

# *Making History Connections*

## ***Theater 101 for Historical Interpretation***

**By**

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### ***Being “HIPP”***

***Using Heart, Imagination, Planning, and Physicality  
in Historical Interpretation***

*All understanding interpreters know as well as I what the ideal interpretation implies: re-creation of the past, and kinship with it. The problem is how to achieve this desirable end. It is not easy...So, in interpretive effort we are constantly considering ways and means of bringing the past to the present, for the stimulation of our visitors...*

Freeman Tilden – *Interpreting Our Heritage*

Interpreters at historic sites and history museums and the visitors to those sites have quite similar goals. Both want an engaging experience that brings the past alive and makes it understandable. Interpreters want to create those experiences, and visitors want to enjoy them.

Creating those experiences, as Tilden says above, “is not easy,” but he does suggest a way out of this difficulty—through art:

*Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.*

One of those arts, that far too often goes unrecognized in the history field, is theater. If the goal of historical interpretation is to engage and inform visitors, then some of the best tools for achieving those goals come from the world of theater. Whether you are playing a costumed character in first or third person interpretation,<sup>1</sup> performing in a scripted museum theatre production, talking to visitors on the floor of the museum, or designing interpretation, four key factors from the world of theater are essential for developing quality interpretation. While you can have some success by not incorporating all four, or by incorporating them half-heartedly, those who excel in their interpretation display strong elements of each: heart, imagination, planning, and physicality.

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<sup>1</sup> In first person interpretation, the interpreter pretends to be a character from the past, speaks in first person, and attempts for the most part to stay in character. In third person interpretation, the interpreter dresses in period costume but does not attempt to be a character.

# Making History Connections

**Heart** is the passion, the love you bring to your work. That heart or passion may be found in your love of history. It may be your commitment to a museum or site. Or it may be fueled by your love of performing for an audience. No matter what the reason, to succeed with style in museum interpretation, you have to have passion and a desire for doing a great job—you gotta have heart.

**Imagination** provides the spark of creativity that lifts your ideas and presentations out of the ordinary and into the realm of greatness. Imagination gives you the capacity to see new, exciting ways to do something or to show connections that will help the audience understand your ideas.

**Planning** ties everything together. It is the careful design and organizational structure that allows you to utilize all the other components in a logical, systematic way to achieve your interpretive goals. Planning forces you to think ahead, to assess your interpretive goals, your audience, and the best way to reach them. Planning then helps you design a process for a successful, engaging interpretation and allocate time for practice or rehearsal until you get it right.

**Physicality**, or control of your body and voice, leads to a presentation that visitors can understand. What good will it do you to have created the most engaging and thoughtful presentation, only to discover that people did not hear or understand what you said or that you bored them with a monotonous voice? Knowing how to use your tools, in this case your physicality, lets you construct a presentation that audiences can see, hear, understand, and enjoy.

If you have all four—Heart, Imagination, Planning, and Physicality—then you are “HIPP” and ready to present your best image, and the museum’s best image, to the public. Let’s examine these four elements below.

## The Heart in “HIPP”

The heart in “HIPP” is the passion you bring to your work. It is the inspiration you have and that you pass along to others. It is the caring you have for the quality of your work and the concern you have that you succeed.

Interpreters have many reasons for their “heart.” A living history interpreter might be passionate about open-hearth cooking or costumed interpretation. An actor may care deeply about the craft of acting. Some interpreters are passionate about working with children. Many interpreters care deeply about a museum or exhibit.

What if you are lacking heart or passion for your interpretative work, either because you have lost it or never had it? The time has come for you to begin some exploration to discover, or rediscover, passion. You might begin by reading books that you find inspiring—try Freeman Tilden. His thoughts about passion and interpretation are still relevant today. As he writes in 1957 in *Interpreting Our Heritage*, “If you love the thing

# Making History Connections

[that you interpret], you not only have taken the pains to understand it . . . , but you also feel its special beauty in the general richness of life’s beauty.” He likewise advocates that you “love the people who come to enjoy it...in the sense that you never cease trying to understand them....”

