



Quality Living History Interpretation Elements for Success

**by
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As we entered the darkened 1836 cabin, we left behind the bright summer sun and the 1990s. Our eyes adjusted to the light, and we noticed a woman sitting in a corner on the dirt floor and smoking a pipe. She looked up, fired off a caustic greeting, which she followed quickly with a smile, and we were hooked, all of us -- history museum directors, programmers, and interpreters at an ALHFAM (Association of Living Historical Farms and Agricultural Museums) Annual Conference at Conner Prairie. We had seen it all in our years of doing living history and costumed interpretation, but this lady was good! We were enthralled. When an interpreter is that good, the experience becomes an unparalleled event and learning experience.

I have thought of her often in the years since. Because, I have, unfortunately, seen a lot of mediocre and bad historical interpretation. Why can't it all be engaging?

What elements does it take to develop a successful living history program? And what does success mean? A short list for the latter question might include lots of visitors, good press and a marketable product, a vehicle for finding funders and granting agencies to support the project, and last, but, not least, a quality knock-em-dead, exciting, provocative interpretation.

I would suggest that succeeding in the last item -- quality -- leads to success in the other items. If that is so, one might ask _How can I achieve quality living history interpretation?_

Glad you asked, because I would like to take this opportunity to offer some suggestions, based on my twenty years in the field, about what I feel are key elements in developing a quality living history program. Let's start at the beginning.

Interpretive Planning

You really do need to determine your goals, themes, and story lines for your site, your character, or your program. It gives you a direction to go and a center upon which to build. You don't need to have a multi-thousand dollar NEH study (although that would be great); a simple brainstorming session with a few wise men and women can provide you with the necessary framework. But it does have to happen in some way.

Historical Content

You've developed your themes; now it's time to gather the facts. As important as this content is, getting it to the interpreters is only another beginning step. The most knowledgeable interpreter will be worthless if he or she can't present information in a way that audiences find pleasurable.

Let's assume that you have determined your interpretive themes and assembled research materials. What do you need next?



Quality Personnel

Your possibilities for success increase tremendously if you work with dedicated, enthusiastic staff who like history and people and are willing to be trained to become good interpreters. Unfortunately, there are many interpreters out there who love and know the content, but really don't know how to present the information. They are either not interested, or in the worst case, not capable, of being trained. Or, perhaps, management has not recognized the need for training. I have worked with interpreters who don't want, or understand how, to work to get better, and while you can still use them in another capacity, you should make efforts to find other people for your costumed interpretation. If you can find people who are willing to be trained and who perceive continuing education and training as integral to success, then your life will be easier and your interpretation will be better.

So now you have assembled the staff you need. You have asked them to read some materials and attend a few lectures. What is one of the first things you want to teach them about interpretation?

Third Person Interpretation.

What's the big deal about this? Everybody knows how to do that, right? All you do is dress in costume and talk.

Of course not! Being able to present a third person interpretation (where you are in costume and speaking in third person) is an essential skill for any interpreter to have. However, many, if not most, living history sites act as though they believe that all you have to do is give people some content and a costume, let them follow another interpreter around for several days, and then send them out as a "trained" third or first person interpreter. You can do that, but the quality and consistency of the interpretation is uncertain at best.

There are a variety of ways to approach doing a good third person interpretation, and they all include training in the following areas: interpretive goals; questioning techniques; telling stories; using vivid, colorful language; incorporating direct quotes from relevant primary sources; and stimulating visitors' senses through hands-on activities, smells, tactile experiences, aural impressions, or taste.

Training staff in these techniques is as important as training them in content.

Storytelling

One of the first and most important skills your staff can learn is storytelling. An interpreter who has several well-designed and rehearsed stories that relate to your content and interpretive themes is like having the versatility and skill of a Michael Jordan on a basketball team. That interpreter can use the stories for children, families, or adults; as a third person interpreter or a first person character; or as a part of a scene. The flexibility of such a person is really invaluable.

Hands-on Activities

As interpretive planners, you should develop a variety of hands-on activities that relate to your themes and sub-themes. These activities should when possible accomplish three goals:

- be related to and help with the regular chores and work of your site;
- support your sub-themes; and
- provide a way for the visitor to become involved sensually (touch, smell, etc.)

The bad news is that the ability to do both of the above -- storytelling and hands-on activities -- is not a skill most people have. The good news is that through training and practice, most people can become good, and some can become brilliant.

