and dramatic approach demand it – and audiences will usually respond positively when it is handled skilfully and they can, sooner or later, see the point of it. The need to challenge is often a key part of the aim of the piece *but* it has to be balanced against the counter-productive risks of embarrassing, confusing, de-motivating, even angering, the visitor who has not yet agreed to ‘buy in’ to the process.

The research showed the importance of an element of ‘**un-settlement**’ - a notion coined by the team. It indicates a frequently articulated experience of respondents: that of having their expectations overturned, assumptions about the subject-matter challenged, of finding that they were personally being confronted with strong emotion or expected to participate verbally or even physically. Such ‘un-settlement’ may often be positive and stimulating, but it can on occasion, for some, also be negative: finding oneself trapped inside an event that you don’t enjoy. Strong feelings remain long after the event. Sites and performers therefore need to handle this important aspect with skill and sensitivity.

### **Theme 2: Performance**

Performance emerged as an important tool in unlocking the ‘**unheard**’ stories linked with events in the past or with museum collections and historic buildings. This could be the small, day-to-day details of how life was lived – powerfully conveyed in the National Maritime Museum’s monologues and the Llancaiach Fawr living history. Or it could be the stories of elements of society ignored by traditional histories – the slaves or the voices of the traders in *This Accursed Thing*, or engaging with the present day immigrant communities in Coventry.

The ‘eventness’ – the **sense of occasion and immediacy** of performance – also has a powerful impact on audiences. The realness, the closeness to and interaction with the actors, and the sense of going on a journey are often positively commented on. Many respondents enjoyed the movement across time and place that occurs and the chance to take on a partnership with the actors which allowed them momentarily to step out of the present day. All this regularly aids respondents’ recall. The crossing of boundaries between time periods risks confusion, however, especially among school children, and therefore, again, requires a high level of skill in the performers and careful ‘framing’ by the museum or site.

The evidence clearly shows that relating to a particular **character** brings the history alive and helps audiences to connect very personally to it, perhaps in a way they did not expect – some recall a very emotional response. People often remember the *experience* of the performance more vividly than the factual content, but that itself can be a useful motivator to find out more at a later stage. We also identified an ‘empathy paradox’, where people develop such a strong sense of empathy with a particular character that they can lose sight of the bigger picture: the larger historical context. Neither sites nor performers can legislate against this, but they have to work to ensure that relevant facts and contexts are embedded within rather than lost in the story, and that alternative perspectives (and voices) are included. The ‘disrupted narrative’ can be a valuable element in the performative repertoire.

It is worth noting that many people valued the **technical and artistic aspects** of the performance – the acting skills and switching of voices, the level of research that goes into

a full first-person interpretive role, and the staging. This all added to the excitement of encountering a performance and made their visit to a site more memorable.

### **Theme 3: Interactivity and participation**

Participation can take place on a number of different levels. For example, a promenade performance requires physically active involvement; first and third person interpretation usually require verbal co-operation between both audience and performer; and even fully-scripted gallery performances often provoke verbal responses from their audience.

People frequently articulated their experiences of our case study performances in language that had a strong bias to ‘doing and feeling’. Many clearly enjoyed the experience of being ‘inside’ a performance rather than a passive observer – for many, the **interactivity was integral to their enjoyment**. One important point: adults generally enjoyed it as much as children. There was an assumption on the part of many visitors that performance and ‘joining-in’ events are provided primarily for schools or family groups – perhaps the way events are marketed to independent visitors is at fault here – but, sometimes to their surprise, **adults expressed as much enthusiasm** as younger people.

With any interactivity, the issue of **control** arises. Who instigates the interaction? Are audience members offered a **genuine choice** about opting in? Sensitivity on the part of the performers is crucial; for a few respondents who did not want to engage, the unpleasant experience of having to take up a role (under pressure from their family, for example) is what stayed with them long after the event, rather than any positive learning. While overall control will, generally, remain with the actors, visitors must feel that they are offered a genuine opportunity (physical and psychological) to opt out if they wish.

### **Theme 4: Learning**

The research showed that performance invariably helped respondents’ **recall** of the heritage depicted and often generated **empathy** with the struggles and life-styles of the people portrayed. It increased their **understanding** of the history, and thus supports sites in achieving their learning objectives. The opportunity for two-way **dialogue** between audience and actor, or between two characters occupying opposing viewpoints, or for further debate following a performance, greatly added to visitors’ engagement and understanding. This opportunity is perhaps unique to performance among interpretive tools.

Another reinforcing factor was the use of **artefacts** as part of the performance, particularly if they could be handled by audience members. Making links with the surrounding site and collections is critical – and performance often gave respondents a strong sense of ownership over the site and the material. Making connections with the **present** – as was done explicitly at Manchester Museum – added another element of empathy.

