

“Museum theatre”: Cultivating Audience Engagement - a case study”

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Abstract

This paper is about research recently undertaken in Manchester into the uses and impact of ‘museum theatre’, an increasingly widespread but relatively under-researched practice. ‘*Performance, Learning and Heritage*’ is a three and a half year nationally funded research project which, through the collection of data from four case study sites within the UK, has sought to investigate whether and in what ways the use of performance and related drama activities in museums and heritage locations can be effective as a medium of learning and interpretation. The final case study - *This Accursed Thing* - was a specially commissioned experimental performance at the Manchester Museum. Dealing with the impact and legacy of the slave trade (officially abolished in Britain in 1807), it was designed to test hypotheses emerging from the earlier studies. We consider the responses to the performance of both independent visitors/family groups and organised educational groups and assess the extent to which the performance engendered engagement, empathetic understanding, and, on occasion, a transformative experience. Analysis of the data suggests that the quality of engagement and extent of the learning depended not just on the quality of the performance itself, nor the volume of information conveyed, but at least as much on the way the experience was framed. It is in the detailed understanding of the complex *transitions* that take place as ‘visitor’ or ‘pupil’ shift to ‘audience’, to ‘participant’ and to ‘learner’, and back again – and often the simultaneity of several of those roles – where the research has proved to be most productive.

“Museum theatre”: Cultivating Audience Engagement: a case study”

This paper focuses on research recently undertaken in Manchester into an area of performance practice that has been developing and expanding in a remarkable variety of ways over the past 20-30 years and yet is still relatively unrecognised and certainly under-researched. Often referred to as “museum theatre”, “live interpretation” or “living history” (Bridal, 2004; Hughes, 1998;

Roth, 1998), none of which adequately captures the characteristics or varieties of the medium, many claims are made for the use of performance in the museum. It can be, for example, a powerful way of opening up aspects of a museum's collection to a wider audience – of reaching and engaging many for whom such cultural displays or sites might usually seem remote, irrelevant or intimidating, not least to young people or to minority ethnic communities whose command of English let alone of British culture may be partial at best. It can aid interpretation, helping us to understand the social meaning of artifacts, animating the inanimate; sometimes it will throw light on, or fill gaps in, the partial knowledge offered by the exhibition. Many will claim it is above all a medium of learning – a means of helping visitors (whether general public or organised school groups) grasp the significance of what it is that they are seeing and offering a unique opportunity to make their own meanings from it – to relate it to their own world, to make connections and understand difference.

Museum theatre is not – or in our view should not be – about replicating the past, about merely illustrating what the authoritative display panels already tell us. At its best, it is about enlivening, providing insights into, and indeed posing questions about, the subject-matter of a museum exhibition. It is about communicating with people who arrive, and see themselves, as visitors rather than audiences, arousing curiosity and engaging people in ways that connect closely with their own lives and concerns in the here and now. In putting the *learner* at the centre of the experience, museums have been part of a larger move evident in cultural institutions across the world, a move to ensure that visitors are not just 'targeted' but are considered participants in the process too. Many museum directors (although by no means all) now see their galleries not only as places for the display of artefacts, but as sites for experiment, debate, and as bases from which to reach out into the community. Drama is seen as just one way of stimulating those debates - its very fictionality helping to highlight the constructedness of many of the

narratives the museums tell through their exhibits.

But it is also a contested practice and the debates about its value and relevance are often heated. Drama in the museum and equally at heritage locations can trigger nervousness about its impact among directors and trustees. One example will suffice to make the point, taken from an historic site in Tasmania, Australia. Port Arthur is the site of a large penal station established in Tasmania in 1830, which became a punishment station for repeat offenders from all the Australian colonies and by 1840 was housing over 2000 convicts, soldiers and civil staff. Here's a quotation from the 'Frequently asked questions' section of the *Port Arthur Visitor Information Brochure*:

Why don't staff dress up in costume?

Many visitors have enjoyed this style of presentation at other sites and say that they would welcome it at the Port Arthur Historic Site. But Port Arthur is a real place with a dark and difficult history. Dressing staff up in convict and other costumes could turn the experiences of those who were imprisoned here into light entertainment, which we do not think is appropriate.

