Lost Property: The marginalisation of the artefact in contemporary museum theatre

Joanna Clyne

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Faculty of Arts
The University of Melbourne
Abstract

The use of performance as an interpretive tool in museums has a long, although largely under-researched, history. Central to this thesis is the paradoxical observation that performance in museums, or ‘museum theatre’, regularly fails to engage with collection items. The title of the thesis, ‘lost property’, refers to both the apparent displacement of collection objects as the subject of museum theatre and the complexities of performing historical artefacts in a museum without reducing their significance to the status of a theatrical prop.

Traditionally, the object has been central to the concept of ‘museum’. With the advent of a new museological approach to the running of museums, the exhibition object seems to have taken a subordinate role to the presentation of ideas and concepts through exhibition design and interpretation. This thesis draws on disciplinary literature, case studies, site visits and interviews with museum theatre practitioners to identify and examine the factors that have contributed to the shifting focus of performance based on objects to performance based on ideas.
Declaration

This is to certify that:

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work except where indicated in the preface;
(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used;
(iii) the thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, bibliographies and appendices.

Joanna Melinda Clyne
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First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge the incredible moral support provided by my partner, Cam Wilson, and my mother, Dr Irene Donohoue Clyne, without whom this thesis would not have been completed.

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Introduction

[Museum Theatre] is theatre that is devised and created purely from the objects themselves.¹

In his work on the shifting paradigm of new museology, Stephen E. Weil writes about the ‘comfortable assertion’ that ‘objects and their care ... lie at the heart of the museum enterprise’.² As an interpretive tool of cultural institutions, it is reasonable to assume that museum theatre would also use collections as the building blocks for performance. Paradoxically, this is rarely the case. Museum theatre practitioner Nigel Sutton’s definition of museum theatre, as recorded above, is challenged by the large body of work devised and performed in contemporary museums that is primarily based on ideas and concepts and largely ignores collection objects as the subject of performance.

Museum theatre practitioner Dorothy Napp Schindel notes this same divide of approach in museum education programs:

‘Object-based learning’ versus ‘story or concept-based learning’ is forever debated in the museum world. Curators have been known to emphasise the physical attributes of an object, while educators, happily for us and in keeping with the philosophy of the ‘new museum’ tend more and more to place objects in the context of a human interest story.³

The distinction between ‘object-based’ and ‘concept-based’ focused programs is evident in the trends of museum theatre development, with most productions opting for concept, rather than object, based shows. A concept-based show may engage with

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¹ Nigel Sutton, interview.
² Stephen E. Weil, Rethinking the Museum and Other Meditations (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 47.
larger themes relating to the museum such as ‘earthquakes’ or ‘archaeology’, while an object-rich performance is more likely to interpret a specific item/s in the collection such as a Ming dynastic teapot or a convict love token.

This thesis investigates whether the marginalisation of objects as the subject of museum theatre is symptomatic of the greater influence of ideas rather than things, as advocated by the theory of new museology. The re-evaluation of the role of the object in the literature of new museology appears to correlate with the reduced presence of objects as the subject matter of museum theatre. The displacement of the object as the subject matter of museum theatre has been noticed by other researchers. In their three-year research project on performing heritage, Anthony Jackson and Jenny Kidd observe that theatre programs in museums have become ‘less about the object and more about the experience’.4

The replacement of object with subject in creative arts practice has also gained academic attention.5 As in the museum, the focus has shifted to the viewer, rather than the object being viewed.6 Subsequently, many museum theorists and professionals have commented on the impact of new museology on the role of the museum object.7 Sandra Dudley suggests that, in the current professional climate, museum objects are ‘reduced to materialisms of abstract human ideas.’8 The seemingly diminished role of the object in contemporary museum performance seems to point to the influence of contemporary museological theory. Chapter Two of this

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6 Ibid.
thesis examines whether historical examples of performance in museums were more object-centric, while contemporary practice focuses more on ideas and concepts.

The research questions investigated and answered in this study are:

- Historically, have the themes of museum theatre shifted from object to idea? If so, why?
- Has new museology contributed to the marginalisation of objects in museum theatre?
- What is the function of objects in museum theatre?
- How do the operational issues of museums contribute to the marginalisation of the object in museum theatre?
- How does exhibition design marginalise the use of objects in gallery performance?

Aims and objectives

This topic was born out of the observation that contemporary museum theatre is frequently enacted with little or no reference to collection objects. The overarching aims of this research are:

- To determine why objects have become subordinate to themes in museum theatre
- To define and classify the characteristics of object-rich performance
- To collect data on the use of objects in performance from cultural institutions using theatrical techniques to interpret their collections;
- To examine the factors limiting performance in gallery spaces.
Terminology

Both theorists and performers of museum theatre have developed a large vocabulary to describe their practice. This is discussed further in Chapter One. ‘Museum theatre’ and ‘museum performance’ are used interchangeably throughout this thesis. I have adopted the term ‘object-rich’ performance to describe a sub-genre of museum theatre that is developed directly in response to museum collections. The term was originally used by museologist Nina Simon in a description of the museum theatre program at the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis.9 The term ‘interpretive objects’ refers to objects used in museum theatre performance, education or public programs. While authentic, they are generally unprovenanced and of little monetary value. ‘New Museology’ is a movement shaping the way contemporary museums engage with their visitors. It considers ways that museums can become more inclusive and participatory. Its relationship to the marginalisation of the object is a key research question in this thesis.

Literature review

There are limited texts relating to the theory and practice of museum theatre. Key figures in the industry, such as Catherine Hughes and Tessa Bridal, have brought the genre to public attention by producing works suitable for both students and practitioners.10 Much of the literature on museum theatre is authored by practitioners who write as a means of reflecting on and sharing their own practice.11

To date, the dominant body of work in the field of museum performance is dedicated to the role of the performer in historical interpretation rather than a focus

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on performing the collection.\textsuperscript{12} Works dedicated to adjacent fields, such as living history museums and historical re-enactment, also form an important part of the body of work.\textsuperscript{13} Jackson’s work on museum theatre under the auspices of Theatre-in-Education (TIE) has led to several important publications, giving performance in museums a greater reach in the academic fields of both performance and education.\textsuperscript{14} Academic attention to the discipline of museum theatre has slowly gained momentum with a range of articles appearing in peer-reviewed journals.\textsuperscript{15} As museum theatre is a discipline suspended somewhere between knowledge and interpretation and theory and practice, the relevant texts have been authored by writers with a range of backgrounds and relationships to the field of museum theatre. The most significant research project to date was the Performance, Learning and Heritage Project, a three-year research project conducted by Jackson and Kidd (2005–2008) and funded by the United Kingdom’s Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).\textsuperscript{16} The project culminated in a conference, the proceedings of which were published into a seminal book on current work, trends and thinking in contemporary museum theatre research and practice.\textsuperscript{17} Projects such as these help reframe museum theatre as an area worthy of further academic research.

