DIGGING A DITCH WITH UNDERGRADUATES: A MUSEUM THEATRE EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This article documents a museum theatre project that involved undergraduates as creators and performers of a play for elementary students. Five themes emerged from the project: three relate specifically to museum theatre settings, while two identify areas for further investigation of any student-devised production. The article ends by offering suggestions for involving undergraduates in the development of museum theatre.

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Keywords: *MUSEUM THEATRE; PARTNERSHIPS; STUDENT ENGAGEMENT; PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION; CREATIVE PROCESSES.*

In the dual role of drama education professor and museum board member, I volunteered to oversee an Ontario museum's initial venture into creating live theatre for children. The resulting one-act play *Inch by Inch, Meter by Meter* won praise from museum personnel, school audiences and local media. I, however, unsatisfied with my own participation in the event, decided to engage in a self-reflective exercise of critical praxis (Neelands, 2006:15). A product of my self-reflective voyage, this paper chronicles the development of a production devised and performed by third-year undergraduates for audiences of school children aged nine to eleven.

This particular university-museum partnership originated to serve three constituents. For the university, it would provide an opportunity for undergraduate drama education students to create and perform a play for young audiences. For the museum, it would address the goal of increasing elementary student visits to the site. For schools, it would bring an aspect of local history to life. I assumed that I brought to the project (a) the capacity to integrate constituent goals and (b) practical experience in facilitating collective creations. As this paper reveals, these ambitious assumptions precipitated both positive and negative outcomes. What emerged for me were new understandings of partnership, the creative process and student engagement. I begin by introducing relevant museum theatre concepts.

Museum Theatre Concepts

In recent years, the phenomenon labelled *museum theatre* has grown tremendously (Roth, 1998; Schindel and Oughtred, 2001). Roth defined museum theatre as 'a play, scene, monologue, or first-person interpretation performed in a traditional gallery environment or a museum auditorium' (1998:194). *First-person interpretation* involves the portrayal of either real or imagined persons from the past in which performers refer to the past in the present tense and avoid breaking character (1998:183). According to International Museum Theatre Alliance (IMTA) founder Catherine Hughes (1998:iii), museum theatre's purpose is to provoke 'an emotive and cognitive response in visitors concerning a museum's discipline and/or exhibitions'.

A focus on purpose suggests various rationales for museum theatre, including 'education, publicity, marketing, [and] entertainment' (Jackson, 2000). Often, 'museum administration [wants] to teach about the social history of [a] site, while intertwining the museum's important teaching objects in the context of a story' (Schindel, 2002). Almost always, museum theatre is created for a specific venue in order to communicate a human element of the museum's focus: 'to inspire, motivate, and capture curiosity; to provoke reflection and inquiry; to stimulate questions and connections; and, finally, to satisfy the human need for a good story' (Hughes, 1998:119).

Several museum theatre productions have specifically targeted elementary students (Saxton and Burke, 1986; Schindel, 2002; Schindel and Oughtred, 2001). Audience feedback has suggested that pupils value museum theatre projects, engage cognitively and affectively in the contexts portrayed, vividly recall narrative details, empathise with problems of the characters and view the theatre experience as more authentic than traditional museum offerings (Jackson, 2000, 2002).

'Inch by Inch, Meter by Meter': An Artifact of the Project

The focus of this paper is a Canadian museum's inaugural Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) project. Third-year drama education university students, enrolled in a Theatre for the Community course, created and performed a one-act play for school audiences of children aged nine to eleven. Museum staff selected the topic of the play – the Welland Canal – to commemorate the 175th anniversary of the man-made waterway. What follows is an artifact of the event (City of St. Catharines, 2004), much like a plaque that might be exhibited in the museum to commemorate its occurrence.