Though we focus on learning, it is also important to remember **entertainment**. The evidence shows that the enjoyment and surprise – the ‘**wow-factor**’ – of a performance frequently inspires further desire in visitors to engage both with the subject and with the site.

### **Theme 5: Heritage and authenticity**

Theorists debate the ‘authenticity’ of museum theatre, in that we can never truly recreate a past we have not experienced. But in the current climate of reassessment of the role of museums, there are now similar questions about the ‘truth’ of traditional displays.

Whatever the ‘truth’, in today’s trend towards a heritage and museum environment which focuses on dialogue, community involvement and interaction, there is no doubt that performance can justifiably take its part. Our respondents show they want the factual truth, and are sceptical of the ‘fake’, but see the performances they experienced as ‘**real**’ in terms of emotional response. Actual, authentic **artefacts** (as opposed to ‘stage props’) emerge as crucial elements in the process of engaging with the past, especially where they are used creatively and as part of a process of questioning and dialogue.

Interestingly, some respondents still see museums as a collection of objects behind glass. Although these displays are more ‘authentic’, the performance they often see as more ‘real’.

## Findings

The Performance, Learning and Heritage research has shown that each site and each type of audience is so different, it is clear that there cannot be a ‘one size fits all’ performative technique. So the research cannot tell us how to guarantee the successful design and impact of performance within a museum or historic site.

What it *can* do is highlight the power of performance and suggest ways that museum theatre can be used to engage visitors and to influence audience response and learning. Here are some key conclusions that arise from our analysis of the evidence.

### Impact

- Performance often has positive **value** for the visitor.
- Performance has **long term impact** on the visitor.
- Performance can enhance the visitor’s **appreciation and critical understanding** of the ‘heritage’ or the subject matter in question.
- The **interaction** and/or **participation** involved emerge as a hugely memorable aspect of a performance, and thus of a museum/site visit. They can aid recall, enhance understanding and increase emotional response and empathy.
- Recall is often aided by memory of the performance’s immediate surrounds (the site as ‘set’) and artefacts (sometimes seen as ‘props’) – **integrating** the performance with a site’s other resources can heighten impact.

### Empathy and debate

- The ‘**well-told story**’ has an unparalleled ability to engender interest in, and often empathy with, the life experiences of those considered ‘other’ from ourselves.
- Performance can give voice to, and celebrate, the experiences of **marginalised individuals or communities** excluded from the grander narratives of conventional history.
- Performance can be used to great effect in dealing with **challenging and difficult content** within heritage environments. It is especially effective in instigating, framing and hosting **debate and dialogue**, and can give people a new-found appreciation of the complexity of the subject matter.

### Framing the event

- An audience’s quality of engagement and the extent of learning will partly depend

on **the way the experience is framed**. What happens *before* and *after* a performance, and the way the visitor is *engaged* during it, are just as important as the content. It is important for sites and museums to consider:

- how the event is **framed**: for example, its advance publicity, physical location, relationship to the adjacent galleries or architectural spaces
- how the visitor is **introduced** to the topic and mode of performance – and where appropriate **inducted** into becoming a willing audience-member, or even an active participant: how is the ‘**audience contract**’ made?
- the extent to which the visitor is allowed a degree of **choice** as to whether, or how far, to participate
- how to incorporate moments of **interaction and genuine challenge** within the performance, and
- what opportunity the visitor is given to **de-brief**: to ask questions, debate or express opinions at the end, and given an opportunity to develop and embed their understanding (which can lead to greater recall).

These issues become even more vital if that event is intended to promote – implicitly or explicitly – learning or ‘agency’ on the part of the visitor.

### **Increasing the impact**

- **Connections to sites, collections and individual artefacts** need to be made more apparent if visitors are to integrate their experience of performance into the larger experience of their visit.
- Building in **interactive or participative** elements will (as long as they are not forced on unwilling participants) aid many audience members’ recall and enhance their understanding of facts, sites and artefacts, as well as intensifying their emotional response.
- **Connections to the everyday lives of visitors in ‘the present’** help performances to be more memorable, but also, crucially, aid recall, meaning-making and perceived relevance of the subject matter over time.
- Building in the opportunity to **reflect with others** (via debate, focus group, informal Q&A, etc) on the performance and its connections with the rest of the site or exhibition will for many visitors enrich their experience of the visit and enhance the learning it is designed to stimulate.
- Performance in museum and heritage site settings demands **acting, research and often facilitating, skills** of a very high order. They include the ability to
  - create and sustain ‘presence’ in performance
  - effectively communicate in testing, often unsympathetic, environments, and adapt to different types, mixes and sizes of audiences
  - engage audiences in dialogue, before, during and/or after the performance
  - undertake preparatory research and translate it into dramatically compelling scripts
  - understand and work in close collaboration with other museum staff: curators, education officers, stewards and so on.