It may be tempting to dismiss such 'conservative' views of the role of the costumed interpreter, but the charge of trivialising, simplifying and distorting the realities of the past is one that we must take seriously. While most of us know how powerful, informative and insightful drama can be as a learning tool, we will probably all be able to think of examples of the kind of performance that the Port Arthur trustees would dread. But it is not as simple as distinguishing the good from the second-rate, or the drama that is based on historic research from that which owes more to fantasy or nostalgia. There are deeper, more problematic issues to do with 'representation', 'authenticity', 'liveness' and 'playfulness', that demand much closer analysis, experiment and debate than is usually possible in the market conscious and highly-pressurised

world that museums and heritage sites inhabit.¹

The *Performance, Learning and Heritage* research (funded by the UK's Arts & Humanities Research Council) has been attempting to investigate whether and in what ways the use of performance and related drama activities in museums and heritage locations can be effective as a medium of learning and interpretation. (We have used the term 'performance' rather than 'theatre' because it is a more all-embracing term which can include traditional theatre forms and 1st person costumed interpretation, and performance has become a far more embracing term in recent years, referring not only to the activity of actors but of visitors too.) Teasing out hard evidence of its actual impact upon visitors is a difficult nut to crack. Are minds changed? Does the impact last? If it does, how do we know?

Our approach has combined a general "mapping" of practice across the UK and abroad, and four detailed case studies.² The last of these case studies was a specially commissioned experimental performance at the Manchester Museum which was designed, among other things, to test some of the hypotheses emerging from the findings so far. *This Accursed Thing* is the particular focus of this chapter, exemplifying the ways in which we are beginning to understand the resonance of performances in museum contexts for audiences.

The framework for the performance was the Museum's involvement in the Revealing Histories initiative. Revealing Histories was a collaborative project timed to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in Britain in 1807.³ The project saw eight

¹ For further discussion of these issues, see especially Hughes (1998), Jackson (2007), Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998), Magelssen (2007), Smith (2006).

² For more information about the research project, its methodology and outcomes, visit www.manchester.ac.uk/plh. The full research report is available to download from the website.

³ For more information about 'Revealing Histories', visit www.revealinghistories.org.uk. Historical note: In the 18th century Britain became the leading player in what was known as the Triangular Trade, in which ships plied the

museums and galleries in the North West of England researching and exploring the impact of slavery on their collections and their own historiographies, with often surprising outcomes. Through this research endeavour, it was discovered that the Manchester Museum (although lacking in artefacts demonstrably relating to the slave trade) had, through its connection with the city and its own acquisitions process, a hidden history also. The performance was seen as a way of making these connections evident and initiating debate not only on the subject matter but simultaneously on the very business of collecting.

In commissioning the performance, the research team was looking for practitioners fully able to take on board and interrogate the project's interim findings, and to work closely with the team and the museum curators to accommodate those findings in a dramatic form that was original, experimental and probing of the medium itself. It was made explicit in the commissioning brief that we were looking for a piece that would "push the envelope". It was also made explicit that the performance would be taking place as part of the museum's Revealing Histories output.

The emerging findings from the first three case studies highlighted in the original brief pointed to: a) the power of narrative to engage empathy; b) the importance of interactivity and the differences in children's and adults' willingness to interact - therefore requiring a built-in

trading routes between the English ports of Liverpool and Bristol, the coast of western Africa (where goods were traded for slaves) and the ports of the Caribbean and the eastern seaboard of North America – where, after being transported across the Atlantic in appalling conditions, the slaves were sold as labour for the sugar and cotton plantations. The ships returned to England with plentiful supplies of sugar and cotton and the voyages began again. The profits made from this lucrative trade fuelled the economy of Britain at a time when the Industrial Revolution was taking root. By the end of the century however, the movement to abolish the slave trade ("this accursed thing"), at least in the British Empire, gained strong ground, leading to the passing of the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act in 1807. Abolition did not of course, on its own, eradicate slavery, nor even much of the trade itself. It was at least a beginning.

degree of choice about engagement; c) the interconnectedness of performance and exhibits/gallery/site; d) the variety of different ways in which “visitors” become “audiences”; and e) the need to build in “induction” and “de-briefing” to the performance event in order to maximise its potential as a learning medium. After a competitive interview process, Andrew Ashmore and Associates, a professional live interpretation company from London, were chosen to fulfil the brief.