'Inch by Inch, Meter by Meter': A Museum Theatre Partnership

Across North America, the late 20th century witnessed a trend in the use of live theatre to animate museum exhibits. With an original play about the history of the Welland Canal, the St. Catharines Museum joined the museum theatre movement in 2004. The inaugural production brought to fruition a partnership between the St. Catharines Museum and Brock University's Dramatic Arts Department that was initiated in the winter of 2003. At that time, the museum's board of directors and the Chair of Brock's Dramatic Arts Department agreed to invite university students to create an original historical script to be performed at the museum for local school audiences. The museum's education coordinator requested a play about the history of the Welland Canal, in honour of the canal's 175th anniversary. In the winter of 2004, a class of eighteen third-year undergraduate students devoted Friday mornings to researching local history and developing a script about the Welland Canal.

The play, titled *Inch by Inch, Meter by Meter,* incorporated a variety of movement and vocal techniques in depicting incidents related to construction of the original canal in the early 1800s. A few of the characters, including William Hamilton Merritt and George Keefer, represented real historical figures. For the most part, however, the actors created fictional characters based on events that happened during the canal's construction. Attempting to reveal the effects of the canal on the labourers who built it, the play focused considerable attention on the plight of poor Irish immigrants who came to Canada in search of land and good wages. It ended with a modern enactment of the *Top Hat Ceremony*, an annual event that marks the passage of the first boat of the season through the Welland Canal.

The museum theatre project exemplified an arts-based partnership that benefited everyone involved. The St. Catharines Museum, Brock University and local schools were enriched by a shared experience. *Inch by Inch, Meter by Meter* was performed on Friday mornings in March and April for school audiences of Grades 4 to 6.

A Narrative and Thematic Analysis of the Project

Two years following the production of *Inch by Inch, Meter by Meter*, personal dissatisfaction with my own participation in the event motivated me to write a first-person narrative titled *Who Ever Said Digging a Ditch Would Be Easy?* (McLauchlan, 2007). The title of the narrative arose from the opening chant of the play: 'Inch by inch, meter by meter, We'll dig a ditch and dig it deeper.'

I viewed first-person narrative an appropriate self-reflective technique in this project for three reasons. First, it supplied a monologue of the event, much like a first-person interpretation performed in museums, thus mirroring museum theatre's approach to personalising history. Secondly, it adhered to sound principles of qualitative research (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). Following selective coding procedures (Strauss and Corbin, 1990:116-129), a story emerged from multiple sources, including (a) notes I maintained of production planning sessions, (b) my Theatre for the Community lesson plans, (c) logbook entries I made immediately after each class, (d) the play script and (e) media reports of the event. Most importantly, the act of crafting the narrative invited me to step back and critically address my participation in the event. In the process, I was able to untangle five themes related to museum theatre and collective creation with undergraduate students. In an approach borrowed from Donelan (1999), this section of the paper entwines thematic interpretations with narrative excerpts.

Theme #1: Before beginning a museum theatre project, it is important that expectations, goals, responsibilities and concerns of all constituents are both articulated and acknowledged as early as possible in the process.

Narrative Excerpt

Our play was collaboratively created in the first seven weeks of a 13-week course that met three hours per session. The remaining six weeks involved one weekly performance for local schools. Discussions held months before term began identified goals and responsibilities of various stakeholders: the museum's board of directors, education coordinator and curator; the University Dramatic Arts Department; and local elementary school teachers. However, one important group was missing — namely,

the undergraduates who would be creating and performing the play were not involved in any initial planning sessions. Nor were their potential goals and expectations taken into account. By the time the class first met, I felt somewhat prepared for the daunting task ahead but anxious that I had not been able to include the students in early decision making — anxious for good reason, as soon became evident. From the first day, student ignorance of the production's demands emerged as a major obstacle to its success. Discussion revealed that many had not anticipated this class to be a high priority of their semester. Previous drama education courses had not strictly entailed performance for an outside audience and students had entered this class expecting to perform at the museum if and only if *their script actually came to fruition. By the end of the fourth week a full class had been present for only one half hour of one session! Health and car problems, hangovers, unreliable alarm clocks, dental and other appointments all deterred students from attending, arriving on time or staying until the end of a session.*

Writing this section of the narrative led me to realise the folly of assuming that the university's institutional commitment to the museum theatre project would automatically be matched by undergraduate students whose opinions were unheard until the first day of class. In essence, the play's creators and performers were absent from preliminary planning sessions when the museum and the drama department fleshed out decisions based on our mutual interests and goals. The museum, in informal consultation with elementary teachers, had already decided on the topic of the play. Based on time constraints of creating a one-hour production in seven 3-hour classes, I had already decided on its basic structure. A few students later reported that the absence of their voices in initial project stages directly contributed to their lack of commitment during script development and rehearsal.

