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Toward a model of theatrical curation

Lisa Scott-Murphy

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I have become interested in the ongoing conversation between the dramatic experience and the curated experience. I am currently working with a team comprising Dr Andrea Witcomb, a curator from Curtin University and Monita Roughsedge, a theatre and exhibition designer from SOCA @ ECU. We are engaged in discussion with the National Museum and we are putting together a proposal to do further research in this area culminating in a theatrical exhibition with the working title of Crossing Australia.

Our two main areas of investigation raise these questions:

Can immersion theatre be used to expand currently available models of 'experiential' exhibition making in a museum context?
Could such a theatrical curatorial approach be used to address contemporary debates about the relationship between the past and the present in Australian history?

Like many people with young families, I have spent many hours in museums in the last ten years. During that time I have observed an encouraging shift away from didactic modes of presentation toward a more engaging and imaginative form. Curators have used imaginative and artistic techniques to try to engage more with their visitors using dramatic devices such as whispering trees, dancing shadows, telephones that ring and relate a story, buttons to push and audio-visual displays to watch. Over the last decade, there has been a growth of performances held in museums and it is increasingly accepted for theatrical ideas to be at the forefront of public programmes. The majority of public performance programmes in museums however have been designed for children, and many have been developed specifically for school groups. Here, the curatorial teams have worked hard to give their young audience license to discover and play. Museums have used theatre in its traditional form to connect better with this generation usually by employing a Theatre in Education approach through story telling to do so.

Interestingly this development has not infiltrated significantly into the main body of the museum.

Yet the shift toward allowing the visitor's experience of a curated work or indeed the entire museum to be central points toward a need to better address the contemporary audience. The public call is for greater engagement with our history. This experiential mode calls for greater use of more dramatic modes of presentation in our cultural institutions and highlights the need to move away from didactic models and seek greater empowerment of the individual. The visitor needs a place in the stories that are central to the experience of the museum. Museum visitors have so often been treated as pupils so their expectation is therefore to be taught. They have been expected to engage with the subject passively and privately.

There is frequent dissatisfaction about our experiences in a museum and, recognizing this, the recent Review of the National Museum called for a more theatrical approach to some of the work.

Pine and Gilmore from Harvard Business School have called our society an '*experience economy'.* They define experiences as events that engage individuals in a personal way. They know well how valuable it is to the business world to capture the public's hearts and offer them, through shared experiences, a lingering memory. Lucrative and absolutely of our time, theatrical techniques are commonly used in the corporate world, in the media, in news coverage, in sporting events and in our schools. Our education system increasingly employs imaginative and dramatic techniques to teach their subjects, placing high priority on communication skills, applying learning to problem solving. It is not only the children who expect to have an engaging experience when it comes to history. Contemporary audiences are also changing. This shift favours the visitor as an active participant rather than a passive pupil. We are dealing with a very theatre-literate public.

Much of the commercial world is using immersive techniques to engage their clients. They are using theatrical processes and devices. And we are seeking more immersive experiences as our tastes change. It could easily be emblematic of our time. Lured by

the promise of another way of life, exotic perhaps, transported to another time or place, another milieu, more money, less money, fundamentally engages the imagination of the clientele. To be 'taken away' goes some way to appease our restlessness and curiosity. We travel more, watch more TV and internet screens, eat exotically, learn more languages and have greater access to other cultures than any other generation. We are skilled in immersing ourselves. It has given this generation a unique education albeit biased toward the desire for entertainment. It comes at a cost and perhaps the worst symptom is the changing attention span induced by a diet of ten second grabs of information before a new scene inevitably competes for the viewer's concentration. This has made difficult the quiet and sober viewing of objects behind glass within museum contexts that was founded on a different system of reflective education. This isn't to suggest that viewing a collection with quiet and serious contemplation has become entirely out of reach for the population but rather highlights the willingness the current society has to engage personally with ideas, stories and artifacts. It also highlights generational change and the need for interaction between the two.

One way of addressing these issues is by giving the audience the critical role of author or curator and allowing them to relate to the work personally. We need to construct exhibitions that connect with their story, their family and the present, to create an event that illuminates each individual's place in the epic narrative of our national identity. These connections depend on the public's ability to engage imaginatively and emotionally with the materials held in the museum. This requires an investment from the audience. In other words, they need to care. Successful theatre like the best curated work depends upon the visitor's imagination and willingness to take on new ways of thinking in response to their experience of the performance.