Finding the Frames for the Action

Before highlighting some of the audience responses and beginning to locate where educational benefit might lie, it will be helpful to illustrate some of the major elements of the performance, and to say something about why and how these came about.

Throughout the devising process, the Manchester Museum was recognised as a significant architectural and historical resource. The two writers (who were also the actors) met with staff from the curatorial, research, and public programming teams from the museum, and were able to access research findings from *Revealing Histories* in order to inform the final look, form, and focus of the performance. As a frame for the performance itself, the museum became the ideological and physical ground upon which the characters came to life. Thus the story of abolition (or aspects of that story at least) was told in the form of a promenade performance through the different spaces of the museum, journeying “through time”, meeting the various characters and encountering *en route* a number of symbolic artifacts. Audiences met six characters, who were, in order, a curator in 2007; Thomas Clarkson - a prominent figure in the UK abolition movement (in 1807); an African slave trader; a British slave trader; James Watkins – a freed slave and campaigner for abolition in the United States; and a cotton mill worker from Manchester. The piece began with an out-of-character introduction, where, in a

non-threatening way, the visitors (perhaps not yet constituting an “audience” as such) were introduced to the option of questioning characters and entering debate. At this stage, the actors used their real names, and acknowledged the transition that ‘in-character’ requires: “speaking of which, I’d better go and become the first character...”. This contributed to a distancing between actors and characters: “they are not us”, which in turn gave the audience licence to push, question and debate, but then at the end when interacting with the actors out of role, to ask them those questions which were historically or practically impossible to ask en route. The out-of-character de-brief at the end of the performance afforded audience members an opportunity to ask questions about the research on which the performance was based, the characters, the actors or, as was often the case, to volunteer their own responses to the performance and its subject matter. Crucially, audience members were also given the opportunity to question certain characters whilst the performance was taking place (the British slave trader specifically), and to respond to verbal prompts throughout. The performance thus encouraged, indeed necessitated, interaction between audience members and performers both in and out of role. It was the belief of the research team, and the actors also, that this would allow audiences to engage in more symbiotic, complex, personal and thus “useful” relationships with both the characters and the subject matter.

While children will generally engage readily in activity and lively discussion, participation involving teenagers and adults is, of course, far more problematic. The need to challenge, to unsettle, surprise, stimulate, is often a key aim of a piece, *but* it has to be balanced against the counter-productive risks of embarrassing, confusing, de-motivating, even angering, the visitor who has not yet agreed to “buy in” to the process. So, how the event is **framed**, how the visitor is **inducted** into becoming a willing audience-member, or even a participant, the extent to which s/he is allowed a degree of **choice** as to whether, or how far, to participate, and

the opportunity s/he is given to **ask questions or express opinions** at the end – all these are vital issues that have to be addressed in every performance event in a non-theatre space where the conventions will not necessarily be understood and will often have to be established and negotiated as the performance progresses.

In this performance, the attempt was made to place the whole sequence within a set of frames that would make the drama, its subject matter, and its way of operating within the particular challenges of the museum space as clear and unthreatening as possible while inviting interaction from the audience as it progressed. The outer frames (of museum, of publicised performance event) would allow for a series of subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) re-framings of the action and the audience relationship to it, from scene to scene, gallery to gallery, character to character. Thus, as noted above, the introduction emphasised that the actors would be playing a variety of different roles, and that the museum galleries as a whole would provide the setting for the drama but by the same token not realistic sets. In this way, the large gallery spaces, the stairways and the connecting passages through which audiences passed whilst promenading from scene to scene could be seen as integral components of the drama—not as irritating and regrettable drawbacks of performing in a museum. Likewise, the audience found themselves progressively becoming an integral part of the action and the drama—drawn in gently at first as the character of the Curator, in the relatively enclosed space where the performance began, introduced the themes and the background to slavery, inviting them to look closely at artefacts related to the cotton and sugar plantations before asking them to follow him into the first large gallery space.