The perspectives on contemporary museum theatre are heavily influenced by literature and conferences organised by the International Museum Theatre Alliance.\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{13} Sten Rentzhog, Open Air Museums: The History and the Future of a Visionary Idea, (Kristianstad, Sweden: Jamtli Forlag, 2007); Magelssen, Living History Museums: Undoing History through Performance.
\bibitem{14} Anthony Jackson, Theatre, Education and the Making of Meaning: Art or Instruments, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).
\bibitem{17} Anthony Jackson and Jenny Kidd, eds., Performing Heritage: Research, Practice and Innovation in Museum Theatre and Live Interpretation (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).
Many of the research papers used for this thesis were grey literature in the form of industry newsletters, handbooks, conference papers, discussion papers and forum notes. Not accessible through academic search engines, these resources have contributed a great deal to widening my research scope on how artefacts are used in performance. In an industry with few publications, PhD and Masters theses have been valued as an important source of data collection and are often cited in academic texts.

To date, little attention has been paid to examining the history of performance in museums and its contribution in shaping contemporary practice. Collectively there are several texts that help form a portrait of the evolution of ‘performed object’ alongside the museum. These are best read concurrently with seminal works recounting the origin and evolution of the museum. Samuel Alberti goes one step further to argue for an object-centred historiography of museums.

Many academic texts offer diverse and rich discussions on the significance of museum objects. Others pay close attention to how an object can be interpreted or

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But, to date, there have been no works exclusively addressing the function and significance of the object in museum theatre. This silence is made evident by museum theatre practitioner Catherine Hughes, whose work makes clear distinctions between object- and concept-driven performances. A key work by Napp Schindel takes a unique look at the process of devising performance that places objects at the forefront of museum theatre development and practice. This thesis responds to these gaps in research and publication, and to Kylie Message and Ursula Frederick’s call for a greater focus on interdisciplinary, object-based scholarship.

Much literature on museum theatre is necessarily trans-disciplinary, with researchers and writers coming from backgrounds in museum studies, drama, education, history or science. It adheres best to the notion of ‘performance studies’, defined by Richard Schechner as both inclusive and interdisciplinary. Like museum theatre, performance studies ‘does not value purity’. It is at its best when operating amidst a dense web of connections ... accepting ‘inter’ means opposing the establishment of any single system of knowledge, values or subject matter.

The field of theatre and performance studies contributes very little important literature relating to the role of the object in performance. The absence of theory relating to performing objects can be attributed to the overwhelming preoccupation of theatre academics with the actor and the text. Exceptions to this are Andrew Sofer’s analysis of the theatrical prop, a discourse that provides an important framework to

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26 Hughes, Museum Theatre: Communicating with Visitors, 70.
27 Napp Schindel, Museum Theatre: Telling Stories through Objects, 10-16.
30 Ibid.
differentiate between the performed museum object and the stage prop. Much can be taken from works on object theatre and puppeteering. Puppeteer John Bell construes that the lack of academic attention to the performing object in a range of contexts has rendered it an ‘invisible field’. Patrice Pavis suggests that these gaps in literature can also be attributed to the lack of finite classification of performing objects:

No ready-made categorization exists to account for the countless objects found on stage. At best one can describe the forms, enumerate the materials and distinguish between utilitarian function and aesthetic usage.

A commissioned study of Melbourne Museum by Lee Christofis and Paul Monaghan formulates the terminology for considering how exhibition design can create obstacles for developing object-rich museum theatre. In investigating the effects of exhibition design on gallery performance, a language is needed to articulate the spatial limitations of exhibition. A terminology and language with which to discuss the impact of gallery design on the marginalisation of objects in museum theatre is offered through works by Bill Hillier, Kali Tzotzi, and Sophia Psarra. Hillier and Tzortzi emphasise that applying an understanding of spatial syntax to exhibition design does not only dictate whether an exhibition is a successful social environment, but that it has the power to enhance or undermine the object narratives put into place by the curator. Psarra’s work on spatial syntax builds on this theory, suggesting the

32 Penelope Bartlau, interview.
narrative is both physical and temporal. I have applied these theories to the question of how the design of an exhibition space can help or hinder the effectiveness of interpreting exhibition objects through performance in Chapter six.

The attention given by theorists to collection items in the learning sphere of museums is at odds with the under-representation of objects in museum theatre. Many education theorists have written positively about the educational outcomes of using performance in cultural institutions. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett writes on the role of performance studies in opening up the use of drama in non-theatrical spaces and situations, particularly traditional museums. She unpacks the notion of the ‘anti-theatrical prejudice’ in cultural institutions and advocates the use of object performance as a means of developing meaningful connections between people and things.

Peter Vergo defines museology as the study of museums, their roles and processes. The term ‘new museology’ was developed in response to a professional dissatisfaction with the social role of traditional museology. Simply speaking, it is a movement and theory that ‘questions traditional museum approaches’. Most critically, these movements for change were founded on the perception that the museum was an elite institution that presented itself as an unquestioning authority. New museologists envisage an environment that nurtures community and

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42 Ibid.
Although new museology is an influential force in contemporary museum theory practice, Andrea Witcomb reminds us that its benefits and failings are still hotly debated. Concerns relate to the diminishing role of the object and the perception of a move away from education towards entertainment.

Works on new museology pose many questions on how the status of objects in cultural institutions has changed and will continue to change. They focus on how the museum can be transformed to nurture further inclusivity and the democratisation of knowledge. Objects are frequently mired in new museological theory as they carry the stigma of being an elitist part of the academy museum. In these museums, objects were viewed, handled and understood only by the upper echelons of society, a practice that does not sit well with the ideology of new museology. In an interesting contrast, performance in cultural institutions is considered to be a relic of the ‘low museum’, institutions dedicated to the diversion of the masses rather than places of serious research or learning. This thesis brings together the unlikely coupling of object and performance to explore the challenges of the ‘performed object’.

**Methodology**

The fundamental question of analysis is to know why and for whom it is being undertaken, and which method would be the most suitable. Jackson and Kidd identify the types of methodology used in previous research on museum theatre as often ‘ad hoc’ and relying on anecdotal evidence. I have tried to avoid this trap by employing a range of rigorous qualitative methodologies to develop an understanding of the marginalisation of objects in museum theatre. These include:

48 Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum*, 12.
a review of relevant literature, filming and reviewing documented case studies of museum theatre, site visits, the application of spatial analysis techniques, interviewing museum theatre practitioners, and observing and analysing museum theatre performances. The fieldwork conducted for this thesis was modelled on the style described by Alan Kelleher as ‘unobtrusive’.\textsuperscript{52} My interest is this field of research is both as a researcher and as a practitioner.

Jackson and Kidd’s process of research for the Performance, Learning and Heritage Research Project opts for a ‘more reflective and less defensive practice’.\textsuperscript{53} As a practitioner of museum theatre, adapting this same approach has allowed me to maintain a distance from the genre and to focus on building my findings based on critical research rather than personal experience. Instead of focusing on the impact of performance on the museum visitor as theorists such as Hughes, and Jackson and Kidd have done, my research centres on the intention and process of museum theatre from the perspective of the performer.\textsuperscript{54} Consequently, the key informants for my thesis have been practitioners, writers and museum operations staff rather than audience members. The impact of object-rich museum performance on audience members is measured using a system of spatial analysis, a form of data collection best undertaken through observation. Spatial analysis is a technique used to chart and analyse the geographic properties of a natural or man-made environment. This includes the way in which people move through it and respond to different obstacles. Within this thesis, spatial analysis is used to determine how performers and audience members navigate the exhibition hall during a piece of museum theatre.

