

How to create A THEATRICAL MUSEUM EXPERIENCE

Tips and tricks



Who are we?

'A Theatrical Museum Experience' (ATME) is an Erasmus+ project (No. 2022-1-BE02-KA210-ADU-000083541), coordinated by the Belgian theatre company 'Theater van A tot Z'.

In this project, the Swedish Norrköpings Stadsmuseum and the Croatian Muzeji & Galerije Konavala collaborated with 'Theater van A tot Z' to bring together expertise concerning museum theatre.



Peter Schoenaerts (general manager 'Theater van A tot Z'): 'The museums in this project all have a strong regional focus, showcasing the history of their respective areas. They do so using contemporary methods and innovative ideas, moving beyond traditional guided tours where visitors merely listen to a guide - an experience that can sometimes feel tedious.

What unites us as partners is our belief that dramatic expression is an ideal way to engage and educate visitors. During guided tours, for example, actors are employed, visitors are allowed to use their imagination or become part of a story themselves.

This approach appeals to people's emotions, creates a connection to the present, and makes it easier for visitors to remember what they learn. As a result, a museum visit becomes more memorable. Thanks to our project, 'A Theatrical Museum Experience', we can now inspire other museums across Europe.'

What is this brochure about?

This brochure, along with its accompanying YouTube videos, serves as an audiovisual manual to help museums start experimenting with drama. The use of drama in a museum context is often referred to as 'museum theatre'. It is an innovative approach that incorporates theatrical elements and performance techniques within museum settings to educate, inform and entertain museum visitors. It enriches the visitor experience and enhances educational outcomes.

Museum theatre has been used in the English-speaking world for quite some time, and our project aims to inspire museums throughout the EU to adopt this practice.

Tessa Bridal is America's leading authority regarding the use of theatre as an educational tool in museums. She defines museum theatre as:

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'content-based educational performances, typically shorter than those in theatre venues and frequently interactive, performed in formal and informal theatre spaces, both within the museum and as outreach, by trained museum theatre professionals for museum audiences of all ages and for school audiences.'

Tessa Bridal ””

The application of drama (scripted or improvised) is another entry point for visitors. It is aimed at providing deeper insights into exhibits, and can be tailored to specific target groups such as children or refugees. Often (professional) actors or museum educators will portray historical characters and/or employ puppetry, objects, movement or music to animate narratives and objects within the museum.

Performances in a museum setting are usually much shorter compared to traditional theatre, fostering audience engagement and interaction, facilitating audience comprehension and critical thinking about presented subjects.

This brochure will help museums reflect on their collections and create their own drama experiences.



Why

Why use drama in a museum

The objects in a museum convey ideas, themes, or powerful stories, but focusing solely on facts can make them seem dry. By incorporating stories and dramatic expression, museums can transform static exhibits into exciting experiences that educate, entertain, and inspire visitors. Such an approach captures people's attention, making visits more enjoyable, emotional and engaging. Effective storytelling and audience interaction are crucial.

Theatre can be used to interpret an exhibition beyond the objects on display, providing context that may not be immediately apparent. It can also offer multiple interpretations that prompt questions and provoke debate, thereby deepening the viewer's understanding. Crafting compelling narratives with live performance elements can be the key to the next generation of museum interpretation.

Today, museums all over the world are beginning (or have begun) to integrate dramatic expression into their daily programming. This trend is likely influenced by recent scholarly discussions in museum education that link multi-sensory experiences, such as storytelling, with effective learning for both children and adults.



Watch our accompanying video:



10 excellent reasons why museums should use dramatic expression

- **Engagement and interest:** Drama captivates visitors' attention, making exhibits more interesting and memorable. This helps in keeping visitors engaged for longer periods.
- **Emotional connection:** By using dramatic elements, museums can evoke emotions that help visitors form a deeper connection with the exhibits, fostering empathy and understanding.
- **Storytelling enhancement:** Dramatic expression enhances storytelling by bringing historical events, cultural stories and scientific concepts to life, making them more relatable and understandable.
- **Educational impact:** It makes learning more dynamic and interactive, helping visitors of all ages grasp complex information more easily through vivid, illustrative performances.
- **Inclusivity:** Dramatic techniques can cater to diverse learning styles and backgrounds, making exhibits accessible to a wider audience, including those who might not engage as deeply with traditional displays.
- **Interactive experience:** Drama invites participation, encouraging visitors to become active participants rather than passive observers, which could increase retention of information.
- **Cultural appreciation:** Through dramatic expression, museums can showcase cultural practices, rituals and traditions in an immersive way, fostering appreciation and respect for different cultures.
- **Interpretation of abstract concepts:** Drama can simplify abstract or difficult concepts through visualization and enactment, aiding in better understanding and retention.
- **Dynamic programming:** Incorporating drama allows for dynamic and varied programming, such as live performances, reenactments and interactive tours, which can attract first time or repeat visitors, specific target groups or even people who wouldn't normally go to a museum.
- **Creating memorable experiences:** Dramatic presentations create unique and memorable experiences that visitors are likely to share with others, thereby increasing word-of-mouth promotion and return visits.



What

What kind of activities or events can you do?

There are a million different ways to tell stories, but museums tend to often use the same ones: static exhibitions and interpretation panels, occasionally complemented by an audio guide. The majority of exhibitions are focused on the objects in the collections, but don't necessarily create an interesting narrative that links them together. By including stories about the people who used the objects (and how), their lives, hopes, dreams and/or aspirations, you can engage the audience more deeply.

Like in a theatrical production, the objects in a museum are the props for your story. A prop is fundamentally there to enhance a story, but it cannot tell the story by itself. The object provides a physical, tangible reference to what you are experiencing, and its historical context provides the set and scenery. However, we still ultimately need a cast, and building narratives around people or characters is crucial to developing these stories. A theatrical performance would mean very little if it were just the props, and the same can be said of museum exhibitions.

Museum theatre aims to engage visitors, create interest in a topic, serve as an alternative to lists of facts and static exhibitions, and provoke an emotional response that leads to learning. Museum theatre can take many forms, with or without audience participation. Below, we will present the most common forms that may be applicable in any museum.



Watch our accompanying video:



First-person interpretation

First-person interpretation is an increasingly popular way of creating a full-body experience for museum visitors by giving them the opportunity to interact with the past through actors or trained presenters. This is an interpretation of actual historical characters and events, performed by actors in costume. The actors perform as if they were actual people from the era or culture they are representing.

Presenting a historical character adds a high degree of authenticity to a museum performance or interpretation. The audience knows that the character being represented actually did exist. The main distinction between portraying a historical character in a museum and in the theatre is that the actor in the museum environment must be prepared to interact with the audience, sharing a great deal of background information.

By taking on the identity of a person who truly lived, the actor is expected to 'become' that person for the visitors, face-to-face, which involves answering to that person's actions, ideologies and life experiences.



Third-person interpretation

Theatrical techniques can be used for third-person interpretation, where an actor or trained presenter uses costumes, props, puppetry, lighting or special effects to convey historical or scientific facts, or make cultural references, without necessarily portraying a character. The focus is on presenting facts and context rather than embodying a person.



Storytelling

Storytellers inhabit the characters of the tale, while still maintaining their role as narrator of the event. They are both first person and third person perspectives in one. Storytelling can help bring historical and cultural context to works of art, scientific and historical objects. Storytellers can appear as a costumed character to aid in an immersive environment and to aid in depicting different cultures by sharing traditions, histories, folklore and myths.



Second-person interpretation

Second-person interpretation is a form of interpretation in which visitors participate in a story (role-play) or a hands-on activity. This approach is often used in living history museums and can be combined with first- or third-person interpretation. Common hands-on activities include arts and crafts, printing or baking bread.

Second-person interpretation does not necessarily require the visitor to adopt a character or pretend to be part of the past. However, similar to participatory theatre, visitors can be invited to assume a character and interact with actors or interpreters as that character. In such role-playing, the participants can be assigned either a group identity or a personal identity. For example, visitors might experience a local history museum as if they had travelled back in time.