Within minutes of their reaching the new space, the proceedings were interrupted suddenly by the voice of Thomas Clarkson, one of the leading abolitionists in the early years of the 19th century—his appearance on a bridge above the stairway was unexpected and required a

physical movement to turn and look up at the figure above them, a re-focusing of their attention and a mental readjustment from 2007 to 1807. The comfortable gathering around their curator-guide, with its stable, single-character focus, was from now onwards going to have to be constantly re-negotiated. Clarkson recited a poem from the late 1790s expressing the commonly-held opinion that sympathy for slaves should not require us to deny ourselves the luxuries and benefits (the sugar, the rum, the cotton) that the trade brought us; as he does so he strides across the bridge and descends the steps towards the gathered audience (who again have to readjust their positioning), and greets them as supporters of the abolition campaign, shaking hands and apparently recognising some as supporters at previous meetings. [see image 1] Soon the audience (for that is what they all are by now—and an actively participating audience at that) are all following him up the stairway to another gallery at which his political meeting will take place. The re-positioning and degree of interaction is pushed progressively further at each stage in the performance.

For many audience members the initial encounter with Clarkson was the first moment at which they felt they connected with the events of the drama. It was a point of contact with a character clearly defined, precisely located in a moment of time, with a clear and urgent message to impart. Their own involvement was not forced, but Clarkson clearly expected them to join him vocally in condemning the slave trade. The agreement was easy, the vocal expression of dissent in unison less readily forthcoming: audiences varied enormously in the eagerness or reticence with which they joined in the call. “Do I get involved now?” “Do I risk making a fool of myself?” “What’s everyone else doing?” “Does this character really want me to call out, or is it just part of a play I’m watching?” “Am I an audience member, or a participant?” (etc) No one was forced to respond but usually they did, with varying degrees of enthusiasm or reserve.

Throughout the performance, it was clear that audience members could opt in or out as they wished.

At the political meeting, Clarkson introduces something of the history of the abolition campaign, giving facts specific to the setting of the performance in Manchester, and contrasting this meeting with reaction in other areas of the North-West. He is accompanied on his travels by a chest containing artifacts, and he hands a number of these around for his audience to consider (in terms of their size, weight, artistic and monetary ‘worth’). These include a small hand-crafted object from Africa, a selection of cotton, and lastly a ‘manilla ring’, a curved brass ring used as currency for slaves. Audience members are encouraged to feel the weight of the ring, and to inwardly reflect on its exchange value in 1807: one African man.

Of all the interactions, by far the most challenging and unsettling came during and immediately after a scene between a black African slave trader and his white (British) counterpart, here to do a deal over the next batch of slaves to be brought to the trading post [see image 2]. The audience begin as witnesses but then find themselves faced by a disconcerting confrontation. The white slave trader turns to them, sees their critical looks and challenges them to tell him what he’s doing wrong [see image 3]. Some engage immediately, others (for whatever reasons) avoid his eyes and hope this is only a rhetorical question; for many there is a sense that to remain silent is either to offer tacit consent, to be complicit in the trade, or at the very least to accept its validity in the context of its time. Young children sometimes jumped in without hesitation to accuse the trader of unfairness; older children and many adults became increasingly frustrated at the trader’s apparent ability to find a justification for his trade whatever the objection. For some, it was only in the relative safety of the final question and answer session at the very end, with the actors now out of role, that they felt empowered to express their reasoned analyses of the evils of the trade or, for others, their anger at its existence.

Audience Responses

The research project received feedback on *This Accursed Thing* from more than 200 audience members through a variety of means.⁴ This included interviews with both school groups and independent visitors. For the purpose of this discussion we will highlight some of these responses, indicating the ways in which different groups and individuals have been making sense of the drama.

