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Julie Anne Taylor
University of Michigan-Dearborn

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Teaching African American History Through Museum Theatre

Julie Anne Taylor
University of Michigan-Dearborn

The Charles H. Wright Museum in Detroit, Michigan is the largest museum of African American history in the world, housing over 30,000 artifacts and documents. The museum is located in Detroit's cultural center, across from the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Detroit Science Center. In addition to interpreting cultural artifacts, the staff of the Charles H. Wright has, since 2004, been educating the public about African American history through museum theatre. Visitors, including school groups, are led through major events in African and African American history by actors who, dressed in costumes, recite scripts inspired by historical records and oral histories. The Charles H. Wright is the only African American history museum which has a long-term, core exhibit employing museum theatre. This article examines museum theatre as a means of teaching African American history. Surveys of 104 adults who toured the museum suggest that theatre heightens interest in the past and fosters historical empathy. The majority of the participants viewed museum theatre as an effective teaching tool.

The history of the museum

When he established the museum of African American history in 1965, the physician Charles H. Wright sought to increase public knowledge of African American history and culture as well as awareness of the struggle for civil rights (Rich & Wright, 1997). His aim was also to promote African American authorship of history. The museum began as a collection of African and African American artifacts and photographs in the basement of a house in Detroit (Rich & Wright, 1997). In order to reach more people in the community, Wright helped to arrange for a mobile museum to travel to neighborhoods, schools, and churches. Experiencing continued growth in popularity, the museum reopened at its third and current location in 1997. About 100,000 people visited the Charles H. Wright Museum in 2008.

In introducing a new, core exhibit in 2004, the staff of the Charles H. Wright Museum, led by its former president, Christy Coleman-Matthews, sought to capture the attention of the public. Coleman-Matthews (2004) wrote, "...the resounding sentiment was that the exhibit had to be emotionally engaging, academically sound and interactive" (p. 1). In addition to electronic stations, the museum introduced actors to interpret the roles of fictional characters from the past and present. The galleries became like stages on which both actors and visitors were present. The 20 galleries of the *And Still We Rise* exhibit cover 22,000 square feet (Demerson & Sorenson, 2004).

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Living history and museum theatre

The first living history museum, Skansen, was established in the late nineteenth century in Sweden by Artur Hazelius who believed that historical artifacts are best understood when placed within contexts (Bridal, 2004; Magelssen, 2007). To depict life before industrialization, Hazelius had historic buildings from different parts of Sweden brought to the island of Djurgarden in Stockholm where they were rebuilt. Costumed staff later began explaining the collection as well as crafts and trades to visitors. In the United States in 1926, John D. Rockefeller began funding the restoration of the capital of Virginia during the colonial period (Leon & Piatt, 1989; Anderson, 1991). Today, Colonial Williamsburg is arguably the best-known living history museum in America. The former president of the Charles H. Wright Museum, Christy Coleman Matthews, once worked at Colonial Williamsburg as the head of the African-American Interpretations and Presentations program (Magelssen, 2007; Roth, 1998). In 1994, she organized the highly publicized, educational reenactment of a slave auction, based on an actual event in 1773, at Williamsburg. Prior to the late 1970s, Colonial Williamsburg had largely ignored African American history, despite the fact that over half of the inhabitants of Williamsburg were African American in the 1770s (Ruffins, 1992; Handler & Gable, 1997).

The Charles H. Wright differs from Skansen and Colonial Williamsburg in that it is not an open-air museum comprised of historic buildings. Permanent “sets” and actors in costumes bring historical developments to life within the museum of African American history. The Charles H. Wright also differs from living history museums in that its interpreters adhere to scripts. Most of the persons in the interpretive roles are professional actors from the Detroit theatre community (Thomas, 2009). They speak directly to the visitors in either first or third person. Sometimes they interact with one another as the visitors watch. The actors do not normally improvise, break from character, or pause to take questions from visitors. Therefore, the integrity of the scripts and dramatic structures are preserved (Bridal, 2004). The disadvantage of this approach is that visitors are not able to pose questions as they arise.

The scripts used during the *And Still We Rise* tour are based on historical research conducted by Carla Thomas, the former Educational Program Coordinator at the Charles H. Wright. Thomas earned a bachelor’s degree in African and African American Studies at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor. An explanation of the origin of the script would enhance the educational value of the tour, though visitors are not left with the impression that primary sources are being recited. The actors often bring the attention of the participants to artifacts and manuscripts on display in the galleries.