In contrast, although closely involved in initial planning, the museum's role in developing the play was minimal (beyond providing resource materials and costumes). Problems related to factual inaccuracy, the handling of exhibit articles and the suitability of content for children surfaced during the preview performance. These might have been avoided had I invited museum staff to attend script development sessions. Rather, for the sake of expediency, I positioned myself as the conduit between the university students and the museum. As revealed in the following excerpt, I should have created more opportunities for interaction between the play's creators and commissioners.

Narrative Excerpt

After their initial visit early in the course, the students' next return to the museum wasn't until dress rehearsal, when we competed for space with a noisy repair crew and a couple of bus tours. With the preview performance hours away — and an audience of media, city officials, university faculty, museum board members and supporters — no one had assumed responsibility for such mundane necessities as setting up seats.

More pressing problems emerged during the preview itself.

First, museum staff noted some factual inaccuracies, one serious enough to warrant script revision and additional rehearsal. Secondly, docents worried that children's exuberance for the play might incite them to infringe

on out-of-bounds spaces and touch restricted objects. Thirdly and most seriously, a few long-time museum supporters complained that sections of the play were inappropriate for children. Specifically, they disapproved of an episode in which a husband slapped his wife, and also wanted to delete a scene dealing with riots provoked by racial and religious hatred. Museum staff felt obliged to placate the supporters and asked my opinion about toning down the play. Fearing both a revolt from the cast and a wound to the script's integrity if I complied, I accepted a compromise. The play would be performed as written; however, during post-show chats the actors would demonstrate the stage slap technique and also denounce any intolerances portrayed as unacceptable behavior.

As in other museum settings (Schindel, 2002), our play's creators relied on museum staff as sources of research and production material. Yet, as the person in charge of the project, I failed to invite anyone from the museum to early rehearsals where factual inaccuracies could have been corrected and assumptions about handling museum objects could have been addressed. Nor did I include the museum in decisions about the appropriateness of content for children. I also incorrectly assumed that museum staff would be aware of our needs for dress rehearsal day and failed to coordinate responsibilities for such necessary tasks as setting up chairs for the preview audience.

According to Hughes, the interests of museum staff must be recognised in relation to both the choice of material dramatised and the means by which that material is presented (Hughes, 1998:21). What I learned from the preview experience was that related stakeholder opinions must also be solicited and taken into account. In the present example, museum supporters critical of the play's content were elderly volunteers who were totally unprepared for a production that challenged a traditionally sanitised version of history. Their unfavorable reactions were exacerbated by the fact that their first introduction to the play occurred during a preview performance for local dignitaries.

Theme #2: Museum theatre is a hybrid phenomenon that reconciles content and techniques of two distinct traditions of communicating with the public.

Narrative Excerpt

Faced with the dual tasks of educating and entertaining local school children, the undergraduate students were determined to create a play that their audiences would enjoy. Three types of characters emerged from their playbuilding activities: (a) actual historical figures, (b) a mythical character from indigenous legend and (c) original persons, based loosely on factual accounts. The historical figures, all male, were played by females. The legendary First Nations character was played by a blond, blue-eyed male, and the original characters focused on universal relationships of family and the workplace. A student of East Indian descent played an Irish immigrant. For humorous purposes, one scene anachronistically used modern snorkeling equipment. The play thus blended fact and fiction in ways that accommodated the needs and interests of its creators.