Most independent visitors we spoke to talked very positively about their experiences of the performance, which by no means indicates that they did not have recommendations for improvement. It was notable however that due to varying levels of knowledge and personal or professional investment in the subject matter, it was often different aspects of the performance that inspired, provoked or surprised. No one narrative of the performance event or set of recommendations was the same.

Learning outcomes varied hugely, from those respondents who said “it opened my eyes about slavery” to those who encountered an intricate and personal engagement: “I was prompted to think again about the ‘taste’ of my name”. Many of the visitors found facts in the performance about the conditions of slavery of which they had previously been unaware: that slave life expectancy was so short, that slaves cost so very little, and that their treatment was so appalling.

The performance prompted a number of different feelings in audience members: “surprise”, “interest”, “inspiration”, “outrage”, “shock”, “provocation”, “tiredness”, “passion”, “engagement”, “anger”, “confusion”, “absorption”, and “reflection”. These feelings, for the most

⁴ The project’s principal methodological approaches to audience response were qualitative. Interviews, focus groups, surveys, participant-observation as well as filming and photography were all used to build a picture of the frames and responses unique to each performance event. Note: All quotations from audience members reproduced in this chapter are drawn from transcripts in the Performance, Learning & Heritage archive.

part, are expressed as being positive outcomes for respondents, at least in an immediate sense. When asked to reflect on what they liked about the performance, many refer to the “reality” of what they have seen: it is “lifelike”, “in the flesh”, “alive”, and for others it is the “journey” of the performance that has been fruitful, enabling consideration of their own particular circumstance and familial history. Many found their experience of the various artefacts and spaces of the museum productive: “the objects that were passed around – I felt quite a connection ... in a very sad way.”

The interactive elements of the performance (as with other case study sites) received mixed responses. They made audience members feel “valued”, “engaged”, “involved”, “included”, “empowered”, “part of the performance”, but also, and often simultaneously, “nervous”, “reluctant”, “scared” or “reserved”. There was certainly a feeling that the “interactment” (as one respondent calls it) had drawn people further into the story than otherwise might have been possible (and for some, desirable):

Interaction makes one feel part of the drama.

Good to be a part of the whole presentation.

The interaction makes the experience more edifying and “real”

When it came to their dislikes, again, the interaction figured strongly, as did logistical issues such as noise, lack of chairs and the movement of the piece. Some felt that something or someone was missing from the narrative, that certain aspects had not been properly dealt with (resistance, the voice of the “slave”, the racism that underpinned slavery in the first place). These (and other) recommendations were acknowledged, and many changes were incorporated into the performance on its return for a second run. For example, resistance on plantations was referenced during the performance, and Clarkson began to acknowledge the artifacts surrounding him in the

African gallery (an addition prompted by an audience member's response to an earlier performance).

Interestingly, and as a by-product of the research endeavour, we observed that given an opportunity to attend adult only performances (as some were advertised), response overwhelmed the availability of places. People wanted to engage with adult topics through drama, and to have space to explore them in an adult environment. They were often inspired to come to the museum by the very fact of the performance taking place, even when they had not previously attended:

The performers brought this shameful part of our history to life and I was rewarded for changing my plans that day by learning some new facts and re-visiting the museum which I hadn't done in a very long time. (F, 31-55, Manchester, Black Caribbean)

This particular title brought me to a museum I had never visited and awakened my interest to come and spend time looking at exhibits. Thought the whole venture was a worthwhile and memorable way to spend an afternoon. (F, 56+, Rochdale, White British)

School group responses

With school groups too, our discussions revealed a range of responses and recommendations which were clearly informed by what John Falk (2006) has called the 'entry narratives' the children brought with them, that is, the complex mix of rationales for attendance and prior associations about both subject matter and museum institution that each visitor carries in their heads as they arrive⁵. In order to understand something of this, we deliberately sought responses

⁵ Falk categorises visitors into types such as the Explorer, the Facilitator, the Hobbyist and the Spiritual Pilgrim. School pupils, even though attending as part of organised groups, will still of course have their own individual 'narratives' and sets of expectations.

from two very different schools. The first was a Church of England Secondary School with an ethnically diverse population and a particularly high pass rate. This group (aged 13-14) had studied slavery and the slave trade as a part of their Black History and the Americas schoolwork and thus entered with a prior knowledge. The second school, in one of most economically disadvantaged areas in the UK, has a very low pass rate, and is mostly white in ethnicity. This group (aged 12-13) had not studied slavery in class, in fact many did not have a prior knowledge of the subject matter at all.