You might also talk to some people you respect. What is the source of their passion? What books or articles do they recommend? Inspiration is often waiting for you just by wandering around a site or exhibit after everyone has left or before they arrive. Let your imagination roam. The quiet times you spend alone on site can help you connect with your historical passion.

But “heart” is not enough, unless you combine it with the essence of theater—imagination.

## Using Imagination: Storytelling and Motivation

Perhaps the most powerful tool in your interpretive kit is an active and vivid imagination. That does not imply that you create fictitious information or events to engage your audience. What it does mean is that you develop “historically plausible”<sup>2</sup> interpretations and stories and use vibrant, descriptive language. A story, scene, or interpretation is “historically plausible” if it is based on primary and secondary sources and is a reasonable extrapolation of what might have happened.

### Storytelling

A practical imagination exercise and interpretive technique is incorporating storytelling and evocative language into your work. Storytelling and associated skills do not have to be limited to the stage or to fictional stories. The techniques below are appropriate to use in your interpretation to tell a story as part of your interpretive message. The story might be about a well-known figure such as George Washington as he braves the winter at Valley Forge or it might be about an unknown soldier who was in Washington’s army. Alternatively, your story could focus on an object and how that object was created or used.

Your first step in telling such a story is to know the story and its details well. Here are some factors to consider in developing a story that will be a delight for you to tell and for listeners to hear:

*Visualization.* You want to paint a picture in your audience’s mind about the story, and to help you do this, visualize scenes from the event or story so your telling becomes more vivid and engaging. Close your eyes and recreate the sequence of the story in your mind’s eye. Stop in each mental sequence and look around. What colors and sounds do you notice? What descriptive words help convey what you are imagining? Describe some of the scenes to a friend, and then let that person ask you questions about the scene.

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<sup>2</sup> “Historical Plausibility” is a term coined by Dr. Ira Berlin, University of Maryland, College Park, while serving as a consultant at the Baltimore City Life Museums for a museum theater project.

# Making History Connections

Think about the most important objects in the story and describe them to a friend, using descriptive language. Doing this exercise can also help you understand some of the missing information you might be able to fill in with a little research.

*Characters.* The people in your story were once alive, and you want to pass that sense of “aliveness” to visitors. Begin by identifying the most important person in the story and describe him or her to a friend. Detail their physical appearance and personality in a few evocative words. To help you dig deeper into the character, you might let a friend ask you questions about your character’s physical appearance and personality. Find a place in the story where the character talks and try to speak as the character would. How would you describe the voice? Do the same with other main characters in your story. If you have found any relevant primary material, this is also a wonderful point to integrate some actual quotes from the character or about the character.

What is the major obstacle or success the character faces in the story or event that you are relating? How does the character react to this? Do they have any second thoughts about their actions? Describe the main challenges and the character’s reactions to them to a friend and as before, let your friend ask questions.

*Plot and meaning.* The framework of the story on which everything else hangs is the plot. Just as a good historian creates interesting stories for the reader based on historical facts, so must you. To do so you need to understand the flow of events, or the plot. To help you get a firm understanding of the story and pare it down to its essence, try to relate it in three sentences in which you tell the beginning, middle, and end of the story. What is the context of the story? What is the most important moment?

*Rhythm.* Varying the rhythm and pacing is another way to heighten an audience’s interest in your story. Identify the parts in the story where the pacing is fast and slow. Retell it, exaggerating the slow and fast parts. Tell the story again and notice where the pacing changes for the first time. Retell that part, exaggerating the change and paying more attention to the transition.

*Language.* Go back over the most important points of the story. Check to see if you are using powerful descriptive words that evoke the meaning of the story. Get out a thesaurus if necessary and substitute more interesting words for some of the less descriptive words you have used. This does not mean, of course, that you are choosing language that visitors do not understand, just more varied language.

## **Movement and Motivation**

Another imagination activity from theatrical training that can be especially helpful to living history interpreters, but also to those who incorporate the storytelling outlined above, relies on imagination, motivation, and movement. Audiences learn more from you than just from the words you say. How you move your body also sends them information. As a very basic example, think about the difference in posture that you

# Making History Connections

would have if given a hug by a favorite friend or relative versus your reaction if someone that you did not like gave you a big hug.