Those skills should be given recognition, catered for and, wherever possible, developed both by the employing institutions and by the acting profession, including the actor-training academies.

### **Perception and publicity**

- There is an **image problem** with this kind of work. Participants have low

expectations of these types of performance. There is also a polarity of expectation in terms of education and entertainment: adults expect it will be entertaining but not necessarily educational, children assume if it is educational it will unlikely be entertaining.

- Poor advance **publicity** is a major issue not being suitably addressed by a majority of sites under observation. Visitors notice the inadequacy of the publicity (in promoting the event widely, in explaining who the performance is for, what it contains and how it can enhance a visit) and the occasional or unpredictable nature of the performance programme. They receive a negative signal about the worth of the activity as perceived by the institution.
- ‘Good’ - that is, stimulating, enjoyable, informative - performance at museums and heritage sites is **valued by adults as well as by children**, despite prior perceptions to the contrary. Subject matter and advance promotion must be well pitched and appropriately promoted to change this perception.

### Fitting performance to site

- Performance is often used as a **stand-alone mode of interpretation** within the museum or heritage site. However, where an exhibition or a site visit is under design, performance, and appropriate space(s) for visitors to gather, listen and see, should be **built in to the exhibition’s interpretive programme** from the early stages of programme design, in order to maximise on resources invested and increase possible visitor engagement.
- **There is no one-size-fits-all performative technique**, and there are a great many ways in which performance can be employed by institutions. It is crucial, however, to align the **goals of the site** and **intentions for interpreting the heritage** with a suitable method of performance activity, in order to ensure maximum use of the resources.

### Assessing the methodology

- Much has been learnt over the course of the project about the suitability of traditional qualitative case study methodology to researching performance activity. Core to our approach has been an emphasis on the voices of participants. The complexity and intricacy of responses surprised us again and again, and we hope to have re-produced some of that diversity in the full report.
- Interviewing proved to be the most effective means of documenting peoples’ responses; our limited questionnaire surveying only served to renew our confidence in this qualitative approach. The interviews gave us access to raw, contradictory and often emotional narratives of engagement (or otherwise) which have been invaluable. The longitudinal nature of the research approach proved to be integral to our understanding of the impact of performance practice. Without this element, it might have been easy to over-emphasise the possibility for change in our respondents; they were responsive, excited and eager to talk about personal transformation on the day of performances, but often more measured and reflective in their responses at a later date. This has enabled us to build a more realistic assessment of the ‘actual’ levels of change that occurred for our respondents (and to confidently assert that change *did* happen).
- Future research in this area may wish to build upon the methodological approach used (and transparently documented) in this project. It may also wish to further explore the particular themes that we have identified. Either way, it is hoped that the body of knowledge and understanding in this area will increase; that practice

will be assessed in more meaningful ways (not simply through quantifiable measures); and that audiences will increasingly see and feel the benefits that come with such reflective practice.

### **For the future**

- Our research did not set out to look at funding aspects and financial **sustainability**. However, given the increasing popularity, and success, of high quality, educative performance work – and the investment involved in retaining actors or buying in a specialist company and the underpinning research and writing skills – we highlight the need for institutions to consider these issues as part of their long term planning.
- Museums and sites do need to consider ways in which performance work of high quality that contributes significantly to their interpretive, educational and community access programmes can be **built into their ongoing programming strategies** – if not on a daily basis then at least on a sufficiently regular basis to be seen as an integral and valued part of the institution’s offering. Where sensitive issues are tackled, especially, it is vital that adequate follow-up (de-briefings, further performances on related issues, etc) is undertaken and seen to be undertaken.
- As we have seen, the research shows that people may still perceive museums as a static, ‘behind glass’ experience, if ‘authentic’ in representing the past. They react to performance within these museums as a more ‘real’ and intense experience. In the future, **how can our museums and historic sites translate the benefits of performance to the wider museum environment**, to shift perceptions, widen access and increase impact?

### **To help your planning**

From these findings we have drawn out a number of **key questions** that interpretive planners (including learning and access officers and, where appropriate, performers) can ask when they are designing performance events in museums or historic sites – whatever the style or aim of the performance. The answers will of course be different for each event and each location, but by following the **checklist** at the end of this document, museums and heritage sites will be able to use the research findings to steer their work.

### **In conclusion**

The Performance, Learning and Heritage research project has shown emphatically that performance has with good reason become a powerful resource in the range of interpretive methods on offer to museums and historic sites. Performance can bring alive and draw out deeper and new meanings from collections and buildings, and has its greatest impact when planned carefully to work in close conjunction with the collections, exhibitions and architecture.