The class settled into a structural pattern that balanced realistic dialogue with factual monologues, spoken out of character directly to the audience.

This technique became one way of reconciling the play's educative purpose and entertainment value.

In facilitating the creation of museum theatre for young audiences, I became aware that infusing non-traditional spaces with theatrical performance can introduce incongruous elements of purpose, content and presentation methods. As a hybrid, museum theatre must uniquely blend pedagogy, artistry and entertainment value (Saxton and Burke, 1986). While focusing on instructive purposes and reflecting historical authenticity, 'theatre must not become another didactic tool for museums' (Hughes, 1998:25) with plots and characters used as mere vehicles for teaching about artifacts. Partly because 'mixing up truth and lies' is the 'stock and trade' of theatre artists (O'Toole, 1995) authenticity is a 'problematic notion' (Jackson, 2000) for museum theatre practitioners. Creators of museum theatre must balance entertainment and pedagogy, fiction and fact, goals of museums and the integrity of theatre art. During rehearsal I sometimes wondered if our target audiences would be perplexed by the play's conscious anachronisms and instances of gender/color-blindness. Following the preview performance I silently questioned the appropriateness of some enacted events (factually representative as they may be) that might disturb children.

Narrative Excerpt

Despite my concerns about entertainment versus the instructive value of various scenes, response from the school groups was unanimously positive in terms of both education and enjoyment. Audience members weren't at all confused by intentional anachronisms and gender/colour-blind casting, and they definitely weren't offended or disturbed by 'the slap.' In fact, it was heartening to observe the warmth that developed between actors and children in almost all performances.

Criticising a 'pedagogy of the polite' that marks some TYA productions, O'Toole (1995) claimed that in many performances for children, 'primary purposes have nothing to do with drama, but with reaching other goals, in a culture very much bound up with answers, and not only answers but right answers'. O'Toole labelled such theatre 'charmless.' For O'Toole, charm is an important TYA element because it arouses curiosity for the new and unfamiliar without destroying reassurance of the familiar. In O'Toole's opinion, charm potentially resides in dramatic events, fictional contexts and actors' personalities.

I believe that O'Toole's notion of charm captures the attraction for children to theatre that is created specifically for them by either secondary or tertiary students. In the present example, young audiences warmed to the play for what seemed to be a variety of reasons, all related to the 'charm' of the event. Essentially, the experience was enticing in itself. Children were invited to a play created specifically for them in a non-traditional venue that had never before produced theatre. By including a couple of unsavory events, the play did not cater to 'polite' notions of sanitised history. Rather, the young audiences were captivated by a context that humanised local historical events by focusing on readily understandable problems of family and other social relationships. Moreover, they appeared to identify willingly with student performers, whose own youthful exuberance and earnestness seemed to trigger similar affective responses from their audiences.

Theme #3: As non-traditional sites of performances for children, museum settings place unique demands on performers and audiences.

Narrative Excerpt

The museum is accessed through an open foyer, overlooking the Welland Canal, with a permanent 3-tiered riser close to the exhibit entrance. The exhibit area is a narrow, winding avenue of niches and display cases. Potential performance spaces include the façade of a shanty, the helm of an old tugboat, a replica of a sea captain's office, stacks of barrels, and a large topographical model of the region. The curator allowed access to all of these spaces, cramped though they might be.

The play began and ended in modern-day scenes involving the entire class, the opening occurring on and around the foyer riser, and the final scene enacting the annual ceremony that welcomes the first boat of the season through the canal each spring. The bulk of the play was staged in various locations within the narrow and winding exhibit area. Scenes were linked by a narration strategy that moved the audience both temporally and spatially from one area of the museum to another.

Because museum theatre is complicated by eccentricities of space, and visitors do not automatically transfer rules of theatre etiquette to museums (Schindel, 2002), one task of TYA in a museum setting is to harmonize audience expectations of two distinct events. Theatre visits are usually discretely rule-bound occasions where codes of appropriate behavior are signalled by such mediators as assigned seats, dimmed lights, closed exit doors and the parting of proscenium curtains. 'A theatre is built for drama and its semiotics are exciting and reassuring to its patrons' (O'Toole, 1995:82).