African American historical and cultural museums



In the last fifty years, the role and nature of museums has extended beyond the accumulation, preservation, and interpretation of artifacts. Museums have become centers of communities, and they have explored and defined history, identity, and social change (Kratz & Karp, 2006; Ruffins, 1992). Edward Linenthal (2006) notes in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory* that the United States is in the process of uncovering, excavating, and remapping history, and such acts of restoration are “litmus tests for the integrity of memory” (p. 216).

Among the first museums of African American history and culture was the DuSable Museum of African-American History in Chicago (Ruffins, 1992). The DuSable Museum, founded Margaret and Charles Burroughs in 1961 as the Ebony Museum of Negro History and Art, has a vast collection of artifacts, manuscripts, and works of art (Ruffins, 1992). Professional storytellers, like *griots*, relate stories with African or African American subjects to children in the elementary grades. Visitors may attend dramatic, musical, or dance performances. The DuSable Museum does not have a permanent exhibit which employs museum theatre.

In the late 1960s, having founded and led museums of African American history and culture in Chicago and Detroit, Margaret Burroughs and Charles Wright began organizing national conferences for museum professionals (American Association of African American Museums, 2011). In 1978, the Association of African American Museums was established. It now has over 70 institutional members (Association of African American Museums, 2011). Under the auspices of the Smithsonian, the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) will open on the National Mall in 2015 (Taylor, 2011). The museum was created by an act of Congress in 2003, one year before the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian (Lonetree & Cobb, 2008). The director of the NMAAHC, Lonnie G. Bunch III, hopes that the African American experience will help all people understand the meaning of being American. Bunch wrote, “...important is the opportunity to help all Americans see just how central African American history is for all of us...(the museum) will use African American culture as a means to help all Americans see how their stories, their histories, and their cultures are shaped and informed by international considerations” (Bunch, 2011).

Teaching African American history through museum theatre

The *And Still We Rise* tour at the Charles H. Wright Museum spans two continents and centuries of African and African American history. The actors tell African American history from the perspectives of ordinary people. The great leaders of the Civil Rights Movement such as Martin Luther King, Jr. are not portrayed by the actors, though visitors learn about such leaders during the tour. The museum does not, nor does it intend to, cover African American history exhaustively. The limitations of time and space influence how topics are presented and interpreted.



The museum theatre program at the Charles H. Wright Museum succeeds in conveying a sense of past events in a manner which is highly engaging to visitors. The actors perform in galleries which depict settings such as a West African market, a fortress and dungeon, the deck and holds of a slave ship, an auction block in a colonial American town, a plantation, and Detroit during the boom of the automotive industry. In these sets, the actors recite scripts which were inspired by historical events and periods. Oral history has for many centuries been important in West Africa where *griots* function both as historians and storytellers. The telling of history by the actors calls to mind this tradition (Hale, 1998).

Numerous original artifacts are on display in glass cases throughout the tour, though visitors view simulacra in many of the galleries. Among the primary-source artifacts is a seventeenth-century medallion of the Royal African Company, worn by a slave, with the engraving, "Royal African Company, Black Labor Supply, His Majesty's Tax No. 87." The horrific nature of slavery is evidenced by the shackles from the *Brigg Charlotte* of 1770 and a leather whip. In addition to first-edition copies of Frederick Douglass' book, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* and Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the museum owns a piece of stoneware pottery, a storage jar, by Dave Drake, an African American slave in South Carolina who signed and dated his pieces during the first half of the nineteenth century.

The study

One hundred four adults from the Detroit metropolitan area participated in this study by completing anonymous surveys after touring the *And Still We Rise* exhibit. Postings about the study were made in community centers and public libraries as well as at a local university. Most of the participants were college students. One group of ten people from the Second Baptist Church of Detroit, the first African American church in Michigan, participated. A total of five different tours were organized between March of 2009 and June of 2010. To three of the five questions on the survey, responses were sought on Likert scales, and comments were solicited. Two questions were open-ended. The open-ended questions were "What thoughts or feelings did you have during the tour?" and "What do you think of the use of museum theatre as a teaching tool?"