Case studies

The case studies were collected across Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America between 2007 and 2009. Many of the shows were produced before this period, but had been sufficiently documented in order to use as case studies. From a research perspective that draws on methodologies from history, social science and applied theatre, there are some evident problems in using case studies that have been performed across a period of sixteen years, across several continents and often through secondary sources. Performance theorist Pavis extrapolates that, in collecting data and analysing performance, it is very important to disclose how each was gathered: ‘An analyst is present at a performance; she has a direct experience of it live, whereas a historian is forced to reconstruct performance from secondary documents and accounts’.55 During the fieldwork component of my research, I made a clear distinction between viewing performances live, viewing footage, and reconstructing performance from interviews, photographs and documents. In my fieldwork, I take on the dual roles of performance analyst and historian. As an historian, my methods for reconstructing performance involve a cross-section of sources, namely: interviews, site visits, accounts, photographs, development documents, and evaluation documents.

Theatrical deviser Alison Oddey emphasises both the importance and problems of documenting live performance: ‘Devised theatre is transient and ephemeral, which makes the documentation of the form difficult’.56 The documentation of shows such as The Dora Fay Davenport Show and The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur allowed me to retrieve examples of practice that would otherwise have been un-accessible. Oddey emphasises the necessity of documentation through film and photography for the purpose of creating examples of practice, archiving past performances, teaching

55 Pavis, Analyzing Performance: Theatre, Dance and Film, 2.
students and developing the genre.\textsuperscript{37} She also suggests that ‘documentation brings credibility and respectability’ as it implies something worthy of preservation.\textsuperscript{38} However, the reading of filmed theatre in lieu of viewing a live performance is somewhat problematic as it does not capture the essence of the experience and must be considered as a variable by the researcher.

In choosing to utilise a case-study-based methodology, I did not set out to use a certain number of examples. I viewed and documented many performances and then selected the seven that appear in this thesis as examples that would provide rich evidence of how collection objects could be used successfully in museum theatre. The case studies are described and analysed in Chapter Three and then evaluated for their effectiveness in centralising the object through museum theatre in Chapter Four. The variety of the case studies in terms of location and museum type provides an opportunity to explore object-rich museum theatre in a range of contexts. In chronological order of performance and viewing the case studies are:

\textit{Case study one: The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur}

\textit{The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur} was written and performed by Susan Bamford-Caleo and Bernard Caleo at the Melbourne Museum (Australia) in January 2004. The show revolves around a museum worker who discovers a machine that allows him or her to speak and listen to objects. Bamford-Caleo and Caleo alternated performances in the guises of Arabella Ascertain and Harry Call with an ensemble comprising a puppeteer and a voice-over artist.\textsuperscript{39}

\textit{Case study two: Robbie the Rat}

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, 157.
\textsuperscript{39} Bernard Caleo, interview.
Robbie the Rat was written by freelance performer Nigel Sutton for the National Museum of Australia, Canberra (Australia) in 2004 and performed there and at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney (Australia) until 2008. The audience was then invited on a tour of the museum where “Robbie”, as the tour guide, stopped in several exhibitions to point out and discuss objects in relation to his own life and experiences of Australian history.\(^6\)

Case study three: The Bog Man’s Daughter

The Bog Man’s Daughter was written by playwright and academic Jon Lipsky and performed by Catherine Hughes in 1994 at the Museum of Science, Boston (United States of America). It was an interactive solo performance in which the performer casts the audience in the role of visitors passing through the bog lands. The Bog Man’s Daughter was performed in a specially designed nook within the Bogs exhibition. This show was recreated as a case study through descriptions by both Hughes and Lipsky in books and an interview with Dan Dowling Jr. at the Science Museum, Boston.\(^6\)

Case study four: The Dora Faye Davenport Show

The Dora Faye Davenport Show was written in 2006 and performed by Nigel Sutton and Jenny Hope at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra (Australia) in a black box space. The show was created in the style of a 1950s lifestyle show and was designed for a senior audience.

\(^6\) Nigel Sutton, interview; Daina Harvey, interview.

Case study five: *V for Victory*

Written by Chris Ford and performed by Gillian Brownson, I viewed *V for Victory* at the National Railway Museum in York (United Kingdom) in 2007. The production was a one-hander, performed on a decommissioned railway platform and told the story of women working on the railways during World War II.

Case study six: *Troubled Times*

I observed a performance of *Troubled Times* being presented to a group of primary school students in 2007 at the York Castle Museum in York (United Kingdom). It was written and performed by Chris Cade, an actor and former teacher. Set in the Kirkgate streetscape at the museum, the show was designed to help students understand life in York in the late nineteenth century.

Case study seven: *Children’s Museum of Indianapolis*

I viewed several performances at the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis (United States of America) when I visited in 2009. These included several in the *Power of Children* exhibition space relating to famous children who had faced adversity. These included performances about Anne Frank (a young Jewish girl forced to hide during the Holocaust), Ryan White (a young boy who contracted AIDS after a blood transfusion), and Ruby Bridges (one of the first African American children to attend a ‘white only’ school during the American civil rights movement). Another performance viewed was called Sebou, which was a show about traditional Egyptian celebrations and was performed in the *Take Me There: Egypt* gallery.
Interviews

The questions I put to my informants related to their understanding of the history of museum theatre, the characteristics of their own practice, the educational values they placed on the genre, the history of their own involvement, the performance environment, and the use of artefacts and props to develop and perform shows. The interviews were filmed to allow for repeated viewings.

My key informants were Daina Harvey (National Museum of Australia), Nigel Sutton (freelance performer), Tessa Bridal (Children’s Museum of Indianapolis), Eric Olsen (Children’s Museum of Indianapolis), Chris Gade (freelance performer), Gillian Brownson (Platform 4 Theatre Company), Patrick Watt (IMTAL [Asia Pacific]), Bernard Caleo (Melbourne Museum), Andrew Grey (National War Memorial), and Mark Wallace (Past Pleasures). Each of these informants was directly involved with one of the key case studies or plays a pivotal role in the museum theatre industry.

Observation and analysis

Observing performances live and on film helped me establish patterns between the intended and actual characteristics of object-centric museum theatre. It allowed me to make judgements based on the audience’s reaction and also to chart the way performers used the museum spaces during the shows. The description and analysis of the case studies throughout the thesis differ in length. This was the result of shows that varied in length, structure, setting and the amount of information available about the process and production of each. This is an unavoidable aspect of qualitative research into live and reconstructed examples of museum theatre.
Thesis structure

This thesis unpacks the observation that the artefact is regularly marginalised in contemporary museum theatre and seeks to understand whether this is as a result of the influences of new museological approaches to museum practice. Each chapter contributes to helping the reader understand the history, process, purpose and outcomes of developing museum theatre from exhibition objects. Chapter One works to present a nuanced understanding of the characteristics that differentiate object-rich and concept-based museum theatre. Chapter Two builds on these definitions to create a portrait of the historical relationship between museums and performance. It provides context for my discussions of both early examples of object-rich performance and how changing trends in museology may have contributed to the reconfigured role of objects in the museum and, subsequently, museum theatre. Chapter Three offers a detailed analysis of the case studies that have formed a considerable part of my data collection. It focuses on the different ways that objects can be used as the focus of performance. This chapter draws heavily on both observation and interview, where practitioners speak about both the intent and outcomes of presenting object-rich museum theatre. Chapter Four summarises many of the important outcomes of object-rich museum theatre. Drawing on my fieldwork and case studies, Chapter Five concentrates on the operational issues that contribute to the marginalisation of objects as a central focus in museum theatre. Chapter Six mirrors this line of inquiry, focusing instead on the exhibition design factors that inhibit the use of gallery spaces for performance. Chapter Seven summarises my response to the hypothesis ‘that objects are marginalised in contemporary museum theatre’ and presents a reflection on my findings.
Chapter One: Defining object-rich museum theatre

What is museum theatre?