Fortunately people love to engage imaginatively with a subject. As Alain Berthoz writes

"Our brains take pleasure in playing, in guessing the real and the false, in lying, in laughing and crying, in capturing and fleeing, in predicting the future –in a word – living."

A curated experience is like a play because in both events a sequence of scenes, artefacts, images, stories and so on offer directions and clues so that the participant(s) might be involved in an extraordinary experience. As theatre practitioners, we ask our

audience to engage with the work intellectually, emotionally and imaginatively as well as physically, often delving into the higher orders of imagination and experience.

A curated experience comprises of a set of intriguing artefacts, images and ideas. They work together and individually to inspire a visitor, convince and compel them to listen with their hearts and minds. In the theatre, we require of the audience extraordinary insight and imaginative solutions to fascinating dramatic 'problems'. This is a shared experience as well as a private one.

In the theatre, the audience has a vicarious and visceral experience. It is vicarious because our investment in the characters and situations on the stage is emotional and organic. This vicarious role allows us to live great deeds through others and experience more fully aspects of humanity that are kept well controlled in our daily lives. It is visceral because we understand language and imagery through an experiential knowledge. Without our physical and empathetic involvement with what is happening on the stage our understanding of the performance would be minimal. Communication is developed through a shared experience and we evolve language to represent lived experiences. We 'read' a sequence according to the meaning we give it – how it relates to our understanding of the world and how it connects with our imagination.

An audience in the theatre enters with an unspoken agreement. We are invited to suspend our disbelief. We also invest empathically with the work. The consequence of this is that we come to care about what possible outcomes are unfolding on the stage. The nature of that type of attention during a theatrical experience is sometimes experienced as a sense of "flow". This is also a term familiar to performers. It is a state in which the imagination can interact with the work and inform what you do with the connections made. We feel in tune with our intuitition.

In other words being in the audience involves an integration of the real and the make believe. Curators and directors can synthesize a myriad of clues into a performance that is able to be read and interpreted by the audience. They sometimes construct this as believably as possible and sometimes they expand the performance to levels that are challenging the audience's notion of what is possible. To do this, we construct a theatrical sequence by guiding the audience's attention in specific ways, building the

work, complete with contradictions. The audience ‘believes’ through recognition and imagination - even when the work is heightened, expressionistic and far from the everyday. The combination of empathy and transformation offers us an exciting diversity and when entered into with a playful spirit is relatively free of judgment and censorship.

In the theatre, there is a broad permission to work in this area of playful transformation. As theatre practitioners we directly influence the audience’s imagination by setting up an intellectually imaginative and physically expressive environment and the audience responds to this dialogue emotionally and intellectually

Theatre also offers immediacy. The sense that the event is happening now and is dependant on the audience is a very powerful tool for personal engagement. The audience is complicit in the work. It is unique because it is here, happening now and is felt experientially.

Theatrical practice can offer a number of useful resources and techniques when building a dramatic curated experience. Such events invite a visitor to be involved and sense that they are immersed in a contemporary and personally connected form of true stories. At a time of great flux in national identity, these theatrical processes enable practitioner’s greater freedom and range of imaginative responses that allow for a wide range of options.

In a museum context, we take seriously the significance of the collection and the selected events of true history with which we are working. The use of imagination must illuminate not distort or alter the nature of the work.

I have been impressed by the work currently being done at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York whose devices are also theatrical. They take small groups of about 12 people into an apartment that has not changed in 70 years. There, you are greeted by a young woman who plays ‘Victoria'. She meets you at the door and invites you in. Your group is introduced as recent arrivals to Manhattan, seeking accommodation who, like her, are Jewish. While waiting for the landlord she engages you in conversation, giving advice as to how to get by in the neighborhood. You are

encouraged to ask questions and she improvises in such a way that all the information is released in response to the questions. I found it a delightful experience, spending half an hour in another century which allowed me to experience what it might have been like to live there then.

Another significant experience for me occurred when I visited the National Holocaust Museum in Washington. This remarkable centre was set up by a theatre director who had a great vision of allowing the space and the stories to unfold dramatically. He ensured that the audience experienced the museum and connected to the history in a very engaging and respectful way. Here there are no actors, no show biz at all – no evocative soundscapes. Instead as you arrive you are met by elderly people who politely give you a ticket and tell you when you can enter the major exhibition. In the meantime, there are other smaller exhibitions to take in – one designed for children to wander through a typical home and follow the fictitious story of David who was sent to a camp and who lost his family to the gas chambers.

