

Kidd, J, 'The Performance of Lives Past' presentation to the Performing Lives conference, Kingston University, 6-8 July, 2009

Contact: Dr. Jenny Kidd, kiddjc2@cardiff.ac.uk @jenkidd

It is with some trepidation that I set out to open a series of papers brought together under the title of Absent Lives and Deathly Presences with a paper about performance in heritage contexts.

Whilst the 'subjects' of heritage performance may well be absent in our present (although the 'objects' often live on), and whilst the heritage contexts within which they are performed (indeed the heritages themselves) may manifest and echo pasts with which we have since found fault, the presences that inform my discussion here are very much alive.

What follows is an introduction to the performance of lives past, problematised through the voices of (very alive!) research participants.

Using these voices, I want to make connections between the performance of 'the past'; how audiences relate to their various 'presents', and the ways in which they occasionally go on to perform their 'selves' very differently back in the 'real' world.

The discussion is based on findings from the Performance Learning and Heritage project, a three year AHRC funded investigation into the use and impact of performance as a medium for learning at Museums and Heritage sites. Based at Manchester University, the research team (of which Anna was very often a part) investigated a number of different contexts, audiences, and forms of performance.

Performance in heritage contexts is designed to achieve a number of objectives; introducing visitors to characters from the past, engendering empathy and understanding, filling the gaps that exist within collections, entertaining visitors, and of course encouraging repeat visits. More recently, it has also been used to show differing (even oppositional) viewpoints to those that have been written into the formalised history of the institutions; the story of the 'ordinary' person at war, or the stories of those enslaved on plantations for example. The hope is that (re)presentations will inform both our thinking about the past and our present. The practice however, has been notably under-researched.

In response to that challenge, the PLH project has tracked audience members in their engagement with such performance activities over a period of up to one year after the event.

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This has enabled the team to trace the ways in which meanings are made, altered and recalled over time. What do individuals remember about the lives of the characters they meet? Whose stories do they invest in and in what ways? What is their view of 'authenticity' in such interpretations?

I hope to provide a brief overview of the project and its case studies, and then go on to exemplify the complex of ways in which people responded in the call to reflect.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Measuring 'impact' is of course notoriously difficult. And measuring 'learning' has its own set of complications; how do we define learning? how do institutions define learning? And what does learning look like to our research participants? Are we talking about factual recall? Or something more? For the purpose of our research we took a rather open definition of learning which encompassed a number of things; recall, understanding, complexity of understanding, emotional engagement, making connections and indeed even enjoyment. And we used a mixed method approach in order to glean as complex a picture of the engagements that occur both in the moment of performance and in reflection afterwards. These included, pre-performance interviews and attendance at school lessons, filming, mapping of audience positioning, post-performance interviews (in the following weeks and then up to one year later), questionnaires, meaning mapping, drawing, and commissioning our own performance in order to test emerging findings. All this we did at a number of different case study sites.

The first was at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich

The second, Llancaiach Fawr Manor in South Wales

For the third we wanted to look more closely at the relationship between a theatre company and heritage institution so we looked at Triangle Theatre Company, currently resident at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum

For the last case study we had the opportunity to commission a performance in order to test and build upon findings from the first three.

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For the rest of this paper, I would like to explore some of our findings using responses of research participants.

PROBLEMATISING THE PERFORMANCE OF LIVES PAST

What/where is 'the past' in participant reflections

Frequently, our respondents talked about the 'realness' and the 'immediacy' of performance; and they were very often touched by the intimacy of that experience. For some this 'reality' was balanced against, and often given preference to, the 'authenticity' of an exhibition; the performance embodied in the here and now what otherwise would have been restricted to artefacts in glass cases (in their perception at least).

They were fascinated too by experiencing that past in this present, with all the contradictions that seemed to entail:

RESP 1: You're like thinking, "Right: I could actually be here, maybe, in the past". Then you see that radiator and you think, "No, it's gone. I'm not there any more". [LFM_S_PP3_133]

School pupils at the Manor house acknowledged the interpreters were acting in the present rather than contriving to get them to believe whole-heartedly that they were being transported to a past. None-the-less, the interpreters had a role to play in making the site more authentic and adding an element of the 'real'. The pupils clearly display an awareness of the performative nature of the experience as enabled by the interpreters who 'show' and 'demonstrate' on the Manor 'set'. While the younger pupils are under no illusions about the fact that these are actors, they do sometimes display an uncertainty however as to when the acting stops:

'Sometimes you don't know like whether they are acting or not cause when he came back the second time he was like "Whenst thou is in another household thoust behave thyself" and it's like you don't know whether they're actually like telling you to behave, or whether they're just acting.' [LFM_S_PP2_130]

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Not all were convinced about the reliability of what they saw however, recognising the staged (or 'fake') nature of the event. But they oscillated between the two kinds of 'truth' that seemed to be on offer: the actors could not be 'real' people from the past, and at the same time, in the moment of performance, they were remarkably convincing.