Museum theatre is described as a hybrid genre.\(^6\) It is best defined as the symbiotic amalgamation of two key cultural institutions. Museums are institutions committed to the preservation, conservation, display and interpretation of objects in addition to providing a forum for the exchange of ideas and opinions. Theatres are places dedicated to the exploration of ideas through the suspension of disbelief. Sutherland Clothier reinforces the interdisciplinary nature of the genre by maintaining that museum theatre has a ‘responsibility to both sides of its hybridity’.\(^6\)

Many definitions of the term ‘museum theatre’ have been offered by theorists and practitioners.\(^6\) These are surveyed and synthesised throughout this chapter to help the reader understand the characteristics of the genre and industry before moving on to an analysis of the role of the object in museum performance.

While the presence of performance in museums can be traced back to the sixteenth century, the term ‘museum theatre’ and its subsequent industry only emerged with the foundation of a special interest group by Tessa Bridal in 1982 and the foundation of the International Museum Theatre Alliance (IMTAL) by Catherine Hughes in 1990. While the practitioners of this industry are traditionally in agreement on the importance of museum theatre and its value as a core method of museum interpretation, their individual definitions of what museum theatre actually entails still defy a collective agreement. Jackson and Rees Leahy state that ‘The deployment of museum theatre varies across the world and its practice is almost as diverse as the sites

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\(^{6}\) Hughes, Museum Theatre: Communicating with Visitors through Drama, 18.
\(^{6}\) Hughes, Museum Theatre: Communicating with Visitors through Drama (prologue); Bridal, Exploring Museum Theatre, 1.
in which is takes place.\textsuperscript{65} In the prologue of her 1998 work, Hughes proposes a definition:

Without seeking to limit what it can be, Museum Theatre is the use of drama or theatrical techniques within a museum setting or as part of a museum’s offerings with the goal of provoking an emotive and cognitive response in visitors concerning a museum’s discipline and/or exhibitions.\textsuperscript{66}

Here Hughes has illuminated the core problem in establishing an official definition, as she feels that the most admirable qualities of the museum theatre industry are its breadth and inclusivity. Rather than commit to a similar holistic definition of the term, other practitioners have focused on a range of attributes in order to capture the individual characteristics of museum theatre.

Bridal identifies several characteristics of museum theatre that have evolved due to the characteristics of the venue, purpose of performance and intended audience:

Museum theatre begins with 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.\textsuperscript{67}

Bridal begins by distinguishing the key purpose of museum theatre, namely to present educational content. A museum theatre performance often starts with a clear notion of what information or knowledge needs to be imparted to the audience. The narrative or emotional aspects of the performance are often secondary to this core objective. This sometimes results in substandard performance as, once the key objective of

\textsuperscript{65} Anthony Jackson and Helen Rees Leahy, “Seeing It For Real? – Authenticity, Theatre and Learning in Museums,” Research in Drama Education 10, no. 3 (November 1, 2005): 305.

\textsuperscript{66} Hughes, Museum Theatre: Communicating with Visitors through Drama, prologue.

\textsuperscript{67} Bridal, Exploring Museum Theatre, 5.
education has been fulfilled, less emphasis is placed on developing the presentation of the information. Definitions of museum theatre are malleable and often coincide with the professional interests of the definer. Jackson and Rees Leahy’s definition of museum theatre has a greater focus on its didactic qualities, focusing on ‘the use of theatre and theatrical techniques as a means of mediating knowledge and understanding the context of museum education’.

Bridal moves on to discussing the length of museum theatre performances as ‘typically shorter than those in theatre venues’. Interviews with practitioners revealed that shows were generally devised to run for twenty to thirty minutes if conducted in a gallery space. This was evident in the case studies, such as _V for Victory_ at the National Railway Museum and the performances at the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis. Performances in theatrical spaces where audience members were able to sit comfortably for at least part of the show often ran to an hour. This was demonstrated in case studies such as _The Dora Faye Davenport Show_ and _The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur_. The duration of performances has been calculated in response to museum visitor research on issues such as museum fatigue.

Stephen C. Bitgood’s work on museum fatigue shows that visitor interest drops after a short period of time if they are either physically tired or are suffering from information overload. By developing short performances, the theatrical experience becomes more like another exhibit or artefact with which the visitor can engage for a short period of time, without overshadowing their experiences of other displays.

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69 Ibid.
70 Nigel Sutton, interview; Chris Cade, interview; Gillian Brownson, interview.
Bridal next moves to discuss the interactive aspects of museum theatre. The most common structure of museum theatre performance, as seen in the case studies of *The Bog Man’s Daughter*, *V for Victory*, The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis, and *Robbie the Rat*, are what Bridal describes as the ‘single-character monologue’. Jackson et al. describe this as a characteristic of museum theatre that has evolved ‘for cost effective reasons as much as artistic or educational’. It also accentuates the need for interactivity in performance as a way of creating dialogue, discussion and perspective. Michael Van Tiel from the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney reminds practitioners that when performances are limited to one actor, there is a range of possibilities for peopling the stage through the use of an actor playing multiple parts, voice overs, puppets or computer animations. He also proposes that audience members can become part of the performance as:

- Stage-hands, to hold a character’s place, to control your arms or have their arms controlled by you, to take your good-humoured abuse, to be dressed up, to read lines or respond predictably, to participate in a game, to hold a prop or costume, to provide sounds, actions or responses, as a full reoccurring character, to move their mouths as you speak for them, to act out events as you narrate them, to pretend to play instruments, to move you as you speak or narrate, to dance on stage alone or as your partner, to act "en masse", to play parts of a system, to be a prop, to be the "confident", to be the jury, to be your shadow, to be a growth on you.