To get an idea of how your movements can send a message, try this classic acting 101 exercise, modified for historical interpreters. This is a good activity to do with a group, but you could also do it alone.

Pretend you are a living history interpreter standing just outside the parlor in a house from the 1840s. You hear visitors enter the parlor from the hall and turn back to enter the parlor. Should you walk into the room in the same way you would if you were in your present-day house, or should you enter as an 1840 person would enter their parlor? How would a person from 1840 enter the room? Each of these ways to enter a room conveys a different message to visitors. Try these examples below, perhaps with a friend to assist. Notice that each of these has an interpretive theme associated with it.

- Quickly—you have misplaced a letter from a dear friend who is traveling to Indiana and you want to find it immediately to show to your husband (or wife). (Your interpretive theme may be to let visitors know about travel conditions in the 1840s).
- In anger—your daughter has just said to you that she wants to write books like Lydia Maria Child when she gets older, so she does not need to learn how to cook. (Theme: role of women in antebellum America).
- With pride—a phrenologist has just read your head and told you that your faculty of courage is well developed. (Theme: interpretation of phrenology and other “philosophical” ideas of the period).

Depending upon the circumstance, you will find yourself entering at a different pace, with a different degree of tension, and with a different force behind your movements. Also, be aware of your posture—how you hold your head and shoulders—and what you do with your hands. You might want to hold a relevant prop (perhaps a letter, a book, or some other object) to give you something to do with your hands and to help convey some meaning to the audience.

Too often, living history interpreters are not aware that when playing a character they can greatly expand their interpretive repertoire and engage visitors better by developing motivations for their character, even for such a simple thing as entering a room. When that happens, the character becomes more interesting to the audience, and when coupled with a carefully designed interpretive theme, the whole interpretation is much stronger.

## Using Imagination: Creating a Scene

One of the most important aspects of being “HIP” is “imagination,” and there is no better way to exercise and grow your imagination than in creating interpretive scenes. Using primary and secondary sources to develop a scene is a logical extension of the

# Making History Connections

storytelling activities above. The key to creating these scenes is using your imagination and letting it run wild. Of course, as you move toward creating a scene for presentation, you should keep in mind the concept of “historical plausibility.”

To begin this exercise, start with a primary source. Below is one such primary source, taken from an article in the February 1840 *Baltimore Clipper*, which describes an accident on the streets of downtown Baltimore in which a boy is run over by a suction engine. A key to doing this exercise effectively is to keep in mind that for any incident that happens, there are multiple perspectives from which to describe and interpret that event. Read over the article below from the *Clipper*:

**A**ccident. A lad about sixteen years of age named Michael Laurence, was yesterday afternoon run over by the suction engine of the Patapsco,<sup>3</sup> while coming down Fayette. His head was considerably lacerated. He was taken into Dr. Alexander’s office, and such aid rendered him as his wounds required. We are only surprised that more accidents of the kind do not happen.

Now, reread the article and try to identify all the various points of view or perspectives that could be used in telling this story. Pretend that you might be interpreting this event for an audience and you want to make it interesting and still accurately tell the events as described. An obvious perspective to choose would be that of Dr. Alexander, who treated the boy. Take a minute or two and make a list—some perspectives are obvious and others are more subtle. Below is a partial list, but don’t peek until you have created your own perspectives.

## People:

- Michael Laurence
- Driver of the suction engine
- Reporter who wrote the story
- Editor of the paper
- Michael’s mother (and other family members)
- Bystanders

## Animals:

- Horses that pulled the engine
- Pigs (American streets were covered with pigs roaming freely at this time)
- Dogs

## Inanimate objects:

- Suction engine
- Road
- Sky

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<sup>3</sup> A 19<sup>th</sup>-century fire engine pulled by horses that pumped water. The “Patapsco” was the name of one of many volunteer fire departments in the city.

# Making History Connections

An important concept to remember is that if you are creating a museum theater scene or a story to tell, you have some flexibility in applying your creative juices. For example, you do not have to be limited in time and space. You could move your interpretation through time to a few months (or even years) later and have a friend of Dr. Alexander relate the story of Michael to a group of people. And since you have moved the telling of the story through time, you could also move it to another location. Perhaps the friend is on a wagon train heading west and tells the story around a campfire.