Int: ... So those people: do they live in the house now?

RESP 3: No.

RESP 2: No, not all of them.

[LFM_S_PP3_151]

The power of the performance to take one by surprise, to overturn expectations, to make a strong impact 'in the moment' - its 'eventness' - is valued by many. The performances at NMM for example are 'real', 'alive', 'life', and the character is a 'live witness' - language that is not used to describe the exhibition and its artefacts. At MM, school pupils recall (three weeks later) moments when a character made them suddenly feel part of the drama, part of the reality of the event:

ANON: Yeah, the guy shook my hand, and I think it was Thomas Clarkson, he shook my hand right at the beginning... It made me feel like I was back then [MM_S_PP2_158]

Interestingly, the strength of the event in the immediate present is underlined, if in a different way, by the 9-year olds who experienced LFM. When recalling the event (one week later), they talked readily and clearly about the characters they met on the day, in the here-and-now, and knew that they were from the 'olden days' while at the same time aware (for the most part) that they were acting, but they demonstrated confusion about - or perhaps lack of interest in - the absent 'off-stage' characters (such as the Colonel who they hear much about but never meet):

INTERVIEWER: And do you know where he was then when you were there?

SH: He went on holiday? He went on holiday and went shopping.

INTERVIEWER: You think he went shopping. Where do you think he went shopping?

M: Tesco's. [LFM_S_PP2_141]

The very young pupils show a more significant confusion about temporality (although not a confusion that causes them any discomfort), possibly also due to their lack of ability in expressing the duality they feel. They fail (in certain instances, and without encouragement) to differentiate between the past, and the very different present (one in which Tesco's is a by-word for all things contemporary).

What we often see happening with older pupils and independent visitors is a more explicit acknowledgement that they are buying into a playful relationship with temporality; that they are able to experience their environment, feelings, social context and expectations in the present, whilst simultaneously using their imaginations and the reality that is being presented for them to inhabit the past as well

One case study highlights the extent to which audiences are willing and able to take this playfulness with temporality. *The Pollard Trail* (case study 3) is split into a number of different segments, some of which are faithful to fact and location, others which take licence in numerous respects. The length of the trail (around five hours in its entirety) means that it is neither desirable or expected that audience members will see the whole 'story', there is no 'beginning', 'middle' and 'end' in any conventional way and thus no unified explicit whole. Time, as presented through the Trail, is only very superficially chronological. The reality and fiction of a past Coventry is being presented in a real and fictitious present:

As for the experience, it seems most appropriate to remember it like it was a dream. This is mainly I think because there were so many individual appearances and moments of clarity with no overall sense of plot. [TTC_observations_5]

There is thus a reliance on audience members to use the experience in order to unpack and resurrect the story themselves, to find within the experience a line to follow, or a comfort with no plot at all.

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Being playful with temporality is not something new to museums and heritage sites, and certainly not new to performance. There are ways in which all of our case studies represent a playfulness in this respect:

- At LFM, every visit may well take you 'back' to 1645, but every year, the people you meet will be one year older, they will have another year of life story, experience, knowledge and opinion.
- In MM, *This Accursed Thing* took audiences on a journey around the museum, ostensibly through time, but also playing with different permutations of place through the building and its architecture.
- At the National Maritime Museum, the characters we meet (as 'real' as they are) play with temporality in the moment of performance. We are immediately 'transported' to a past which we inhabit, with the character, for the entirety of the piece. Within this timeframe however, the pace of the performance is used to affect the frenetic speed of the gunfire, or the agony of the waiting that the character experienced.

There are many ways then that performance can explore the temporality of history without relying on the seriously resolutely chronological, and it seemed our audiences were open to this playfulness.

All of the above (and not least the characterisations they are presented with, the architecture and the artefacts) help to create in audiences a sense of a past that is accessible, interesting, memorable and open for exploration.

Comments on the museum as setting for performance often focus simultaneously on the sense of place they facilitate (they provide a physical and intellectual link to the past), and a desire for 'displacement' (to be taken out of the reality of the museum, its familiarity and sets of expectations *into* that past). They are simultaneously 21st century spaces (with shops and cafes) and places steeped in the heritage(s) they seek to interpret. They perform a dual aspect. It is important to our respondents that sites are not 'stages' (in a traditional, static sense), none the less, the use of the words 'theatrical' and 'dramatic' are common in describing the space. Audiences thus display a willingness to suspend their disbelief (a moment that can sometimes be broken by the intrusion of other 'visitors'):

RESP 1: like when they were using the ship, the part of the museum that was like that...even though you know it's not a ship, it's quite nice.