Bridal raises the idea of the ‘trained museum theatre professional’. One of the questions put to my informants was what kind of skills a museum theatre performer

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73 Tessa Bridal, interview.
76 Ibid.
needed and if they required any special training. The idea that museum theatre performers inhabited a specific genre of performance that required different skills from traditional actors was provoked by Hughes’ recollection of her time as a performer at the Museum of Science, Boston:

My job at the Museum of Science is to act in plays, in exhibitions or in its theatres and to be a museum educator. I am expected to be as committed to my acting as I am to creating a learning experience for the visitor. I must be believable as any character I play, and be able to handle questions regarding rest room locations. I am a professional hybrid. 77

Hughes’ definition of the museum theatre practitioner points to a diversity and flexibility perhaps not required by performers in a traditional theatre space. It requires a performer who is comfortable to drop in and out of character and assist with the operational running of a museum. The notion of ‘hybridity’ is a recurring one in the museum theatre industry and extends to the skills and qualifications of the performers. Lynne Conner, the former director of the ‘Stages in History’ program at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania uses the term ‘actor-historian’ to describe an employee who is primarily an actor, but has received additional and intensive training in the academic field represented in their institution. 78 Sheli Beck supports this notion by stating that: ‘The ability to train an actor in the history of the period portrayed is much more efficient than training a historian to be an actor.’ 79

This was an opinion shared by many of my interviewed informants. 80 The notion that content is more easily taught than effective performance skills is constantly

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77 Hughes, Museum Theatre: Communicating with Visitors through Drama, 5.
80 Dan Dowling Jr., interview; Eric Olsen, interview.
reiterated in the museum theatre community, but often viewed unfavourably by academics who feel that it dismisses the importance of substance and scholarly merit. Jackson points to the dangers of assuming that a traditionally trained actor can move easily into the field of museum performance:

Such practice [of museum theatre] should be seen as a specialized form of interpretation rather than a branch of the acting profession. The skills required of the costumed interpreter may overlap with, but are not identical to, those of the actor.81

Eric Olsen (Children’s Museum of Indianapolis) adds further requisite qualities: the important qualities of flexibility (in time and thinking), ability to act across a range of different styles, hunger for knowledge and information, capacity for research, use of appropriate tone for different target groups, such as children or disabled visitors, and the ability to relate well to people.82 As Olsen points out, many actors work primarily on stage and screen and may have had no cause to try and start a conversation with groups of people.83 In acknowledgement of the hybrid nature of museum theatre, practitioners must shrug off what Paul Johnson refers to as ‘an unfounded stereotype ... of actors who care only about performance, and of museum staff who care only about the collection’.84

The definition of the ‘actor-teacher’85 by Romy Baskerville and Mike Kay recognises that museum theatre performers work across the disciplines of both theatre and education, and that they require very specific skills that are not by-products of traditional training in drama or education. Their dialogue revisits the concept of a

81 Jackson, Theatre, Education and the Making of Meanings: Art or Instrument?, 236.
82 Eric Olsen, interview.
83 Ibid.
hybrid, a reoccurring theme in this dissertation: ‘What actually is an actor-teacher? Is he an actor who teaches, or a teacher who acts? Or are we talking about a new breed of performer, a hybrid?’

The term ‘actor-teacher’ is also used by Napp Schindel to describe the actors in *Fare for all at the Mount Vernon Hotel*. Here the performers were trained in ‘educational theatre methodology, interactive techniques and improvisation’. She refers to their roll as ‘teachers, guides and storytellers’. When interviewed, TIE practitioner Baskerville spoke on the qualities that an individual must possesses to work in the field of TIE:

> You do need people who are highly conscious of what they’re doing and why ... Actors, in other words, who are outward-looking and not inward-looking ... We’ve already said that a performer in TIE has to be able to adapt – and an absolutely essential part of that adaptability is the audience awareness, the need to recognise your audience whatever it may be and wherever it may be and to know about it.

A performer who can sing, dance and act is often referred to as a ‘triple threat’ in the theatre industry due to their ability to be equally proficient in each area. Similarly, a museum theatre performer needs to be a ‘triple threat’ with the ability to teach, act and be confident in an area of knowledge, such as museum studies, history or science. Like the museum itself, the museum theatre performer must be infinitely adaptable. Baskerville referred to the importance of a performer who was ‘outward-looking’ and displayed good awareness of audience response and needs. In order to maintain awareness of the environment and educational objectives, the museum theatre

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86 Ibid.
performer cannot afford to disappear into their role. Instead they must be mindful of a
transient or interactive audience, able to adjust their performance to block out
background noise, be able to step outside their role to answer questions and
sometimes break character due to unexpected happenings in the dynamic museum
environment around them. In short, the audience must be acknowledged, as the
objective of the performance is to appeal directly to their sense of curiosity regarding
the multitude of objects surrounding the performance environment.

In her writings on object-rich museum theatre, Napp Schindel accentuates the
challenges of performing in the ‘eccentricities of museum space’. Bridal marks out
the unique characteristics of museum theatre as a genre performed in ‘formal and
informal theatre spaces’. As illustrated in the case studies, these may include a black
box theatre space, a corner of the exhibition or a decommissioned railway platform.
As a venue for performance, the museum offers an environment that can be
traditional, dynamic or almost unfeasible.

Advocates and critics alike have expressed their views on the value or perceived
lack of value that museum theatre contributes to the visitor experience. Jackson has
observed that it is regarded in the museum industry as a ‘contested practice’. Interviews with museum theatre playwrights and performers revealed that most had a
clear idea of the function and purpose of the show. Catherine Hughes states that
museum theatre can be used to ‘address ideas left out of exhibitions’. Equally, it can
be used in historical settings as a means of keeping cultural practices alive.

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84 Bridal, Exploring Museum Theatre, 6.
Evans postulates that museum theatre allows audiences the opportunity to reflect on key actions and decisions that have shaped history.94

Finally, Bridal identifies the physical, practical, social, educational and bureaucratic constraints of performances connected to museums. Unlike traditional theatre, museum performance must adhere to the overarching mission statement of the museum and adhere to its educational obligations. For a project to reach fruition, it must be condoned by its host institution and be justified through links to the museum’s strategic plan.

**What is object-rich museum theatre?**

As a result of interviews with practitioners and observations of performances in cultural institutions, it is evident that museum theatre can be classified into two subgenres. The first is a style concerned with the direct interpretation of exhibitions and tangible artefacts housed in museums and cultural institutions. The second adopts an approach that deals with more abstract concepts such as cultural diversity, technology or climate change. This thesis is an exploration of the first, collection-based style.

An object-based museum performance is developed and enacted in response to museum objects and artefacts. It relies on the principle that objects are central to the composition of the show. It is predominantly performed within an exhibition and has the key objective of providing audiences with a deeper and more emotive knowledge of the object or series of objects it is interpreting. It provides opportunity to interpret what Francesca Monti and Suzanne Kenne term as ‘silent objects’, those that are almost completely ignored or do not attract and hold attention.95

94 Evans, “Personal Belief and National Stories: Theatre in Museums as a Tool for Exploring Historical Memory,” 189.
Based on interviews with practitioners and my anticipated summation, the key objectives or outcomes of object-rich museum theatre are to:

- use performance as a tool to help museum visitors to engage with objects on a deeper level;
- show that museum objects have many meanings and lend themselves to a range of different interpretations;
- encourage audiences to look more closely at museum objects and notice them rather than simply see them;
- help audiences draw on their own experiences to enrich their connection with museum objects;
- relate directly to exhibitions and vivify exhibits.

The choice of object-based rather than concept-based museum theatre was the result of an initial survey of industry literature and informal discussions with practitioners. Surprisingly, these first points of research revealed that many museum theatre shows performed in cultural institutions make little or no reference to the collection. Other practitioners felt that making explicit connections to the collection was the key value of the genre. As Mellissa Marlowe, gallery theatre performer and coordinator for the Witte Museum, contends: ‘Museum Theatre suggests plays written specifically to complement museum exhibits’.96

Further research into the ideologies of new museology revealed a parallel decentralisation of material culture in exhibition design, where museum objects are regularly treated as ‘grammatical marks punctuating a story’.97 This thesis does not criticise new museology, but rather looks at ways in which the stereotypes of object knowledge can be shrugged off and be reconfigured to fit with contemporary practice.