Once you have established a point of view, take five minutes or so, ideally with a few others, and create a scene that tells the story from the perspective you have chosen. Be sure to include elements that we have mentioned earlier, including thinking about variation in movement, pacing, and vocal expression. As an alternative activity, you could create a story that is told by one person. Remember in both cases to use evocative language to help paint a verbal image of what you are saying.

Your imagination in many ways is like any other part of your body or mind. The more you use it, the stronger and more agile it becomes. Look for opportunities to use it by finding elements of your interpretation or presentation that lend themselves to storytelling and then practice by telling the stories you create to family members or friends. As you begin to finalize your presentation, keep the concept of “historical plausibility” in mind, so you do not stray from your interpretive message.

## Planning for Imaginative Interpretation

Up to this point, the discussion has focused on specific, personal elements of your interpretation. It is now time to step back to view the whole process. Inevitably, some of you will at some point be asked to create a character, a scene, an interpretation, a demonstration, a story, or a welcome greeting. When those occasions arise, it is valuable to be able to take a much broader look at what you are trying to do and how best to do it so your efforts support the museum’s mission and the program or exhibit’s interpretive goal. Below are some elements to consider as you create that presentation, whether it is a museum theater presentation, a living history interpretation, a tour, or a special program.<sup>4</sup>

*What is your goal?* Asking this question should be obvious; on the other hand, museum interpreters often fail to do so, and the answer affects all the other aspects of the project. You need to identify clearly your mission, your goal, and your “spire of meaning”—the essential point you want to get across to visitors.

*Who is your audience?* Are you designing this for elementary school children, for families with young children, adults interested in a specific topic, or a general audience

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<sup>4</sup> These planning elements are based on a workshop conducted by Dale Jones and Margaret Piatt, “Planning Effective Living History Performances” at *A Union of Spirits: A Conference for Interpreters*. The Farmer’s Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y., 1991.

# Making History Connections

including adults and children? Once you know who the audience is, you can begin making decisions about whether the piece should be interactive, dramatic, a more traditional interpretation, or something else entirely.

*What is your interpretive format?* Will you be creating a tour; a living history interpretation for an interpreter that has a station, or specific spot; a short or long museum theater piece; a demonstration; or some other format?

*Where will you perform or present?* Is the space in an exhibit, outside, in the room of a historic house? Will visitors have benches, chairs, low walls, or steps to sit on? Will audiences be positioned so the sun or light is in their eyes or at their backs? Are there distracting sounds coming from another gallery? If so, your audience should be positioned to face away from that area.

*How long will your presentation be?* Long enough to accomplish your goals, but no longer, is the standard but unclear reply. The time range can vary greatly. It could be as short as three to five minutes, or as long as fifty minutes. There is no set answer, although many museums choose a range of seven to fifteen minutes for museum theater presentations. If you are creating a tour, there is also no magic length. Some short but poorly designed and presented tours seem to last an eternity and other long tours keep visitors totally engaged. It really depends upon your audience, your goal, your space, and other factors listed here.

*How will your audiences be oriented?* If you are creating a museum theater performance or a short living history interaction, it is important to let visitors know what is about to happen. Will visitors accidentally stumble upon the program? Will there be an announced time and place? Will an orientation, or description of what is to follow, be built into the presentation or will someone else need to do that?

*How much interaction with visitors and families do you want?* Do you want the audiences only to watch or listen? Do you want families to have some interaction during the presentation or tour? How much? Will it support the main goal? Do you have supplies and props for interaction?

*Have you developed a written script or outline?* While some presentations may successfully arise without conscious planning or scripting, you have a better chance of creating an effective presentation that can be passed on to future presenters or performers if you have planned it carefully and written it down.

If you are creating a museum theater performance and looking for a good playwright, you might contact local university drama departments, community theaters, and local professional companies for possibilities. To assist you in selection, you might ask for previous work or even invest a small amount of money and, after presenting your goals and some information to the playwrights, ask them to create a portion of a scene for you to look over.

