



***Museum Theatre and Evaluation
An Overview of What We Know***

by
Dale Jones

Introduction

Advocates of museum theatre claim it is an incredibly effective interpretive vehicle for reaching audiences in an engaging, effective, and often emotional way. Skeptics are not quite so sure and want to see some proof.

Recently I had the opportunity to gather some proof – evaluations of museum theatre presentations and programs – when I volunteered to do a presentation at the Visitor Studies Association (VSA) conference in early August. Below is a summary of some of what I found about museum theater after reviewing reports on nearly twenty museum theatre productions or programs:

- Practitioners And Supporters Cannot Say Enough Good Things About Museum Theater.
- Visitors Really Do Like Museum Theater
- Visitors Think They Learn A Lot From Museum Theater
- Evaluation Supports The Fact That Visitors Do Learn From Museum Theatre.

Practitioners And Supporters Cannot Say Enough Good Things About Museum Theater

We've got great things to say. Below are a few comments from museum directors. Read on. They are glowing endorsements.

It does reach audiences, it does get across a message and it provides the diversity of learning experience which is ...in almost every instance a very good thing.

David Ellis, Director and President, Museum of Science, Boston¹

[Museum theater] is one more way of stretching our reach, of communicating with new audiences in new ways but with a consistent message .

Robert R. Archibald, President, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis

...we are totally convinced that the power of theatre as a communication media is very, very significant....

Ron Kagan, Director, Detroit Zoological Institute

I could give you numerous quotes from those of us who are involved in museum theatre about theatre's transformational power and its many other virtues, but you get the point.

¹ These comments are from an IMTAL-sponsored session at AAM in 1998 in Los Angeles. For the full text of their comments please see this website: http://www.mos.org/learn_more/imal-directors.html



Visitors Really Do Like Museum Theater

If there is one statement about museum theatre that seems to be true universally, it is that visitors like it. In 1982, Mary Ellen Munley, who conducted perhaps the first evaluation of museum theatre, *Buyin' Freedom*, at the National Museum of American History, said:

The general reaction of visitors to "Buyin' Freedom" was universally positive. People used words such as wonderful, enjoyable, just perfect, and beautifully done to express their pleasure with the program.

Even the untrained observer could see things happen in the "Buyin' Freedom" audiences. People huddled together to be able to better see the action; distractions in other parts of the museum went unnoticed;...audience members winced, laughed, sighed and sometimes even hissed out loud.

Karen Holt-Luetjen commented on visitor reactions to "Working People of Richmond," an exhibition with museum theatre produced by the Valentine Museum:

Visitors were fully engaged. About 90% of the numerous visitors interviewed listed the performances as the best part of the exhibition.

In an evaluation done by Diane Brandt Stillman, Director of Education at the Walters Art Gallery, for *Of Courts and Courtship: Scenes from the Renaissance*, 95% of visitors who filled out the questionnaire said they enjoyed the play greatly or a lot; 99% said they strongly agreed or agreed that they would like to see more such plays at the Walters.

In a 1993 study conducted at the National Museum of Science and Industry in London by Sandra Bicknell and Xerxes Mazda titled "Enlightening or Embarrassing?" (don't you love that title?), researchers found that "95% of the sample express a view that drama in the Museum is a good idea."

I think you get the idea. Nearly all visitors like museum theatre, and they say they like it a lot!

Visitors Think They Learn A Lot From Museum Theater

In an evaluation done in 1989 of "Steps in Time" at the Baltimore City Life Museums, Dr. Michael Kiphart found that 95% of visitors thought the performance was better or superior to exhibits in imparting knowledge about 19th century Maryland history." Similar responses led Kiphart to state that while we could not confirm knowledge gain, visitors clearly thought that they had learned.

In "Ten Years of Evaluating Science Theater at the Museum of Science, Boston," a paper presented in 1999 at the VSA conference by Lynn Baum and Catherine Hughes, they note this same perception of content gain with visitors. In an evaluation of *The Masque of Leonardo*, 88% of visitors questioned said felt that the play added value to the exhibition experience. One appreciative visitor wrote an unsolicited letter to Diane Brandt Stillman, commenting on *Of Courts and Courtship: Scenes from the Renaissance*:



Countless times over the past fifty years, I have wandered through those treasures [at the Walters Art Gallery] and tried, through outside research, to become somewhat knowledgeable. But in one hour, I learned more than I did in all those hours of looking and reading.

Both the “numbers” and the personal anecdotes and stories from many evaluations and reports strongly support the fact that visitors feel that they learn something from museum theatre and that it is a experience that they think has value.

Evaluation Supports The Fact That Visitors Do Learn From Museum Theatre

There is some growing evidence that visitors do, in fact, learn from their museum theatre experience. In an evaluation of *The Ballad of Chico Mendes* at the Museum of Science, Boston, authors Baum and Hughes report giving pre- and post-tests to a random sample of visitors: “Visitors were given three multiple-choice questions about: Chico’s biography, extractive reserves, and cattle ranching. Of the post-test group, 80% chose the correct answer to the question about Chico Mendes, compared to 27% of the pre-test group. For the question about extractive reserves, 98% of the post-test group defined this concept accurately, compared to 34% of the pre-test group.”

In 1999 I conducted an evaluation of an exhibition and museum theatre performance at the Hershey Museum and decided to compare the visitors who had seen the performance and exhibition versus those who had seen only the exhibition.

The results were startling!

When asked what they could remember about one of the three main themes of the exhibition, 94% of visitors who saw the performance could recall information, while only 58% of visitors who saw just the exhibition could recall some fact. In another instance only 33% of those seeing only the exhibition recalled information, while 69% of those seeing the performance could recall relevant information. While the sample size was small and the exhibition may have had some difficulties in communicating the theme, it appeared that something extraordinary was going on.

Final Thoughts

The results I have presented here are merely highlights of what is contained in the evaluations and certainly do not report on all the findings, but they do seem to represent common and important themes or threads.

One potential evaluation problem did emerge in reading these reports. Museum theatre and drama in the museum do not mean the same thing for all. For some, museum theatre is clearly a performance created by playwrights, directors, and actors. For others it is an interactive program with actors or interpreters who may or may not have a script which they may or may not follow. Over the course of reading these reports I came to have a more expansive view of museum theatre which incorporates both of the above styles. However, I do think that it would be valuable in the future to realize that these forms of museum theatre are not the same and that the differences should be taken into account in evaluations.



In the beginning of this process, I had quietly hoped for some surprises or unexpected insights. That didn't happen.

I think that there are few surprises because I have talked about all these ideas with colleagues before. I have heard your great stories and anecdotes, and we have talked about what it means. That, combined with the many museum theatre presentations I have seen and all my IMTAL contacts through meetings, publication, and conferences, has helped me to become aware of all this.

But it sure is nice just to have a few numbers here and there to pull out when you need them.