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96 Mellissa Marlowe, quoted in Bridal, Exploring Museum Theatre, 2.
I have used the word ‘marginalisation’ to describe the declining attention to objects in both museums and museum theatre. Other applicable terms include ‘demotion’, ‘disenfranchisement’ or ‘subjugation’. Andrea Witcomb writes about the ‘displacement’ of the museum object. All terms point to an academic awareness of the changing role of objects in contemporary museum practice.

In addition to determining why the exhibit object has declined as the subject of museum theatre performance, this thesis explores the function and purpose of building performance from objects. Dudley defines this as a ‘bottom-up’ approach, where the initial focus is on the museum object before any secondary interpretations such as labels are addressed. The term ‘object-up’ is also used to describe this same phenomenon.

What role does the ‘new museum’ play in shaping contemporary museum theatre?

The role of the collected, displayed and interpreted object inherited from the Victorian era of museums is one of the aspects most contested by new museologists. The key argument against an object-centric collection was the often-unethical manner in which ethnographic objects were acquired. Charles Saumarez Smith notes that, through the process of being displayed in the museum, the objects were taken out of their original context, subverting their original meaning. Once displayed, they were placed in a new narrative, prescribed by the museum. Vikki McCall and Clive Gray have observed how the new approach to collection objects in the museum has led to a reconfiguring of the role of the curator.

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89 Sandra Dudley, Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations, xxvii.
90 Ibid, 145.
92 Ibid.
collection information, curators felt they were being ‘downgraded’ or moved into administrative or managerial duties.¹⁰⁴

Each of these aspects has played a role in what Weil saw as a new approach in museum practice and ideology where the focus of museums began to shift from object to idea.¹⁰⁵ Witcomb suggests that rather than a finite shift, there is still ‘a series of oppositions between traditionalists and renovators, objects and multimedia, objects and ideas, education and edutainment’¹⁰⁶. Early museums worked on the perception that the visitor wanted to see as many objects as possible. These were traditionally displayed in large cases with limited labelling and less interpretation. A visitor to Australia’s most recent museum, the Museum of Australia Democracy at Eureka (M.A.D.E), will notice exhibitions with limited objects, supplemented with interactive activities, media displays, text panels, and images.¹⁰⁷

In her work on museum history, Anna Farthing demonstrates the effect of new museology by identifying a paradigm shift from exhibitions curated solely on the collections available, to the exploration of themes ‘for which appropriate objects are unavailable or inadequate’.¹⁰⁸ The lack of collection objects no longer prevents museums from telling the stories associated with them. Farthing focuses on the widening of the concept of ‘exhibition’ to embody the display of both human action and behaviour, attributes often picked up by museum theatre performers for

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¹⁰⁵ Weil, *Rethinking the Museum* and other Meditations. 43.
¹⁰⁶ Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum*, 2.
interpretation. The expansion of the museum is further enhanced by the recognition of ‘intangible heritage’, as promoted by organisations such as UNESCO.\textsuperscript{109}

Despite the evident value of democratising the museum, many professionals feel that the displacement of the object has gone too far. Dudley postulates that the museum object has become ‘peripheral to the narrative of the exhibition’.\textsuperscript{110} Other professionals see changes but don’t feel that the museum has been completely overhauled. Napp Schindel acknowledges that new museology has led to a reinvention of the museum but maintains that they are still shaped by their collection objects.\textsuperscript{111} Rather than marginalise the museum object, Deirdre Stam argues for an approach that works towards an interpretation of objects that is democratic, inclusive and concedes the influence of display on visitor perception of artefacts.\textsuperscript{112} She argues that ‘exhibits ought further to acknowledge that there are three sets of actors relating to any exhibition: makers of the objects, exhibitors of those objects and viewers’.\textsuperscript{113} Charles Garoian too feels that the polysemic aspects of objects needs room for expansion and considers the act of acknowledging the internal dialogue of artefacts as a means of avoiding monologic interpretations of exhibits.\textsuperscript{114}

This thesis examines whether the principles of new museology have contributed to the marginalisation of objects in museum theatre performance. Hughes states that ‘it is difficult to separate the goals of museum theatre from the goals of museums themselves’. This is a key consideration in determining whether the movement away from objects as the cultural capital of the museum has influenced the contemporary practice of museum theatre. I argue that objects and inclusivity are not incompatible

\textsuperscript{111} Napp Schindel, “Museum Theatre: Telling Stories Through Objects,” 10.
\textsuperscript{112} Stam, *The Informed Muse: The Implication of ‘The New Museology’ for Museum Practice*, 277.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid
\textsuperscript{114} Charles R. Garoian, “Performing the Museum,” *Studies in Art Education* 42, no. 3 (Spring 2001): 237.
and that museum theatre can be used by cultural institutions to move museums towards the goal of democratising knowledge, and furthering social and cultural inclusion. As museum theatre practitioners Sondra Quinn and Jacalyn Bedform contend:

Through theatre, the audience can become closer to the creator of the object, the user of the object, the collector of the object, the purpose of the object and, most importantly, to themselves.\textsuperscript{115}

This statement re-enforces the idea that object-rich performance in museums can play a key role in promoting a polysemic approach to both cultural and historical understanding.

Recent writing about museums from industry figures such as Simon points toward the nurturing of institutions that are innovative, cross-disciplinary, inclusive, creative, and take risks across a variety of learning platforms.\textsuperscript{116} They encourage the visitor to become part of the interpretive dialogue in spaces that are both flexible and multi-purpose. New museology encourages practitioners to revaluate the role of the object in the museum. The new museum is not a mausoleum, an ivory tower or a sideshow.

\textbf{Are objects an inherent part of museum theatre?}

The perception of museums existing primarily as repositories for objects, is challenged by theorists such as Steven Conn who asks ‘do museums still need objects?’.\textsuperscript{117} Conn contends that, as an isolated entity, museum objects have lost their ability to make meaningful connections with visitors and that rather than being

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  \item \textsuperscript{116} Simon, The Participatory Museum, 105.
  \item \textsuperscript{117} Steven Conn, Do Museums Still Need Objects? (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).
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explicitly marginalised, they are simply losing their monopoly over the museum experience.\textsuperscript{118} The idea of a museum without objects has caused theorists and practitioners, such as Elaine Heumann Gurian, to ask whether cultural institutions without tangible collections still fit into the definition of ‘museum’.\textsuperscript{119}

The debate over the necessity of objects in museums is underpinned in this thesis through the exploration of whether objects are inherent to the definition of museum theatre. The role of the museum in new museology has been subject to much debate, with museum professionals attempting to strike a balance between traditional practices of curatorship and a shift towards a more inclusive taxonomy. Gaynor Kavanagh suggests that objects remain necessary to museums, as it is the custodianship of objects that makes museums unique and justifies their roles as cultural institutions.\textsuperscript{120} Without the connection to museum collections, museum theatre is not anchored to cultural institutions.