# Making History Connections

*Have you allocated time, money, and locations for rehearsal and practice?* Whether this is a museum theater play, a short first person interpretation, or a demonstration, the staff who will be in front of the audience needs to have time and space to rehearse or practice. Be sure to set some rehearsal practice time for the actual space in which they will be performing or presenting.

*Do you have a director for your production?* Many museums fall into the trap of not using a director for their performances or a staff member with director-type abilities for their presentations and interpretations. A director can provide an objective perspective on your performance or interpretation that you can't possibly do yourself and can help you create a more interesting presentation by calling to your attention strengths and weaknesses of your interpretation:

- Effective and engaging parts of your presentation;
- Distracting or ineffective parts of your presentation;
- Points in your presentation where you need to add some variation to your movement—perhaps sitting, standing, leaning against a wall, or moving to a different space;
- Your pacing in case some parts are moving glacially and need to speed up or another part is presented at such a rapid pace that you lose intelligibility;
- Solid tips on how to create a better, more effective presentation.

If you are creating a museum theater piece, you may need to interview several directors to find one who understands the nature of museum education and how to combine that with a theatrical presentation. You might look in university or school drama departments, community theaters, or local professional theaters for a director. If you don't have the time or inclination to search outside your museum for a director, you might look to your own staff to find someone with those abilities. Someone with a good eye can improve staff's presentations tremendously by just watching a few times and giving some inspired coaching.

*Have you considered the use of "prepared impromptu?"* Interpreters or presenters have many opportunities to respond to questions from their audience – the same questions that are asked routinely. Rather than taking each one and answering anew or falling into a pattern of responses that haven't been well-thought out – why not prepare an engaging response that you practice and are ready to give when the occasion arises? A "spontaneous" reply prepared and rehearsed beforehand, a "prepared impromptu" is perhaps the most effective way of consistently making a strong interpretive statement. All good speakers do this, so why not museum interpreters? All it takes is a little bit of time and planning.

How much planning? As Mark Twain once said, "It usually takes me more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech." So it is with these "prepared impromptu." To the audience it appears to be a fresh response to the question they have just asked (from their standpoint, the question is new, of course). You, on the other hand, have prepared and practiced your best response.

# Making History Connections

In any interpretive situation, you can have a number of prepared impromptus, and when someone asks you a question or a topic comes up, you provide a transition/entry line, pull out your prepared impromptu, and off you go! Be sure to incorporate movement, engaging and descriptive language, and interactivity when appropriate.

*Have you made sure your scene or presentation is interesting?* It is worthwhile to stop periodically, look at your presentation or scene and ask yourself, “Is this interesting?” Jon Lipski, playwright for the Museum of Science, Boston, felt that it was so important to make museum theater interesting that he created a “Ten Commandments of Museum Theater” that apply to museum interpretation as well. These Ten Commandments are:

1. *Thou shalt not be boring*
  2. *Thou shalt not be boring*
  3. *Thou shalt not be boring*
  4. *Thou shalt not be boring*
  5. *Thou shalt not be boring*
  6. *Thou shalt not be boring*
  7. *Thou shalt not be boring*
  8. *Thou shalt not be boring*
  9. *Thou shalt not be boring*
- And
10. *Thou shalt always deliver the information.*<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, too many museum presentations place all their emphasis on number ten and load up the presentation with facts and dates. They fail to keep in mind the simple adage to engage and not bore the audience. Note that “engaged” does not mean just “entertained” but implies relevant interpretive content as well.

## Physicality

All thought and imagination will be for naught if the audience or visitors cannot hear or understand you. This is where the “Physicality” aspect of theater comes into play—making yourself understood through your voice and body. We touched on some movement elements above and below we will briefly review some thoughts and exercises related to voice.

Many of you have probably had the unfortunate experience of straining or losing your voice at the end of a long day of interpretation. Others may have difficulty finding enough volume to reach the back of a room in which you are speaking, while others lose their audiences attention because they mumble and do not enunciate their words. In addition, everyone has had the mind-numbing experience of listening to someone who

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<sup>5</sup> Jon Lipski, “Playwriting for Museum or: How to Make a Drama out of Slime Molds” in *Case Studies in Museum, Zoo, and Aquarium Theater*, eds. Laura Maloney and Catherine Hughes, (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1999).