The other exhibition, on the hidden children, was set up in quite a traditional way with many potent artifacts, dolls, drawings and such like with many photographs and small 20 second grabs of reminiscences playing on monitors. The stories coalesced to give some sense of the scale of the holocaust and were of course incredibly moving. The main exhibition was behind a massive brick wall with great steel doors and two elevators. We entered in small groups. Once inside the metal box nothing happened for many minutes until a short documentary played on a TV screen high above our heads providing some basic history and 'setting the scene'. It acted as a prologue. Once inside we could wander along major pathways but also return to read, listen and reflect. The subdued lighting guided our gaze and there was an active but quiet ambience. Many people were moving through the exhibition, it clearly has an enormous visiting population. The artifacts, photos, text and devices asked you to attend to each story with renewed interest and were beautifully curated. Each scene changed your attention, perhaps just by the act of peering down into a pit to find spent artillery, or walking through a corridor that had well lit side panels- full of shoes – hundreds of them or passing through a corridor of hair. There were a series of gangways leading from one part of the building to another and the well over which you pass, falling to the floor three stories below was lined with everyday photographs of people, kids, grandparents lovers, families, soldiers, teachers, nurses, shopkeepers. By the end, we realize that this entire village had been

wiped out and that we had been gazing into the faces of all those who had died. This Museum managed to give you a sense of scale.

I had been apprehensive about visiting this museum. As I left I thought how remarkably it had been directed, with a very skilful design of experiences that prevents you from flooding with emotion but rather leaves you better informed, educated and clearer, with a wider sense of humanity.

Both these museums have as their base, a single theme. One, the immigrant experiences of the 1930's on the Lower East Side of New York, the other, the Holocaust.

I have created two performance works that have also informed this area of research in the last 5 years. One was a work performed in 2000 called *Savage Hope*. This was developed from some research I had done with Dr Michael Campanelli, a visionary Arts Therapist whose work on autobiographical processes using visual art was outstanding. We set up a project and worked with a group of performers and therapists to find an integrated artistic practice that would give us insight into the driving themata of each individual. I then devised a physical theatre show that explored how young adults dealt with change and how this reflected on that generation facing the millennium. The process drew on biographical stories and extraordinary moments of transition. This was woven together into a show that was successful at the time. Set on a hot Perth night in a stranger's backyard, unusual groups of people connect. It did not follow a linear narrative and the kaleidoscopic events took us to Africa and the Gold Coast, to imminent bushfires and the desires of a wild imagination. The show ended with a cool change and pouring rain. *Savage Hope* spoke dramatically of the problem of youth suicide and the difficulties of change in a world in flux; of expectations and dreams, of tenderness and friendship, of alarm and the desire to escape. It was regarded as absolutely of its time.

My experience tells me that immersion theatre may be used to expand currently available models of 'experiential' exhibition making in a museum context and
that such a theatrical curatorial approach could be used to address contemporary debates about the relationship between the past and the present in Australian history

Let us imagine then a model of theatrical curation.
We cannot predict the outcome because the answers to these questions will depend on the findings of the research into dialogic work. However we do have some indication of what the outcomes might be. We also can discuss what it will not be.

In searching for a collaborative form from the outset we know, for instance, that it is not going to be based on the theatre idea of a performance or play. It is not Theatre- in-Education, nor is it a work that illustrates one aspect of a curated work that exists in the mainstream of the museum elsewhere. It will not be designed to satisfy corporate events based on an already existing model. Rather it will be a curated work developed in collaboration with the museum, bringing together a collaborative curatorial and theatrical team who work on the structure and form of the exhibit. Let's call it by the name theatre and museums use, a show.

We want to create a curated show that is experiential in its form. The audience will need to change its accepted position and, at times act as curator as they move through the work, at other times behaving more as an empathetic audience. Undoubtedly the relationship to the work will be livelier than perhaps some of the older models of curation allow. By empowering the visitor to decipher and experience the work, we hope to attract a wide audience, give greater ownership to the event and to provoke greater commitment to thinking and connecting personally to the themes running through the work.