Articulating their experiences of being an audience for *This Accursed Thing* appeared to be an easier task for pupils than recalling or reciting factual data such as names or information about artifacts. This was evidenced not only in the meaning maps that pupils drew (they found the map less easy than writing lists of what it was they particularly liked or disliked about the performance), but also in the interviews we carried out with them. This, no doubt, had something to do with their view of the performance as a journey, both physically through the museum, and emotionally through the narrative of abolition. It was a significant experience for all of them, both personally and collectively.

The pupils talked readily about a number of aspects of the piece, principally the movement and the interaction inherent in it. Both were seen as ways of engaging audience members and ultimately facilitating learning. The interactive moment which inspired the most response was (perhaps unsurprisingly) the questioning of the slave trader [image 3]. The pupils viewed this as an enjoyable exchange (one that they would *never* get in the classroom), at the same time as it was frustrating because “he has answers for everything”. This contributed to an increased understanding of the complexity of debates and viewpoints at the time, and the size of the task the abolitionists faced.

Moments when the pupils really felt engaged include (but are not limited to) Thomas Clarkson appearing on the balcony, the slave trading, being “on the boat” (the imagined slave ship), and interacting with the characters:

They were like, drawing us in, like, asking us questions about how we felt about it... It made us involved, not just watching it.

You get the actual, real answers, like, what would have happened.

When they were answering them questions it was like we were really there.

These moments in particular stand out for the interaction and surprise they generated and the (lasting) impact the specific characters had upon them.

James Watkins (the freed slave) in particular impacted upon many of the pupils at the more ethnically diverse school; some professed to have wanted to ask him further questions about how it felt to be a slave and his journey to freedom. This often led pupils to conclude that they had wished to meet an actual slave or slave family to ask them about their “current” life. Some even suggested that they could have role-played slaves themselves (the suitability of such an activity would no doubt divide readers’ viewpoints). This, in turn, they reasoned, would have given them extra ammunition with which to question and finally outwit the British slave trader.

When asked how the performance made them feel, the word many of the pupils used to describe their emotional response was “sad”. This especially related to those moments when they learn how people came to be slaves, and how they were treated as slaves: “I felt really sad for those people. You really felt what they were feeling, if you were there. If you were one, you felt it.” Emotional responses were also triggered in relation to certain artifacts. It is seeing the manilla ring (its worth: one life) that for many inspires an emotional engagement with the magnitude of the story.

Most of the pupils professed to have had their opinions about the slave trade altered in some way by the piece, specifically in the understanding that some Africans were also implicit in the trade. This is a fact that appears to be a surprise to many of the pupils (it is not something that they have found out in their classroom studies), and is commented upon especially by those (more ethnically mixed) pupils at the first school:

It made you realise how lucky you are... Like, when they was telling us about how the slaves got took and sold for piece of metal... I felt a bit upset when even the chief of Africa was involved in it.

Attitudinal change at the second school was less on this micro-level as their knowledge of slavery and the slave trade was virtually non-existent before the visit. However, some of the pupils professed to have changed their attitudes about wider issues as a result. For example, one pupil began to recognise the overt racism of some of the people she knows, including her own father (the teachers on the trip informed us that racism is a real problem in the school and local area), and others began to realise that “even though they do not have a lot, they have an awful lot more than people in Africa”. There was an interesting comparison made at this school quite regularly between slavery, and what appeared to them to be “black issues” more generally: famine, aid, and ‘Comic Relief’ (a well-known British charity and telethon event). Some of the pupils decided they wanted to organise a collection to help people in Africa, which they professed to be as a result of seeing the performance.

