



LIVING HISTORY IN THE CITY

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When one thinks of living history and museums, the images that arise are usually of costumed characters in rural or frontier scenes accompanied by candle-making, butter churning, spinning or weaving. The ideas "urban" and "living history" are seldom placed together in the same sentence. Even the largest organization serving living history professionals is called the Association for Living Historical Farms and Agricultural Museums (ALHFAM). Not a word about cities. ALHFAM, is of course, supportive of living history in all its forms and locales, but rarely is living history found on the urban landscape.

Yet if living history is a viable interpretive tool, why would it not be useful in an urban setting? That was exactly my reaction when I came to work at the 1840 House of the Baltimore City Life Museums (BCLM) in 1985. Since my first visit to a living history site in 1980, I was fascinated by the dramatic and interpretive potential of such sites. The 1840 House, designed to be a living history site, was unique in that it was furnished with reproductions and deaccessioned collections and had the interpretive potential I desired. The hands-on nature of the furnishings promised incredible opportunities for interpretation. Visitors could sit on the sofa, handle the chamberpots, and help cook in the kitchen. In addition, the nature of an urban site forced me to move beyond standard living history interpretations of dipping candles and making butter. Preservation and interpretation of such processes are important but not relevant to an urban site in the mid-nineteenth century where city residents purchased, and did not make, such items as candles and butter.

My challenge was to design an interpretive program that capitalized on the urban nature of the 1840 House. First our staff decided to do guided tours of the House for both the public and school groups that featured first person living history interpreters with some hands-on elements for students -- cooking over the open hearth and 19th-century games were our staples. Nothing earth shattering there. However, the area where we took a noticeable turn from standard living history interpretation was with drama.

Within a few weeks after I arrived, I met with Donald Hicken, the Theater Department Head for the Baltimore School for the Arts, and we began planning a theatrical program in the 1840 House. Through Don's guidance we came up with a concept for a drama called "Steps In Time" that focused on interpreting the impact of social issues -- abolitionism, colonization, health concerns, domestic relations -- on a 19th-century middle-class household. While a convincing interpretation of such issues is difficult, if not impossible, even in the hands of a single skilled roleplayer, the task is easy and natural for a cast of actors.

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We produced our first drama in the Spring of 1986 and have not looked back. That year we hired two local professional actors to perform with three School for the Arts students and presented over 150 performances of a 45-minute drama over 13 weeks. In the ensuing years we developed scripts that presented racial relations, but have also examined the role of women and health concerns. This year's production, "The Baltimore Nunnery Riot," examines tensions between Protestants and Catholics.

Since 1986 we have presented a dozen different plays with over 900 performances for more than 20,000 visitors. Those unaccustomed to museum theatre and more familiar with traditional exhibits and docent-led tours might wonder "Do visitors really want to see a dramatic performance? Can they really learn anything about history?"

The answers to both questions are "Yes!"

In evaluations done in 1989 and 1990 we confirmed our suspicions --not only did visitors enjoy the performances, they felt that they understood more about history and saw the relevance of issues in the past to life today. 95% of visitors surveyed said that the performance they saw was "better or superior than traditional exhibits in presenting historical information in a meaningful and enjoyable manner."

Responses by visitors to the Valentine in Richmond have been similar. The Valentine recently incorporated three performance vignettes into its exhibit *The Working People of Richmond*. About 90% of the visitors interviewed listed the performances as the best part of the exhibition. The success has encouraged the Valentine to continue its use of living history with characters and performances at its new Valentine Riverside site.

Why does theatre work so well? Just as museums have an obligation to collect and preserve buildings, objects, prints, paintings, landscapes, and written documents, they also have a responsibility to put those physical remnants of the past into a broader personal context. A dramatic performance, when combined with appropriate artifacts, reproductions, and research of the historical record, can help us understand what might have happened and how people interacted and reacted to the events and situations in the past. It can provide us with a way of finding a human, personal link with people in the past.