Gurian poses an interesting paradox as she seeks to address the contention that objects are not the heart of the museum.\textsuperscript{121} She proposes that the importance of objects is the ownership of the story associated with it.\textsuperscript{122} If stories can only be told in the presence of the object, this idea points to the potential limitations of object-rich museum performance.

In order to explore the relationship of museum theatre to collections, it is important to differentiate between the concepts of ‘museum theatre’ and ‘performances \textit{in museums}'.\textsuperscript{123} These expressions are often used interchangeably but

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\textsuperscript{118} Ibid, 7.
\textsuperscript{119} Gurian, “What Is the Object of This Exercise? A Meandering Exploration of the Many Meanings of Objects in Museums,” 27.
\textsuperscript{121} Gurian, “What is the Object of This Exercise? A Meandering Exploration of the Many Meanings of Objects in Museums,” 26.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid, 26.
\textsuperscript{123} Nigel Sutton, interview.
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represent a nuanced subdivision within museum theatre industry. ‘Performances in museums’ are theatrical events enacted within a museum; they do not necessarily have any relationship to the themes, collections, programs or mission statements of the institution. These still align with Hughes’ definition of museum theatre, which incorporates any theatrical presentations that occur ‘within a museum’.124 Often, the museum is simply a venue. These types of performances were evident during the dime museum era (defined and discussed in Chapter Two) where morality plays were performed in the theatre space attached to the museum without any cross-pollination with the content of the gallery. Some shows may be developed around a general museological theme such as ‘dinosaurs’ or ‘evolution’ and may tour to a range of museum and non-museum venues. Robert Swieca refers to these as ‘off the shelf’ performances.125 In the case of ‘performance in museums’, the object often becomes a secondary concern while subject prevails.

‘Museum performance’ implies shows specifically designed to relate to the objectives of a museum. Each of the case studies examined in this thesis are classified as ‘museum performances’ as they were specifically written for the institution in which they were first performed. The collection objects act as narrative hooks, shaping the characterisation and plot development. As referenced by Dan Dowling Jr., the connection between object and performance can be a limiting factor, as it ties performance to the cultural institution or exhibition.126 Some scripts are written with a built-in mechanism that allows anchor objects to be substituted for similar ones. In the

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124 Hughes, Museum Theatre: Communicating with Visitors, (prologue).
126 Dan Dowling Jr., interview.
case of Robbie the Rat, the show has been performed in other institutions where Robbie interacts with an alternative collection.127

**Distinguishing between prop and artefact**

Napp Schindel emphasises the importance of differentiating between ‘prop’ and ‘object’ in museum theatre by focusing on the specific purpose of each.128 Artefacts and props differ in: construction, handling by the performer, authenticity, audience perception, symbolic meaning, and future significance. The inherent danger of using objects as the inspiration for performance is that the significance of the artefact can be undermined by inadvertently turning it into a theatrical prop.

The term ‘prop’ references an object that provides structure and support. To actors, the prop is something that can be clung to during the tempest of performance. It represents a certainty in a make-believe world where anything can happen. Although considered secondary to script and movement, the theatrical object can act as an anchor for performance. In performance, objects are generally props embellishing the action, or puppets that either replace or appear alongside the actors. Two theatrical movements that elevate the object are: ‘Object Theatre’, a European form of puppetry using non-humanistic objects, and ‘Property Theory’, a rarely documented field of research on the function and use of stage props. Prop theorist Sofer provides one of the few academic references to the intellectual, emotional and historical roll of properties in performance, observing that in plays objects are ignored in favour of subjects.129 It is likely that museum performance takes its cues from the theatre, where little academic attention is given to props.

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127 Nigel Sutton, interview.
Sofer determines that ‘stage objects ... remain at the bottom of the hierarchy of theatrical elements deemed worthy of analysis’. They are secondary to characterisation, dialogue and action and are altogether absent in some genres of performance. Many successful and evocative performances have been staged without sets or props. The effective use of text, gesture, emotion and suspension of audience disbelief can render them unnecessary; a striking contrast to object-rich museum theatre where the object is the centrifugal force for plot, characterisation, action and conflict.

Theatrical objects are also further marginalised by the fact that they are often considered as part of the set, rather than as a separate entity. Apart from iconic objects such as Lady Windermere’s fan, props are rarely referenced in scripts and are ‘often invisible on the page’. Traditionally, the designer and director determine to what degree props will shape a show’s action and aesthetic. Stanton B Garner Jr. alludes to the subordination of object to actor that is evident through the term ‘props’, abbreviated from property, a term used to convey ownership.

McAuley extrapolates that Bertold Brecht was one of the innovators in object realism on stage, as he realised that in order to complement characters such as Mutter Courage, whose life struggles are clearly etched on her face, the props also needed to reveal an emotional biography. Brecht’s poem Weigel’s Props was written in reference to the dramatic process used by Helene Weigel (a key actor in Brecht’s company) to incorporate objects into her characterisation. She is remembered for her portrayal of the title role in Mutter Courage. This poem documents Brecht’s observation

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130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
of the relationship between Weigel and the props she used to anchor her characters. The props were so integral to Weigel’s portrayal and the construction of her character, that she felt naked without them and unable to sustain her connection to the role. As cited in the poem, all props were selected carefully by Weigel for their visual appropriateness, but also for the greater meanings that the audience was invited to glean from them. A pewter spoon associated with Mutter Courage is imbued with notions of poverty and being forced to forage. It also speaks to a nomadic life where possessions are few and closely guarded. Two lines in the poem state that ‘she selects the objects to accompany her characters across the stage’.134 This approach is comparable to the ‘object-up’ methodological approach taken by the National Museum of Australia to develop the 2010 Australian Journeys exhibition.135 It refers to the process of curating an object-rich exhibition where artefacts are centralised, rather than the punctuation for a series of themes and concepts.

According to Sofer, ‘by definition, a prop is an object that goes on a journey; hence props trace spatial trajectories and create temporal narratives as they track through a given performance’.136 While he refers to the theatrical prop, this same objective is applicable to the museum theatre object, which, as an interpretive artefact has not only an imagined history but also a real one.

Like the museum object, theatrical props are not devoid of meaning. Instead they are already imbued with social and cultural significance, much like their real-world counterparts.137 Sofer refers to the exploration of an object’s past life as ‘ghosting’, as a given prop already carries a range of social connotations.138 An object on stage can

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136 Sofer, The Stage Life of Props, 2.
137 Ibid, 17.
138 Ibid, 3.
conjure up many images, both theatrical and social, in a similar vein to a museum artefact. Consequently, a prop can also be a hook upon which the mantle of interpretation and association can be hung. Just like a museum object, a prop can be ‘an actual thing as well as a nexus of competing ideological codes’. While material culturalists, such as Jules Prown, focus on information such as ‘where was it made’, or ‘who owned it’, these questions are not relevant in a theatrical context. Instead, the actor and audience must imagine the past life of the object, from what it appears to be made of and the significance of who is represented as having owned or made it.

Museum objects are items that form part of the collection. The museum object can be defined by its function and connection to its environment. It is framed by the building in which it is displayed, and has been selected for its rarity, representative powers, or relationship to a person, event or idea. Catalogued objects can be put on display, placed in store, travel as part of an outreach program, or become part of an interpretive collection. Once an object has been displayed, it can be subjected to a number of different types of interpretation such as a tour guide, sound effects or recordings, interactive buttons, performance, proximity to other objects or placement in a particular exhibition.