The findings of this study indicate that the representational practices used by the Charles H. Wright strongly increase visitors' interest in the museum. Ninety-three percent of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the use of museum theatre makes the tour of the Charles H. Wright more interesting. Sixty-six percent strongly agreed. One participant wrote, "The museum theatre was fantastic. (It) really brought the subject matter to life." Another observed that the use of theatre "...involves the visitor more deeply in the experience and makes the information easier to remember..."



Ninety-five percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that encountering actors in the galleries increased their level of engagement. Seventy-five percent strongly agreed. The captivation, motivation, and provocation of the public are goals of museum theatre, as Catherine Hughes (1998), an actor and director at the Museum of Science in Boston, has observed. One participant in the study in the Charles H. Wright Museum wrote that encountering a variety of actors had increased his or her curiosity about and alertness during the different parts of the tour.

The sense of being transported to different periods in time was described by a number of people who visited the museum. "...it was almost as if you were living in that era," wrote one participant. Another described feeling as if he or she had "travelled with some of (my) ancestors." When asked how connected to the past they felt while touring the museum, 69% of the participants in the study reported that they felt strongly connected. This outcome is similar to the findings of Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen (1998) who, along with the researchers of Indiana University's Center for Survey Research, asked 1,453 adults how connected to the past they felt when visiting museums or historic sites. Fifty-six percent of the respondents in their study reported feeling strongly connected to the past in museums. Only gathering with their families led to their having a stronger sense of the past.

Empathy, historical understanding, and cultural awareness

People are impacted both cognitively and affectively by museum theatre (Hughes, 1998; Lord, 2007). According to Carla Thomas (2009), visitors to the Charles H. Wright Museum often identify closely with the narratives or recall personal or familial experiences while and after touring the galleries. The responses of many participants in the study suggest that empathy is fostered by the experience. One participant described gaining "a sense of the personal impact of historical events." Another commented on the important educative function of the tour, "It is important for people to learn and experience our past so that they (or we) do not repeat it."

Among the feelings identified by the respondents on the surveys were anger, sadness, remorse, pride, and hope. One person explained, "You feel as though you are a part. You feel the anger, the fear, and the joy." Many participants reported experiencing strong emotions during the portion of the tour which depicts the Middle Passage. One wrote, "...walking through the slave ship was very emotional. It made me think of what it must have been like for the people who actually lived through it." Another commented, "The tour through the dungeon and ship holds was disturbing and heartbreaking." A third wrote that the tour had "...made the slave trade seem more real, as it was formerly somewhat of an abstract concept of history..."

The cultivation of empathy is significant in history education. Elizabeth Anne Yeager and Stuart Foster have concluded that empathy is central to the construction of historical meaning because history is shaped by human motivation and character (Yeager & Foster, 2001; Cf. Berlin, 1966.) Historical empathy is fostered by thinking about people and events in context (Davis, 2001). It must be rooted in evidence, though it requires imagination (Davis, 2001; Lee &



Ashby, 2001). To have historical empathy, one must think both logically and inferentially (Yeager and Foster, 2001).

In addition to fostering historical understanding, empathy is fundamental to intercultural relations. Imaginative placement leads to identification, reflection, and insight into the thoughts and behaviors of others (Calloway-Thomas, 2010). “Although both sympathy and empathy are crucial in human understanding, above all, empathy is the crucible of intercultural relations,” asserts Carolyn Calloway-Thomas in her book, *Empathy in the Global World* (p. 7).

Museum theatre as a pedagogical tool

Museum theatre immerses participants in life-like simulations of historical realities, deepening their understanding of the past. The members of the audience are on the stage with the actors, though in silent roles, like witnesses. The proscenium arch, a curved space through which audiences in western theatres have traditionally viewed performances, has been eliminated (Megelssen, 2007). Museum theatre renders historical contexts and developments in three-dimensional forms which are accessible and immediate.

The participants in the study at the Charles H. Wright Museum were asked to write their opinions of the use of museum theatre as a teaching tool. Their views were decidedly favorable. One respondent noted that museum theatre “gives you a much more in-depth understanding because it makes you relate to the reality of what happened in the past.” Another wrote, “Without the actors, I would not have felt so connected to the people and history...” Participants commented on the potential of this means of relating history to engage and maintain the interest of students.