Theatre provides a methodology for developing characters. Living history interpreters, who lack training in the theatre arts, often present characters that are superficial -- they lack the depth of characterization that actors normally bring to a role. Incorporating such skills into interpreter training and using actors provides a richer, deeper, and more textured experience for visitors.

Theater is also particularly effective in presenting differing perspectives. We are certainly remiss in our historical obligations if we allow only one voice to be heard. In "Steps In Time" we have included the perspective of the bigoted (by today's standards) white colonizationist as well as the abolitionist and the free black preacher who argue against colonization. Theater allows those multiple voices to be heard in all the passion that they embrace.

The fourth reason for drama's effectiveness is its ability to present conflict. Too often



living history museums focus their interpretive efforts on uncontroversial aspects of "a simpler life" in the past. Thomas Schlereth has argued eloquently in "It Wasn't that Simple" (*Museum News*, Jan/Feb 1978) and "Causing Conflict, Doing Violence" (*History News*, October 1984) that life in the past was much more complicated and violent than we imply to the public. In past productions of "Steps In Time" we used an incident in which Frederick Douglass was beaten by white immigrants to illustrate the racial and ethnic tensions over jobs in the 1830s. Visitors' comments on evaluations indicate they found the play gave them insight into the current tensions in the African-American and Korean communities.

For presenting human behaviors and interactions, multiple perspectives on issues, richly textured characters, and conflict, theatre is unsurpassed and is a tool that urban sites should embrace unreservedly.

AT OTHER SITES AND GALLERIES

While I have been discussing our living history at the 1840 House, we have also found living history characters and dramatic performances to be extremely effective in our galleries and other historic sites. We have developed two different living history interpretations of H.L. Mencken at the H.L. Mencken House. In one an actor works from a script and performs in Mencken's study; the other is a costumed interpreter who interacts with the public in traditional first person. We have had several performances of early American artist and museum proprietor Rembrandt Peale at the Peale Museum, two scripted and one first person. In the restored 1930's kitchen in the "Rowhouse" exhibit at the Peale Museum we presented "Everybody's Grandmother," a one-woman show focusing on work.

The Museum has continued the concept of integrating living history and performances into galleries with the exhibit "Heroes Just Like You." "Heroes" incorporates reproductions and props with permanent collections in three different scenes in the 1890s, 1940s, and 1990s to give the illusion that the actors, who have been rehearsed to touch only appropriate reproductions and props, use the whole environment.

Each of these presentations noted above follows a similar construction. We identify appropriate themes and primary and secondary source material. The themes and sources are woven into a script that is based upon language and facts of the time period we are presenting. The script is then passed onto to museum staff and consultants for approval and comment, and finally a director works with an actor in rehearsing the script.

OTHER FORMS OF LIVING HISTORY

While theatre has been a significant part of our living history interpretation, it is by no means our only form. Our most successful school program, "*Hands-on History*," was created to incorporate living history techniques throughout the school experience. We instituted the program three years ago for the following reasons: 1) to create a paid staff of museum teachers who were trained in living history interpretation; 2) to relieve the strain on full-time staff who were constantly called in to cover tours when docents were unavailable; 3) to develop a new tour that built on our developing strength in living history; and 4) to incorporate two of our non-living history sites -- the Carroll mansion and the Center for Urban Archaeology -- into our living history programming.



In each of our "Hands-on History" programs students are guided by a costumed interpreter and receive a 45-minute tour that incorporates role-playing and storytelling and a 45-minute activity. In "Life In the City" the activities include making fritters on the open hearth; dancing a cotillion in the drawing room of the Carroll Mansion; recreating a classroom session in a mid-19th century school; or discovering artifacts in a simulated archaeological dig. Each of the activities is based on primary source materials relevant to an urban site. For example, the school activity is based on records from the local Catholic Carmelite Academy.

In "A 19th-Century Day," students, who spend four hours at the Museum, tour and compare lifestyles of the wealthy with middle class with African-American servants at the Carroll Mansion and the 1840 House; bake on the open hearth; and perform and videotape a scene based on an incident that might have occurred in the 1840 House.