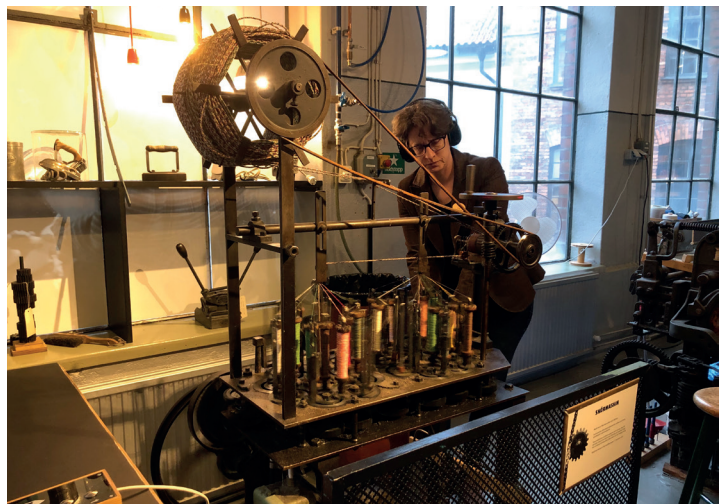
Such interactions must be carefully facilitated to achieve the desired outcome, though visitors might be allowed to make their own choices regardless of historical record. Allowing visitors to portray prominent historical figures and make their own choices is less common due to concerns about historical accuracy.

Many educators advocate for role-playing as a means for visitors to learn by doing, think critically about history and make personal connections between history and their own lives.

Demonstration

Demonstration is a way to illustrate activities such as historical craft-making and concepts like scientific principles. It's also a method to contextualise a museum object or artifact. In a demonstration, the demonstrator generally explains the activity or concept using an object or similar tool.

In traditional demonstrations, demonstrators typically do not pretend to be anyone else.



There is considerable overlap between demonstration and theatre. Theatrical techniques such as characterisation, costume, narrative and special effects are often used to enliven demonstration and attract visitor attention.

Demonstration may also serve as a component of a museum play or theatre piece. However, differences remain between the conventions of demonstration and those of theatre. You should not promote a demonstration as a theatre performance, as it may cause visitor confusion and/or disappointment.

Music and dance

Music and dance can be used separately, together or in conjunction with other forms of museum theatre. Music (whether instrumental and/or vocal) should be performed by qualified performers. The same goes for a dance performance that is either choreographed or improvised. However, in special programmes or after a performance, music and dance could also be explored by visitors in a more participatory way.

This enhances their understanding and interpretation of the ideas and concepts the museum is trying to promote. Music is also often used to illustrate and explore different cultures.

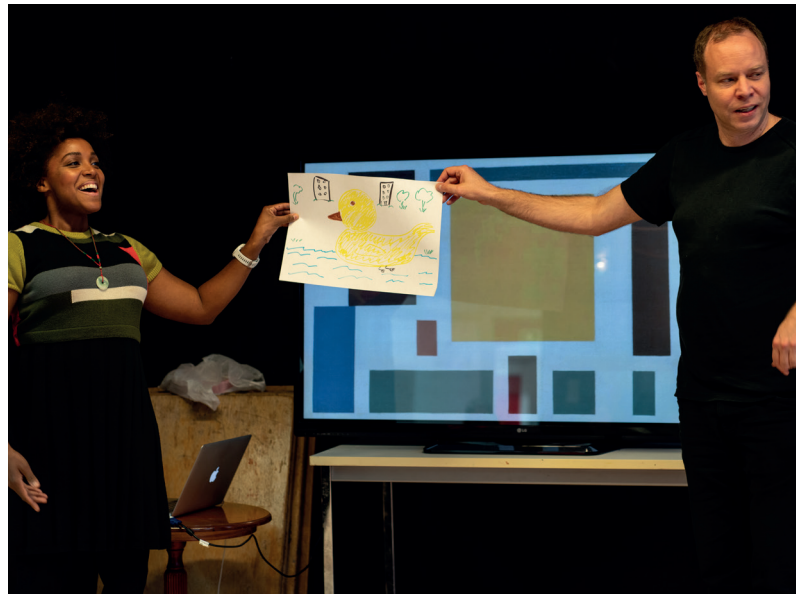
Using dance and music in museum theatre allows the museum to evoke greater emotion within a performance, connecting with visitors on a different level. Music, in particular, helps to set the stage not only for musical or dance performances but also for more traditional theatre, educational presentations and other activities.