RESP 2: It looks quite like it.

RESP 3: Well, it is; you just have to imagine it. (LAUGHS) [MM_S_PP2_155]

Most spaces (for museum theatre presentations especially) are only temporarily theatricalised through performance, and their quick return to the normality of the museum helps to highlight the transience of history and the impermanence of the people and stories that constitute it. Performance aids an exploration of the liminal in the museum: past/present, public/private, place/displace, internal/external (mental processes/physical responses), active/passive, personal memory/collective memory, museum/theatre.

The importance of the 'authentic' in audience engagement

The use of performance at museums and heritage sites has frequently been criticised for representing a sanitized and fictitious 'past' (Hewison, 1987). Authenticity is sought in many 'reconstructions' of the past (see Tivers, 2002: 187), but is often recognised as an 'idealistic, rather than a realistic, aim' (Tivers, 2002; 198). It is also something that can only be ascribed to an event, performance, site or artefact, it is not inherent *in* it (Rubridge, 219). Hunt's 'bloodless war' or Turner's 'playful war' (Hunt 2004: 398) can never be truly authentic for they are devoid of the pain, death, isolation and motivations that accompany 'genuine' war. Our limits in knowledge, our limited ability to empathise, and our very different motivations, remain a constant restriction to 'authenticity'.

But all of this perhaps relies on an assumption that authenticity 'exists' elsewhere in the museum. In fact, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Hein and Samuel acknowledge, museum displays are 'created' out of context by 'fallible and culturally influenced humans' (Hein), with objects undergoing forms of 'reconstruction' themselves (such as cleaning or restoration) which render large chunks of that item's past as undesirable. It is often only within its original form that an object is seen as maintaining its truth. Seeing it as possible (and desirable) to 'reverse the process of history' in this way is, according to Smith, a 'species or contemporary arrogance' (Smith in Vergo, 1993: 20).

This is also very much a matter of representation. Whole groups of people are missing from the authentic version of 'the past' recounted at many sites and institutions. Decisions (judgements) have been made about which histories to present, in what way, and to whom. When 'choosing' artefacts for display decisions are made about the overall look and feel of collections, display contexts, charging for engagement, as well as which interpretation of objects is the correct or preferred one to impart to visitors.

Of course, this is now changing, with the 'Authorised Heritage Discourse' (Smith, L., 2006) coming under *some* scrutiny by sites and museums themselves (and not least by their 'users'). Never more so than in 2007, when many activities designed to commemorate the anniversary of the abolition of the Slave Trade Act in the UK involved museums seeking to alter

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representation through 'inclusion', 'dialogue' and 'access'. Increasingly also, we see the language of 'co-production', 'community', 'democracy' and 'consultation' being used.

Research participants have much to say about their expectations in terms of the authenticity of the encounters they have with performers and within the performance itself. There is a common link made to meaning making more generally – that a lack of perceived authenticity makes meaning much harder to come by and can make audience members switch off. There is a desire to see the factual 'truth' presented in a way that engages with its complexity and depth:

these things vary so much sometimes they're very erudite and full of content and other times they're pretty shallow [NMM_I_PP3_45]

I thought it was quite accurate, the consequence is that it may have been uncomfortable for some, but that was the reality of the day. [MM_I_PP2_211]

But people also want to have authentic experience in terms of resultant feelings and emotions:

I felt really sad for those people. You really felt what they were feeling, if you were there. If you were one, you felt it. [MM_S_PP2_161]

This was especially true for case study four at the Manchester Museum where we commissioned a performance as part of the Revealing Histories initiative (investigating links between Manchester museums and galleries and the slave trade). This performance, designed to initiate debate not only about slavery and the slave trade, but about practices of museum collection and acquisition, was often responded to in very emotional ways. Learning how people came to be slaves, how they were treated as slaves, and also, encountering certain artefacts really triggered an emotional engagement with the magnitude of the story [manila outline].

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One school group with whom we worked had done no work on slavery in school, were in a principally white and economically deprived catchment, and we had been informed that there were very real problems with racism amongst pupils. Previous to the trip, they cared very little and are unable to imagine why the session might be of use to them, in anonymous meaning maps they said some pretty awful things, including readily equating (perhaps to goad the researchers) slavery with savagery. However, going to the museum, meeting characters, entering debate and having the slave trade humanised and 'realised' in front of them proved to be hugely significant.