Crossing Australia will explore national identity by using a traveling theme both geographically and in time. This archetypal idea of the continent island and its remarkable communities are at the core of our national identity. It unites the themes of the National Museum and offers a broad audience with whom to connect the work. Next year there is a focus on outreach at the NMA. There is an expectation that our national institutions have a direct presence in remote communities and regional centres. Crossing Australia would add a new collection to the important collection based in Canberra. The event ideally would provide a focus for forums and other events that will connect the communities to the work adding their experiences and discussing the issues it raises.

Crossing Australia would be developed to unite the past with the present and integrate the main areas of the NMA. It therefore crosses many boundaries – those within the National Museum, the intersection of museology and theatre, integration of commercial and artistic practice as well as investigating educational and interpretative aspects of contemporary life.

Imagine an exhibit that is constructed as a series of interlocking 'rooms'. These would be designed to be as flexible as a theater space needs to be. Each room would allow for immersive experiences and function in a theatrical sequence and perhaps on a ten minute cycle. The use of sound, lighting and sets of course supports dramatically the curated work. The audience or visitor would be guided by the sequence that unfolds in a captivating way. They may make a direct narrative of the work at times and finally they may simply have greater understanding of the nation as a result of their journey across the continent and across time. Each room could take the visitor further into the world of the communities visited, offering surprises and contradictions as all good theatrical experiences do. They then have enough clues and intrigue to begin to piece the whole event together. On departure, visitors will be thinking & talking about their experiences in the car park, piecing together the politics, the dilemmas and ultimately the relevance as the total experience enters their time, their homes and memories. It will be a theatrically curated work, as rigorous as any museum exhibit and an exciting and dramatic enactment too.

By creating the rooms with simple flexible sets we can allow people to enter the world of the event and place them inside the story demanding their attention and requiring them to put it together. Imagine a series of shows on land-use and climate change as is told in rural histories or the changing culture within community groups since settlement, the indigenous relationship with itinerant workers or each town's 'claim to fame'?

Perhaps we'll hear "the Museum is coming to town!!! "

Although not without precedent, this work, as far as I know, is unique in that we are creating an experiential exhibit curated dramatically from the outset and one that unites several major themes of the NMA – the nation, the land and the people, by creating work

drawn from communities across the country. Not only is it a new form but it actively involves communities and increases our national heritage collections.

We know how to engage theatrically. Yet, unfortunately with so much television and film and reducing attendance in theatre, we often expect to do so quite passively and sit in the dark to let our eyes and mind do the imaginative work. We are increasingly dealt a minimalist package – 10 sec bites of easily digested information. The theatrical curation model would have to function on several levels to allow for as wide an audience as possible; a thing that I think theatre is good at. In fact Shakespeare was better at it than most. Working on many levels and providing relief at critical moments, he encouraged audiences to listen with good attention spans. By having many things to be immersed in, this model should enable all people to have an interesting experience. We do not want to send the kids to a junior performance while the adults ponder glass boxes. Let's bring them together in an event that tells many stories of our land.

Theatre calls on imagery and dramatic tension, it charts a journey accumulating changes, it calls on surprise and contradictions, it uses rhythm and sound, light and text, and the theatrical experience demands an intellectual, emotional, sensual and kinesthetic commitment from its audience so that they share an event that is happening in the present .

Let us use some of these theatrical devices to release the scholarly work and the museum's collection in a vital form that speaks directly to an audience and places them as central to the experience. The time is right for a theatrical exhibition that tells many stories, within an immersive experience: one that engages and connects to our current society. At a time when more research is taking place on greater community involvement, it is an ideal to time to take the museum out of its glass case and let the audience in. This unique model for theatrical curation sees designers, curators and directors working together from inception to create a work that is both valid in museology terms as well as exciting theatrically.

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Lisa Scott-Murphy is experienced in cross-disciplinary research (theatre movement and design/ Australia Council grant, visual art therapy/performance Savage Hope 2000 and architecture/devised performance work Trespass 2002,). Lisa's first degree is in science, her training in acting and movement and her masters is in Movement Design. She has worked as an actor, a movement designer, fight choreographer and director. At WAAPA she is the Head of Movement in the Theatre Department and directs students in both text and original works. Her consultancy work includes the Australian Medical Association working with overseas trained doctors, the National Museum of Australia sitting on the performance advisory committee and as a free lance movement designer. Lisa recently returned from a trip studying outstanding museum performance in New York, Boston, Washington and Orlando's Disneyworld and is currently developing a project on theatrical curation.

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