John Falk and Lynn Dierking (2000) posit, in their Contextual Model of Learning, that learning is an integrated experience which occurs within changing personal, sociocultural, and physical contexts. Enhanced physical contexts promote learning, when properly constructed. Museum theatre is unique pedagogically because of its address of diverse learners in rich, physical contexts. Its appeals to the learner are sensory, intellectual, and affective (Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson, 1999). The differentiated, complex, and integrated experience generates curiosity and interest (Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson, 1999).

Edutainment and the pedagogical limitations of museum theatre

As increasing numbers of Americans visit museums for educational, value-added leisure experiences, museums have two competing objectives: to educate and to entertain. Despite its educative value, museum theatre has limitations. A number of participants in the study of the Charles H. Wright Museum noted that the structured recitations and transitions between galleries did not allow enough time for the examination of the museum’s artifacts, the reading of its



placards, or the posing of questions. Although the actors have learned the history which they are presenting, their expertise lies primarily in theatre. Impromptu historical discussions are limited. The educational value of the tour at the Charles H. Wright Museum would be improved by the provision of an explanation of the script and by a discussion with an educator following the tour. Overall, the theatre program at the museum is successful because the conveyance of accurate historical and cultural information has always been the priority of the curators.

Cultural and historical museums in Illinois

In addition to visiting the DuSable Museum, educators who seek to expand their students' knowledge of communities and cultures ought to consider the National Museum of Mexican Art. Although the museum does not offer museum theatre, it supports the performing arts. Theatre, dance, and music are performed by Mexican artists regularly. The museum offers workshops on Mexican art, history, and culture as well as open houses to educators. Teachers who participate in the Mexicanidad workshops receive curricular materials and resources. Other cultural museums to which field trips may be planned in Chicago include the American Indian Center, the Balzekas Museum of Lithuanian Culture, the Bronzeville Children's Museum, the Institute of Puerto Rican Arts and Culture, the Irish American Heritage Center, the Mitchell Museum of the American Indian, and the Ukrainian National Museum. The Arab American Action Network, the Chicago Japanese American Historical Society, the Indo-American Center, and the Swedish American Museum send presenters to schools. For a complete list of museums, cultural centers, and institutes, educators may view the web site of the Chicago Cultural Alliance (2011).

The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Illinois has theatrical elements. In the Ghosts of the Library Gallery, the museum utilizes Holavision technology which allows for the appearance and disappearance of on-stage actors and objects. The audience is not on stage; visitors view the library through a window. The museum utilizes dramatic installations, including mannequins of historic persons, and it contains the Union Theatre where plays such as Charlayne Woodard's *Flight* are performed by professional actors. To write her play about an enslaved family and community, Woodard utilized slave narratives and folktales. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Museum also employs new technologies to engage visitors who may watch a hologram of Lincoln delivering the Gettysburg Address (Alexander and Alexander, 2008). Tours by school groups are free.

Museum theatre in the classroom

Collaboration among museum curators, actors, and history educators is required to increase museum theatre offerings. Most museums today have curators of education who are receptive to innovative programs. For teachers who cannot take their students on field trips to museums which offer museum theatre, readers' theatre is a viable alternative. Scripts for social



studies have been published in books such as *Readers' Theatre for African American History*, *Readers' Theatre for American History*, and *Extraordinary Women from U.S. History: Readers' Theatre for Grades 4-8* (Sanders & Sanders, 2008; Fredericks, 2001; Smith, 2003). In addition, Arizona State University offers lesson plans for classroom teachers using theatre. The plans are aligned with the National Arts Education Standards. One lesson plan, "Dramatizing Your Story," requires the students to engage in oral history by interviewing their family members about their ancestry and family history (McCaslin, 2011). The students are asked to bring familial objects from home. They improvise with other students in class. An extension involves transcribing and editing scripts.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that museum theatre, with its simulations of historical developments, is a valuable teaching tool. The communication of African and African American histories and perspectives at the Charles H. Wright Museum is captivating and dynamic. Learning is enhanced by museum theatre's sensory, intellectual and affective appeals. In this study, the participants' levels of interest increased as a result of the actors' performances, and their sense of connection to the past was heightened. Museum theatre also fostered historical empathy and understanding among the participants. Historical events seemed less abstract, and the impact of those events on people was better understood. This study suggests that museum theatre, with its enhanced physical context, merits the attention of social studies educators.



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