After having watched the performance, these pupils, some of whom did not know what slavery was before the trip, and who easily and readily equated slavery with savagery (including one pupil who thought that slaves ate one another), demonstrated a vastly increased understanding of what slavery “means”. Slavery has moreover been humanized for them. The pupils are able to imagine “if it happened to me” and recognise slavery as something that is not

irrelevant to their lives - either through time lapsed or geographical distance. They are now more fully attuned to slavery's inherent injustice and unfairness, and also the racism that enabled it (in this historical context).

Some Final Reflections

What does the research so far, and particularly these observations, tell us? It does *not* tell us how to guarantee the successful design and impact of performance within a museum or historic site. It *does* suggest that it often has value and resonance, that it can enhance the visitor's appreciation and critical understanding of the heritage in question. It underlines the importance of the well-told story in engendering interest in, often empathy with, the life experiences of those considered "other" from ourselves, or in giving voice to, and celebrating, the experiences of individuals or a community that finds itself marginalised or excluded from the grand narratives of conventional history. But it also suggests that what visitors accrue from such experiences is governed by a complex array of factors: the variety of "entry narratives" and "horizons of expectations" which visitors bring with them on arrival, their conscious or subconscious personal agendas which will prompt them to look out for elements in the display or performance that confirm or unsettle existing opinions, the cultural capital that (as Bourdieu, 1979, suggests) people will have already acquired and which will attune them to respond and interpret in particular ways⁶. In "heritage performance", as in all forms of theatre with educational claims, not only do we need to understand the power of performance in its various manifestations, but, just as importantly, we need to understand our audiences better too. That has been one of the key goals we set ourselves in this research: to understand audience engagement better.

⁶ For a discussion of an audience's 'horizons of expectations', see Bennett (1990). See also recent research in 'visitor studies', e.g. John Falk (2006).

Moreover, the *quality of engagement* and the *extent of the learning* will depend not just on the novelty of the experience (though that should not be lightly dismissed), nor just on the quality of the performance itself, nor the volume of information conveyed, but, at least as much, on the way the experience is framed. As Goffman (1974) has shown us, it is the invisible frames constructed around social events that influence how we “read” them, make sense of them, draw meaningful connections with other aspects of social life. There are the culturally conditioned frames the potential audience bring with them (their notions of “museum” for example) and there are the frames established by the performance. Hence our attempt in commissioning *This Accursed Thing*, and the attempt of the writer and actors in devising the performance, to frame the stories and the engagement they might generate through an interlocking set of theatrical devices. Not least, the insistence on an element of induction and of de-briefing as a way of introducing and closing the performance (without closing down the questions raised), and on the incorporation of moments of interaction and genuine challenge within the performance, accompanied by the tacit permission to opt in and out at any point, were we think important factors in the *relative* success of this particular project in conveying information, engaging interest, challenging preconceptions and provoking debate. We stress “relative” because of the range of responses and personal meanings articulated by audience members still emerging from our analysis.

Finally, it is in the detailed understanding of the complex **transitions** that take place as “visitor” or “pupil” shift to “audience”, to participant and to “learner”, and back again—and more often than not the simultaneity of several of those roles at any one moment—where our own research is beginning to be most productive. What we have presented here represents only a set of snapshots of audience response from the school groups and the general public. In this intermediate phase of the analysis, however, and, given the occasion and the strength of the

invitation to engage evident in and through the performance, it has been instructive to discover just how willing visitors can be to become active, participating *audiences*, to be part of a *negotiation* of meaning in a location not usually associated with such dialogic processes. If a tendency in our mediatised contemporary culture is to simplify the world around us, to make it digestible in small, bite-sized chunks, then perhaps, as the novelist Richard Ford (*Independence Day*, 1996) once put it, the role of the artist is to re-complicate our perceptions of the world for us. And as one of the audience for *This Accursed Thing* said,

It made what I thought was a straightforward campaign into an interesting and complicated journey. (M, 19-30, Rochdale)

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Note

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Figure 1. Abolition campaigner, Thomas Clarkson, addresses his audience
(Andrew Ashmore as Clarkson)



Figure 2. The African and British slave traders meet to negotiate a deal.
(Paul Etuka as the African chief, Andrew Ashmore as the British trader)



Figure 3. The British Slave Trader confronts his audience