Dramatic and First Person Interpretation Skills

I put these together because they belong together. Too many interpreters fail to learn aspects of characterization including movement, voice, motivation, and character research and development that are integral and second nature to good actors. While they perhaps memorize all the available information, they don't fill in the blanks with their best "historically plausible_" guess, and therefore the character becomes accurate in terms of facts, but one-dimensional, boring, and inaccurate in terms of behavior, attitudes, and personality.

Characters should have likes and dislikes, problems they are facing, memories of parents and childhood, personality quirks -- any of the attributes that make us interesting as people. It does take some time and effort to flesh out a character to give him or her the depth necessary to spin an interesting and believable interpretation, but the payoff is tremendous.

How do you get help? You can contact local college, university, or high school drama departments or local community or professional theaters to find a director, actor, or drama teacher who is sympathetic to your needs and goals. This drama specialist could conduct a series of workshops that would be structured around the goals of character and scene development. This workshop needs to be integrated with your interpretive goals, based on and primary and secondary sources, and include homework and rehearsal activities that staff can use in daily interpretation.

Focused Training

The goal of focused trainings (which might be part of your drama workshops) is to integrate content into presentation, while giving interpreters the opportunity to practice their craft. I suggest doing common readings focused around a specific interpretive theme, event, activity, or person. The sessions include discussions of content, relationship to mission and interpretive theme, and relevant interpretive techniques.

Making History Connections

One effective method is to choose an appropriate historic incident and then read and discuss the background of the event. Ask your interpreters to examine the incident from the various perspectives of those involved. The point of this approach is to find the many different ways of looking at a single event. It is a valuable exercise for developing attitudes for your character interpreters, for developing scenes, and for helping your interpreters develop a sensibility for understanding and examining other events and situations.

The next step is to make assignments to tell the story from one of the perspectives you have discussed. Once they have the storytelling approach underway, assign some of them to do a third person interpretation of the event incorporating some storytelling elements. Your next assignment would be for them to relate the incident from the first-person perspective of a character, based on the skills learned in the drama workshops. Your final assignment would be for them to create a scene.

Rehearsed Improvisations

Nothing grabs an audience like a well-crafted scene between two or more interpreters. Unfortunately, many of the scenes I have witnessed between living history interpreters appear to be unplanned, and usually uninteresting. How do you create an interesting and compelling scene?

As Mark Twain said, "It takes three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech." So it is with "rehearsed Improvisations."

"Rehearsed improvisations" are actually rehearsed, partially scripted scenes that you and your interpreters create and rehearse to be used at any time. They can be triggered by some prearranged signal, activity, or line that one interpreter says. While they will probably be somewhat different every time they are performed, they contain some elements (e.g., opening and closing lines, a crucial part of the scene, some activity, etc) that have been rehearsed until the interpreters are comfortable with them.

From a visitors' viewpoint, the encounters between characters should appear spontaneous and "fresh," but in reality they have been researched, created, and rehearsed (initially as part of your drama techniques workshop and under the supervision of a drama coach) so that they are effective and engaging.

After you have done your focused training on a topic and created stories, third person, and first person interpretation, you should be ready to create scenes. With your interpreters you outline a scene and then try it out. With the help of your drama coach you determine what works and what does not and then try it again -- either the same way, or with minor or major variations. Eventually you will create the core of a scene with which everyone is comfortable. I would suggest beginning with short scenes of perhaps three to five minutes and gradually expanding to longer scenes of probably eight to ten minutes maximum.

Some elements of the scene will probably be scripted: the beginning, so you know when to start it, and the end, so you know when to finish, and whatever points in between that seem necessary.



You may find some direct quotes or phrases in your research that demand to be included verbatim -- if so, use them!

This technique also works for developing short bits, or scenes, that an individual can use. It is actually helpful to have prepared many short, rehearsed interpretive "bits" that an interpreter can use at any time.

"It's Showtime" -- A Final Concept

If I had to give one overall thought to anyone wanting to put more quality in their living history interpretation (or any other interpretation), it would be to always remember that living history interpretation is a performance -- perhaps not like what you saw Dustin Hoffman or Emma Thompson do in their last movie -- but a performance nonetheless. Once you begin talking to a group of people, they become your audience and you are performing for them, whether you want to admit it or not. If you are playing a character in a scene, enacting a first-person interpretation, telling a story or demonstrating an activity, you are acting in a different manner from your everyday self.

So you administrators and program planners out there, admit it. Your interpreters are performers in their own right. They need all the training and support you can give them if they are to become quality living history interpreters like that pipe-smoking woman in the cabin at Conner Prairie.

It can be done. Good luck.