The pupils began to imagine 'if it happened to me', to *feel* for those whose lives are still touched by slavery, and to want to *do* something to change the legacy (although what to do remained a stumbling point for them). In short, they begin to understand slavery's impact on their own lives and attitudes. One pupil begins to recognise the overt racism of some of the people she knows, including her own father, and others begin to realise that 'even though they do not have a lot, they have an awful lot more than people in Africa'. They are now more fully attuned to slavery's inherent injustice and unfairness than they were ever likely to be otherwise, and able to recognise and admonish the racism that underpins it and its legacy.

These, and other, participants were surprised to have had such 'authentic' experiences within museum spaces, which says much about their prior expectations of this kind of work. The particular performance they have seen is often seen as being a 'one off' in this respect and has not persuaded them that they can expect this level of authenticity across the board:

I think I probably feel that that was a bit of lucky chance if you like, that that was as good as it was, and I think my instinct would probably still be not to gravitate to that kind of performance. [NMM_I_PP3_13]

There are some interesting comments about the relationship between fiction and 'knowledge' made by respondents at all case studies. There is an assumption evident that performers straddle a tricky positioning between the two, more comfortable perhaps in the fictive world than with the 'truth' of the institution. Respondents often comment that they have been lucky that the performance they have seen has been so obviously well-researched (CS1 and CS4),

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and well acted. This again belies an attitudinal stance towards this kind of work more generally that assumes very low standards:

Occasionally there is evident a mythologising of the trip as a whole (and the performative elements too) in the minds of our respondents over time. School children attending LFM were a case in point here. There are certain things they encounter on the day and talk about in follow up discussion with each other and (more formally) with the research team that remain with them, their imaginations lending the experiences weight and becoming a central focus for the day. Many of the other memories of their trip then hang on the myth they have created around 'the ghost', the 'big house' or the 'scary' characters (for example), and the past becomes a realm upon which they can impose their fictive inventiveness. Mythologising the past is seen by some critics as one of the travesties of the heritage 'industry' but is something that was usefully explored and responded to through case study three, where we see that a real and objective past is in itself a fiction. This was an exercise in exploring 'un'reality; a fantastic and fictitious past (and present):

It is truly a wonderful piece of anarchy [TTC_observations_5]

For most of the case studies, there is little or no recognition of or engagement with the nuanced questions that are currently being asked and explored in the wider museological context. How can we 'know' the past? Is 'the truth' in institutions, objects, people, presence, purpose and endeavour? Whose standards of 'truth' are being aspired to? How important is the authentic? How faithful is memory? How reliable is the knowing archive?

It is interesting to look at respondents' attitudes towards the wider institutional **context** as authority, and as 'history'. They have expectations of the sites in terms of the associations they make (most often that the museum is dry, stuffy, predictable, educational – but not necessarily fun). In this respect it is entirely possible that our respondents are playing back a stereotype of museums that firstly does not exist, and secondly, does not match their prior experiences of sites that they have visited (as is proved as they go on to talk about other sites they have been to). None-the-less, these are the associations they make:

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I thought the drama was good, but I thought it was in big contrast to the exhibition itself which I found very static, full of artefacts etc [NMM_F_PP1_117]

The exception here is the Manor house, which, as an immersive experience (the simplicity of which they applaud), does not fit their stereotype:

ANON: It didn't feel like a museum, because museums have things in a glass case and you just look at it.

ANON: It felt really real, 'cause everything was... There was absolutely no models.

ANON: It felt like going back in time. There was no technology, just...

ANON: Plus everything was just going on around you. [LFM_S_PP3_123]

Museums are thus seen as being very much about material culture: objects behind glass and traditional or mechanical interpretation. It is often commented that museums do not use their assets as productively as they might (CS1, CS3, CS4). Performances, in contrast, are seen as bringing the museum and its stories to life, as being animated and in 'real-time' (the 'liveness' is important here). Principally, this approach is seen as being 'not just about looking'. Some respondents feel that the performance can introduce new people to the very idea of the museum and the stories it can tell – it thus should have some kind of dual function.

What have been highlighted here (very briefly) are a number of ways in which the responses of our audiences reveal the complexity of engagement with heritage performance. The research was unable (and nor did it wish to) provide a one-size-fits-all list of recommendations for using performance in these contexts. What the responses do reveal however is a readiness on the part of audiences (on the whole) to engage playfully with representations on the past through performance, to be critical of them, and to find ways of making meaning from them which they take away and into their own lives in small ways. These performances become a part of the latent store of knowledges and experiences that they can call upon when needed – not least when a researcher calls out of the blue and asks them to reflect.

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