# Making History Connections

speaks in a monotone with little or no inflection or expression and who lulls us into inattention and boredom.

The above problems are common throughout the world of museum interpretation and can all be addressed through voice training techniques commonly used in theater. Five important elements can bring success to your speech efforts: warm-up, breathing, relaxation, articulation, and expression.

*Warm-up.* Just as a dancer or anyone about to do strenuous activity stretches and prepares his or her body for dancing or exercise, so should an interpreter prepare their voice. One of the most effective ways to loosen up and relax your voice is humming, an exercise you can do in the privacy of your car as you drive to work. First hum just a single note, then a favorite song. Next, try humming up and down the scale and dropping down one tone each time.

*Breathing* is the core of your voice. Proper breathing enables you to have sufficient volume to project to those standing in the rear of your group and enough endurance to speak for a long period of time—all of this without straining your voice. When you breathe in properly, you take in enough air for exhalation, and control of that exhalation gives you control of your voice. To give you an idea of how breath affects your volume, try doing this experiment. Take a deep breath, exhale until your lungs are empty, and then try to say as loudly as you can, pushing the sound from your lower abdomen, “History is fun.” If you have emptied your air, you can barely do it. Now take a deep breath, filling your lower lungs (not your chest) and try saying the same thing. Not so hard, is it, when your lungs are full? You can even add volume if you have enough air. The trick is to breathe in so your stomach expands and not your upper lungs.

*Relaxation* affects the pitch of your voice, your volume, and the strain you put on your vocal chords. Try the humming exercise above, with the idea of relaxing your vocal chords and your neck. Notice that your voice should relax and your pitch should be a bit lower. As you learn to control your breathing and relax your voice, you should also lessen the strain on it.

*Articulation* is indispensable for allowing audiences to understand what you are saying and enabling you to be heard without having to speak as loudly. You can increase your verbal dexterity by trying any of the old stand-by practice phrases such as “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers,” or make up your own to practice your enunciation. Try saying the phrases clearly and cleanly, paying attention to the consonants.

*Expression* in your voice gives you nuance, emotion, and emphasis and helps audiences understand your meaning. It makes the sound of your voice more pleasant to the ear—more interesting and less boring. This is clearly one area where many interpreters are remiss. One of the best ways to learn to become more expressive is to read aloud. Try reading to children or to a friend. You might choose some poetry you like, for example Robert Frost’s “The Road Not Taken.” Read it as if you are very sad and then try

# Making History Connections

reading it as if you are quite happy. Try a variety of different emotions. The purpose is to learn a variety of expressive ranges in your voice to help engage your visitors.

Also try to vary your pace—sometimes it makes sense to talk slowly, other times more rapidly. What does not make for an interesting interpretation or talk is to speak at the same pace all the time. Keeping some variation—in pacing, expression, and volume—makes you more interesting to listen to.

## **Coming Back to “Heart”**

Our brief tour through theater and interpretation has taken you through the elements of being “HIPP”—heart, imagination, planning, and physicality. As you begin to look at all four of these and integrate them into your interpretive work, it is useful to keep a couple thoughts in mind. Without proper planning, your efforts will probably not reach the interpretive success you desire. If you do not have the imagination to create engaging interpretation, whether in museum theater, living history characters, guided tours, or other interpretations with visitors, then you run the risk of being boring. If visitors cannot hear or understand you, you will have lost them even with the best-designed interpretation.

Even with all three of the above in place, however, unless you have “heart,” you will find your enthusiasm and energy flagging in the end. Your heart might be tied up with the mission of the museum, or it might be based on the fact that you like talking to people. It might even be based on your enthusiasm for interpreting or performing. In many ways, it doesn’t matter what makes you passionate about your work. It is only important that you have that passion or heart that you can transfer to others. For without heart, you will not have the motivation or the energy to care enough about your work to plan, practice, rehearse, and make it better. And that would be a loss for you and the public.