In contrast, today's museums feature interactive devices that invite spontaneous audience discussion and mobility. During museum theatre performances, visual distractions of peripheral exhibits compete for audience attention. Lack of traditional theatre seating, sometimes accompanied by the need for viewers to change location as a play progresses, exacerbates confusion about spatial territory. Rules about restricted museum objects might be compromised when audiences view actors using props that have the appearance of genuine artifacts. Museum theatre audiences require 'a structure for the visitors' experience that defines and signals the "rules of the game" they are being asked to play' (Jackson, 2000).

In the present example, our play used four strategies to promote appropriate audience behavior. First, before each performance, school groups were welcomed by a museum staff member who introduced the play's structure and explained differences between theatrical properties and genuine museum artifacts. Secondly, the children sat on portable mats that served as individual spatial territory throughout the performance. Thirdly, the play began outside the exhibit area, with the audience positioned in a traditional proscenium arrangement, tacitly signalling norms of theatre etiquette. Finally, as the play progressed, a 'transition team' of actors led the audience through the museum, using their own positions to establish the perimeters of audience space.

Theme #4: The process of creating an original script does not necessarily generate aesthetic engagement and a positive collaborative culture.

Narrative Excerpt

All student actors were involved in the first and last scenes of the play, scenes that I directed and largely facilitated. The majority of the play was developed from topics selected by classmates during their initial visit to the museum. For much of the script development process, they worked in separate self-determined groups on the scene of their choice. Each group also met with me for two rehearsals outside of class, where we focused undivided attention on each scene's blocking, character development and timing.

Early in the process, I realised that working groups had self-selected primarily by clique-based friendships rather than interest in specific topics. More destructively, some classmates overtly detested others. For example, when I asked one student to demonstrate a dance he had choreographed, his performance was met by stony silence from many classmates rather than the praise it deserved.

It quickly became evident that several students lacked experience in collaborative script development and performance. Some were frustrated when asked to translate factual information into a narrative dramatic structure. Improvising dialogue that moved the scene along was also difficult. A few classmates required intense levels of coaching and monitoring during class. In rehearsal, three students balked at the notion of memorising lines and blocking. One ended up carrying a clipboard as a prop (although this was not an appropriate accessory) for the sole purpose of reading her lines. The pressure of creating a play of high quality weighed on the class. Stress emanated palpably from the group.

Before and after performances, students continued to congregate in clique-based groups. No tangible sense of cohesion ever developed within the class as a whole and some personal animosities grew rather than diminished as a result of performance-related events. Although some students claimed to enjoy and learn from the experience, a few remained almost obsessively affected by their negative attitudes toward classmates and others complained that I had been excessively demanding and perfectionistic.

Rooted in the seminal influence of Slade (1954), building a positive (and even transformative) sense of community among students has been an aim of drama educators for over fifty years. Many early writings in drama education held out a promise that participating in drama's collaborative tasks naturally hones skills of co-operation, compromise, empathy and values clarification. Such generous attitudes arise uncritically from an assumption that drama education is ceaselessly positive and constructive (Rasmussen, 1996). According to O'Farrell (1996b) however, participating in drama does not necessarily entail personal and social growth. O'Farrell and other opponents of a utopian view of drama as an educational cure-all have asserted the need for genuine

critical discourse (Hornbrook, 1995, Rasmussen, 1996). My experience in creating museum theatre with tertiary students attests that the process of collaborative script-building does not necessarily generate either a positive social climate or a sense of aesthetic engagement among classmates.