Just because this research has unearthed the **complexity** of performance in museums, it is critically important *not* to see this as overly daunting but rather to look again at performance as a new and underexplored tool, an extraordinarily rich and valuable method of engaging the active participation of diverse audiences in making everyday relevance out of their shared heritage. In addition, we believe that, through creative partnerships – as has been seen in this report – museums can learn new skills and approaches that will help to open up the entire process of interpretation for the institution as a whole.

The research has, inevitably, raised as many questions as it has answered, but we hope that it will act as a springboard for further exploration and analysis of the successes and weaknesses of different modes of performance and their use at different types of site. We hope too that it provides a basis for further development and enhancement – and indeed expansion – of the repertoire of interpretive and educative strategies available to museums and heritage sites. We welcome feedback on the contents of this report (via the contacts given at the end of this summary) and look forward to studying the outcomes of any future such research.

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## Planning checklist

*These questions are intended, not to overwhelm with detail, but simply to provide prompts that will help museum and heritage site staff recognise, and enhance, the quality and efficacy of performance in heritage settings.*

### The site

1. Where do we position performance within the institution in terms of the institution's **structure**? Is it a part of our Outreach or Community Access programme? Or the Education or Curatorial programmes? Or does it cross all programmes, in which case how will it be coordinated most effectively?
2. How can we translate our performance programme and its intentions into a **language** understood elsewhere in the institution?
3. Where do we position performance intellectually – how does it fit with the **goals** of the institution?
4. Do we have a clear **actor interpretation policy** that is understood and implemented by all (including all performers)?
5. How does the performance fit within (or usefully outside) the other interpretive strategies on offer? How does live interpretation **complement** the various other performances being played out 'on site'?
6. How do we best **support the performers**, whose role may often be pivotal in the interpretive strategy of the site and whose skills as actors, researchers and 'facilitators of engagement' with the public need to be valued and developed?
7. Where do we position performance **physically** in the site? How can we ensure that performance is not battling with the institution – tannoy announcements, loud video presentations, sudden changes of location etc.
8. How do we **promote** performance work? Can promotional materials help to make connections to the rest of the site? How do we persuade our 'target groups' that this kind of interpretation might be 'for them'?
9. Do we have appropriate feedback and **evaluation** strategies in place? Are we as a site being honest and reflective about our practice?

### The performance

1. How do we **describe and 'frame'** the event (e.g. as re-enactment, story-telling, promenade; as designed for particular audiences/age groups or for the general public)?
2. Who is **facilitating** the interaction? Do we need a separate person (other than the actors) to take on this responsibility?
3. Does the performance need a **dramatic arc** or easily-recognisable shape? A dramatic conclusion? A 'plot' in the traditional sense? Or do we want to be playful with the form in this instance?
4. What are the moments of inspiration/surprise (**the 'wow' factor**) that will provide opportunities for visitor engagement?
5. What place does **empathy** have in the performance? To what extent is it important to inspire empathic engagement with characters in the piece? If it is, how do we ensure that it enlarges rather than narrows understandings (avoiding the 'empathy paradox')?

## The content

1. What **style of interpretation/performance** matches our intentions most suitably?
2. How can the **complexity of this heritage** be explored through performance? With, for example, multiple voices, opportunities for dialogue, or audiences taking on roles?
3. How do we ensure opportunities to **'de-brief'** – to question and debate and to make connections with the rest of the site/the exhibitions/subject-matter?
4. What place does the deliberate **'un-settlement'** of audience preconceptions or the creation of moments of 'dissonance' have in the performance – as a means of building on the challenge and providing insight into the subject-matter?
5. What are the points at which the audience is **challenged**, intellectually and/or emotionally, and how far into the event do they occur?
6. How do we ensure the performance and content are appropriately **pitched** – to avoid patronisation at one end of the spectrum and alienation at the other?
7. When sensitive issues are raised in compelling ways, how can the museum provide opportunities for **follow-up**, or plan for an ongoing programme of activities (debates, performances, etc) that continue to address such issues?

## The audience

1. Who is/are our **target audience(s)** for this piece?
  2. How do we **induct** visitors into the performance event (and the 'rules of the game' - the 'contract')?
  3. How and when do we employ **interaction** and **participation** in performance? Are they the best way to achieve our aims in this instance?
  4. How and when do we ensure opportunities to exercise **choice** – to opt in or out of the contract?
  5. What is the nature of the **transitions** that visitors experience - from 'visitor' to 'audience', to 'participant' and to 'learner', and back again, in museum performance? Do these transitions need to be facilitated? If so, how and by whom?
  6. How important is it that we make our audiences **comfortable** – ensuring they can all hear, see, sit? Are there benefits to making them *uncomfortable* (for artistic or other reasons)?
  7. How can we ensure that a **care responsibility** is taken for our audience members - especially when we seek to engage them emotionally or physically?
  8. How do we ensure opportunities for (and respect the right of) visitors to exercise **'agency'** – to make their own meanings in their own way and to engage in ways that may or not be predictable?
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