A second living history program, targeted for our out-of-school public, is entitled "Journeys Through Time." This program, with six separate components, utilizes costumed museum teachers and various living history activities and is targeted for Girl Scouts. "Listening to the Past" includes parlor games, making simple toys, and cooking on the open hearth. In "Manners" participants bring their dolls for a tea party and learn 19th-century etiquette from a costumed interpreter in the Carroll Mansion, make a tussie mussie, and play parlor games. "Theater" allows guests to see a performance of "Steps In Time" and perform and videotape their own scene after selecting characters, props and costumes.

RULES OF THE ROAD

Over the past ten years our living history program has grown from ground zero to a relatively elaborate system of school and public programs and museum theater performances. Our staff has grown from one person (the author) who did everything, from splitting firewood to scheduling to giving tours, to a paid staff of twenty full and part-time living history interpreters, a scheduler, and other programming staff, not including the actors and directors we hire for theater productions.

What happened, and how did we do it? Below are some urban rules of the road, that at least in retrospect, provide some framework for our success.

- 1) Just do it! Never mind about doing it well, that will come in time. Of course you should strive for the highest possible quality, but don't let lack of perfection hold you back.
- 2) Always try to take steps that you can build upon. An example is in our costume department. I began the first year of the program with a \$10 budget and the clothes on my back (which I had worn at other living history sites -- Conner Prairie and the Homeplace---1850). We now have nearly 100 different costumes. How did we increase our stock? By always including clothing into any project, grant, or budget that I write.
- 3) Don't be afraid to experiment. Try out ideas and projects on your audience. They are the best judges of your product.

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- 4) Don't be afraid to present conflict and issues. I have found that the only people who are hesitant about dealing with issues are museum professionals. If you have what you feel is a particularly sensitive issue, present it with theatre. Theatre is an accepted convention that gives the audience the freedom and safety to watch and reflect upon topics and issues that they would not ordinarily discuss or consider.
- 5) Don't be afraid to use the discipline of theatre in your interpretation. Contrary to what many museum professionals seem to feel, actors and directors are highly disciplined professionals who meet deadlines in creative ways. The synergy created by several talented people working toward a final product is truly invigorating to staff and the museum.
- 6) Use a director for your theatrical productions, even if they are one-person presentations. When many museums decide to use drama, they hire actors and have them write the script and direct themselves, a difficult task at best.
- 7) Ask your public what they want. Our "Hands-on history" program has been shaped in large part by the responses that teachers give us on our simple one page evaluation.
- 8) Don't be afraid to use spaces in which you would normally not put interpreters. We have found great success in placing living history programs in the drawing room of the Carroll Mansion after carefully moving fragile items out of harm's way. Likewise we place interpreters on the edges of hallways and rooms so that the interpreter appears to be in the room but is only on the perimeter. We have also used neutral spaces for performances. Remember that because audiences are prepared to suspend disbelief, you have great latitude in how you use spaces.
- 9) It doesn't have to be expensive to be engaging. This year we have produced two plays with over 60 performances for about \$9,000. That's not a bad price for a program that reaches over 1000 visitors.
- 10) Look for collaborations. We have been fortunate in finding college and high school theatre departments that are happy to work with us and have assisted us in drama production, staff, costuming, and training.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Our successes encourage us to go forward. We are currently building a new building that will house our core exhibit on Baltimore history -- "I am the City." That exhibit is being designed as a series of environmental spaces for living history interpretations and theater presentations. A touring living history program, "Building Bridges to Understanding" will turn oral histories collected in Baltimore's African-American community into a performance piece that will travel to adults in 60 outreach sites. Living history -- from demonstrations to character interpretations to theatre -- has become our primary form of interpersonal interpretation.

Why am I such an advocate of living history? Because it has become a tremendous and growing success at our museum. Living history has a unique ability to humanize history and

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make it more personal and accessible. When a living history program has a solid research base, creative design, and skilled interpreters or performers, it is truly a thing of beauty. I simply want to see more of it. I am sure that with a little effort and care, living history can be a success at your site too, whether you live in the city or country.

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