Process drama

Process drama is a non-scripted, process-oriented, collective activity. It requires audience participation, with the participants also serving as their own audience. The aim is to create a dramatic 'elsewhere' - a fictional world inhabited for the sake of the insights and interpretations it produces. Examples include:

- Dressing up as historical figures (e.g. coal miners, factory workers, aristocrats)
- Re-enacting a painting
- Speaking as the people portrayed in a painting
- Improvising a scene based on a painting, picture, statue or other piece of art



Karen Vickery is an actor and director who works at the Australian National Portrait Gallery in Canberra. She says that the use of drama in a museum context is:

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'another lens, another way, another entry point for our visitors in terms of the exhibition programme.'

Karen Vickery ””

At the National Portrait Gallery they invited 'a variety of performing artists, from musicians to dancers to dramatic artists, to respond to the themes, ideas and imagery in an exhibition and to present that performance within the context of the Gallery, in a way that we negotiate.'



How

How to start using drama in a museum?

By now, you are probably convinced that using drama in a museum can be very useful. But if you've never done it before, where should you start? Consider the potential benefits of utilising dramatic expression in your museum. Are there any pitfalls to avoid?

We have compiled a brief step-by-step guide that will take you through the process of setting up and executing an exhibition, guided tour, activity or event incorporating museum theatre.



Watch our accompanying video:



Step-by-step guide

- Step 1 **Knowing what you want**
- Which target group(s) do you want to reach?
What would you like to show them?
What do you want them to learn or remember from their visit?
Do you need to create something new, like an exhibition, a guided tour, a performance?
- *Brainstorm with your colleagues, talk to your director/manager and decide what exactly you want to create.*
- Step 2 **Connecting the dots**
- Are you and your colleagues on the same page?
What kind of staff/partners are you looking for?
Who do you want to work with?
Who can help you or support you financially?
- *Establish contacts with the outside world, talk your ideas through and determine who the staff and/or partners will be.*
- Step 3 **Preparation**
- What do you need? (Insurance, props, historical input, ...)
Who can provide what?
Is technical support needed?
Do you need to apply for funding?
Can you approach sponsors?
- *Consult regularly with everyone involved and make a good estimate of the time you will need to get everything in order.*
- Step 4 **Planning**
- Who is responsible for what?
What needs to be ready by when?
Will you need publicity?
Do people need to be invited?
Will you notify press or media? If so, how?
- *Make clear agreements with your partners and make sure everyone knows what is expected of each partner.*
- Step 5 **Execution**
- Do you need a timeline or script?
How will you rehearse? When?
Is everyone participating briefed on time?
How are guests welcomed?
Who will resolve any problems?
- *Make sure that everyone involved, including all the museum staff, are well informed about the event's progress.*
- Step 6 **Evaluation**
- Was the event successful?
What went right or wrong?
Could certain problems have been avoided? How?
What should you pay attention to next time?
- *Together with your partners think about what kind of activities you can develop or do next time.*



To conclude...

By using museum theatre, your visitors or specific target groups (art lovers, newcomers, elderly people, children, etc.) will be more engaged and interested. Isn't it great to know that you can help them remember more and enhance their experience at your museum? Trying out new things is never easy, but it can be incredibly rewarding. We hope you give it a try!

And if all of the above hasn't convinced you of the benefits of using drama in a museum, perhaps Liam Wiseman's words will. Wiseman is a former museum relationship manager for the Arts Council England.

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'... maybe it might help change your way of approaching your work, because after all, tradition is just peer pressure from dead people.'

Liam Wiseman ”

We wish you lots of success!



Bibliography:

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Thanks to:

KMSKA
Löfstad Castle
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Norrköpings Konstmuseum
Rector's Palace, Dubrovnik
Red Star Line Museum
Rupe Ethnographic Museum

Have questions?

Need advice?

Want to brainstorm?

Contact one of the partners in the ATME project!

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