Engagement in collaborative drama work involves the presence of certain social conditions. In O'Farrell's (1996a) opinion, these include community bonding, a free exchange of innovative ideas and a heightened sense of purpose. Bundy (2004) found that aesthetic engagement among tertiary students is influenced by the relationship of students to each other and the facilitator, the degree of interest in and comfort felt regarding the dramatic premise of topic being explored and participant familiarity with the form of drama. In a previous study, I discovered that a positive collaborative culture requires a shared sense of participant identity and affiliation, an appropriate balance between student freedom and teacher-imposed structure, student choice within assigned tasks and fluidity of group membership (McLauchlan, 2001). Ironically, in working with the museum theatre students I did not heed my own previous findings, primarily because I felt the constant pressure of time constraints. I focused more strongly on theatrical product than on communal social health.

Because I did not attend sufficiently to requisite social elements, the museum theatre project lacked important preconditions for an optimal collaborative environment. A few factors contributed to this shortcoming; most were exacerbated by the urgency to create an original script of high quality in seven weeks of class time. First, the students and I entered the course as strangers, with no shared history or basis of trust when the project began. Moreover, driven by the need for expedience, I focused class time on developing a script rather than 'building a tribe' (Booth, 1986:7) and structured the play so that self-selected peers worked simultaneously and independently on discrete scenes rather than in more productively diverse groups of fluid membership.

Secondly, the students' lack of involvement in the initial planning of the project meant that their opinions about topics for the play were never heard. Urgency was again a major cause of this problem — it was simply not feasible to devote the time required for students to come to agreement on preliminary ideas that would meet the needs of both the museum and the target school audience.

Finally, several students were inexperienced in script development and/or performance, and some felt pressured to create something of high calibre in an unfamiliar domain. Rather than allowing a script to unfold gradually through collaborative exploration, reflection and refinement, we relied on formulaic approaches to crafting a final product. Students unaccustomed to performance for an audience were further stressed by the need to memorise lines and blocking. As their teacher and director, I added to their discomfort by emphasising the urgency of preparing a high-quality script for the museum's initial venture into theatre for young audiences. Thus, although the final product won praise from various sources, the actors did not function as a unified team during its creation and performance. My emphasis on product over process led to this unfortunate circumstance.

Theme #5: The experience of repeated performance for public audiences can motivate students toward increased professionalism.

Narrative Excerpt

Throughout the performance phase of the production, I attended primarily to the students who created and were now performing the play. The repeated presence of an audience appeared to trigger their growth in professionalism, pride and sense of ownership. With only one exception, all actors were consistently on time and eagerly engaged in pre-show warm-ups and rituals. Energy and effort were highly evident in each performance. Dedicated leaders emerged in the group and most performers invited family, friends and former drama teachers to at least one performance.

This narrative excerpt focuses on the audience as a source of motivation for student performers of theatre. Inattention to theatrecraft is a recurring criticism of drama work that is undertaken primarily for participants' personal and social growth (Schonmann, 2005). Affirming the value of theatre as art form and discipline, critics of 'drama-for-drama's-sake' have called attention to the benefits of commitment to artistic standards (Hornbrook, 1991, 1995).

In a similar vein, while recent literature has addressed the values of play-building, scant attention has focused on the effects of an audience on student actors. I witnessed in the museum theatre production that the presence of an audience both challenged and rewarded play-builders in presenting their own work. Experiencing the demands that an audience brings to performance seemed to educate both minds and bodies in skills of discipline and confidence under pressure.

Final Reflections

From my single experience in museum theatre with undergraduate students, I tentatively offer two recommendations for embarking on a similar project. First, it is crucial to identify and involve all constituents in all phases of the production, from initial planning to processes of script development and rehearsal. Secondly, regardless of time pressures and the need to create a successful 'product', it is important to engage in team-building activities that promote a unified commitment to the project. Initiatives that enhance a sense of group identity can facilitate trust among classmates and encourage students to set aside personal animosities in a collaborative working environment.

Finally, as I contemplate the themes that emerged from my self-reflective narrative, I realise the powerful potential of personal storying to analyse lived events. Of the five themes revealed, three deal specifically with museum theatre settings while two identify potential areas of study for further investigation of any student-devised productions. There remains much to be discovered about collaborative processes of script development and performance with student actors.

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