Bettina Carbonell refers to museum artefacts as ‘captive objects’ whose energy or aura can be harnessed for the purpose of edification. The cased museum object is adulated for its unique aura and is therefore protected from damage with perspex or glass. This system of protection alienates it from the visitor, but also marks it out for special attention. Hierarchically, the interpretive object sits below the cased object. It has assumed this position because it is either: a) one of many; b) lacking in

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139 Ibid, 18.
140 Prown, Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture, 69-96.
provenance; c) easily replaced; d) cannot be damaged; e) not precious; f) not rare; or g) not monetarily valuable. Such artefacts are often used on ‘touch trolleys’ or in educational programs where visitors can interact with them in a tactile manner.

The role of the collection object in the overall mission of the museum is contested. Museum discourse on the nature of the object in the museum exhibition, continuously references the danger of collection objects becoming exhibition props. The language of these discussions implies that props are a lower form of object. Susan Berry suggests that artefacts have become decentralised and, while they enhance exhibitions, are more illustrative than functional in their historical role. Gurian proposes that, ‘like props in a brilliant play, they are necessary but alone are not sufficient’.

Napp Schindel focuses attention on the functionality of the prop in theatre and museum performance, suggesting that, rather than being marginalised in performance, artefacts can also be perceived as competition for the museum theatre performer. If featured predominantly in a show, they potentially cast the performer in a subordinate role. Napp Schindel argues for a theatrical context that frames the performer as a ‘vehicle for teaching about objects’. Ideally, the relationship between performer and artefact should be symbiotic. In theatrical terms, ‘vehicle’ denotes a work designed to showcase a performer’s abilities. It is essentially shaped around their characteristics and talents, with everything else becoming secondary to this key objective.

In considering the similarities and differences between artefacts and props in performance, it is important to observe how objects shape the role of the performer. While object-rich museum theatre implies that objects are cast before plot, Napp

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145 Ibid, 10.
Schindel, in her discussion of developing museum theatre, writes about the process of developing characters and then retrospectively fitting them with interpretive collection objects. A common attribute of object-based museum theatre is its often incidental nature. Many practitioners devise performances that are not deliberately built on objects. According to Bridal, performances at the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis focus on a character and story first before making links to the objects.\textsuperscript{146} This is a common method used by performers and educators who often focus on themes and ideas rather than the physicality of an object, which is considered to be the domain of the curator.

While artefacts become ossified during their second life at the museum, they were initially props to support the business of human life. By reclaiming their past life through performance, artefacts are momentarily transported back to their key original function. The transition of artefact to prop is engendered naturally through theatricality, where dramatic props generally only become artefacts through their association with famous plays, actors or designers.

**Conclusion**

Close reading of key works on museum theatre reveals that the interpretation of objects is not considered to be an inherent attribute of museum theatre. The majority of practitioners interviewed commented that development of historical context, characters and ideas was at the centre of their development process. Mark Wallace, director of Past Pleasures, a costumed interpretation company in London, provided the best justification for building museum theatre from objects by describing it as ‘a hook to hang your hat on’.\textsuperscript{147} The object in museum theatre is the seed that

\textsuperscript{146} Tessa Bridal, interview.
\textsuperscript{147} Mark Wallace, interview.
generates and cultivates all the ideas that go into devising the performance, while the limitations of space and operational issues intrinsic to museum theatre give the show shape. Just as a ‘prop’ is defined as something that holds up a structure, the object is an effective tool for maintaining the structural integrity of a performance.
Chapter Two: The history of object performance in museums

The history of object performance in museums

Performance in museums is not a new phenomenon. The use of theatricality to display and enhance collection objects is evident in the very earliest incarnations of museums as private collections. This chapter poses and responds to the hypothesis: ‘has performance in museums moved from the interpretation of objects to the presentation of ideas?’

The history of the performed museum object investigated in this chapter is neither finite nor exhaustive. Instead, I focus on four significant historical examples of performance in museums to test the theory that objects were the dominant subject of performance in early incarnations of the museum theatre genre. Mauries cites cabinets of curiosity (wunderkammer), as one of the earliest example of institutions that ‘performed objects’. Skansen, a living history museum founded in 1891 is also considered to be a key influence in the amalgamation of objects and performance. Dime museums, a more popularist style of museum common at the end of the nineteenth century contributed many of the spatial and psychological aspects of performance in cultural institution, still evident in contemporary museum theatre. A more modern influence has been Theatre in Education (TIE), a form of didactic performance founded in the 1960s. The role of the object in each of these is evaluated alongside discussions of new-generation museum theatre, defined as existing in the 1980s to the present day. As a compendium to the analysis of the genealogy of

149 Ibid.
150 Hughes, Museum Theatre: Communicating with Visitors, 33; Bridal, Exploring Museum Theatre, 12; Rentsch, Open Air Museums: The History and the Future of a Visionary Idea, 4; Magelssen, Living History Museums: Undoing History Through Performance, 4.
151 Dennett, Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America, 86.
museum theatre, Hughes warns that the evolution of the genre has not been linear. For every move forward, there has been a side step or step back. Each example of museum theatre is evaluated in order to determine whether the object is central to performance. The chapter concludes by considering what impact new museology may have on future museum theatre, and whether this may contribute to further marginalisation of the artefact in performance.

**Wunderkammer: The cult of the object**

The origin of the western concept and construct of ‘museum’ is attributed by museologists such as Tony Bennett to the popular sixteenth century movement known as ‘cabinet of curiosities’ or wunderkammer, which began in Europe. Traditionally, a cabinet of curiosities was a room or large cupboard filled with an eclectic collection of rare, bizarre and often fanciful objects owned by a wealthy private collector and displayed for the benefit of friends and visitors. Prior to the fashion that induced wealthy citizens to begin their own collections, important artefacts were often housed in churches. These took the form of religious relics such as the bones of saints, or fragments of the true cross. The cabinet of curiosities were an important point in the genesis of performing the artefact, as early depictions provide evidence of intensive, although not always accurate, object interpretation coupled with performative techniques.

Collections of objects were traditionally activated by the owner, who would bring his party into the cabinet of curiosities and explain the etymology, social/spiritual significance and national origin of each item. As a collector, his emphasis was also on

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156 Ibid, 38.
how each object was acquired and its cost. ‘Foreign’ artefacts were particularly prized, as they brought into the room a sense of ‘otherworldliness’, and the accomplishments of man in and over nature. Mixed with ethnographic and natural objects were often fanciful items, the most common being the horn of a unicorn or a dried ‘mermaid’. In actuality, the ‘unicorn’s horn’ was the horn of a narwhale and the ‘mermaid’, a dried monkey’s torso attached to the tail of a fish. By exhibiting objects such as these, cabinets of curiosity spawned their own mythology.

Dubbed ‘theatres of the world’, the cabinets were treated as a microcosm of the known universe in which the placement of objects often held many layers of significance and meaning. Generally, the cabinets were very much self-contained and its contents did not seep out into the rest of the estate. Patrick Mauries points to the unique spatial properties of the cabinet as a place ‘framed, encircled and embedded’ where objects could be loosened from their real world context and become part of a fanciful narrative. In this mini-world, objects were sacrosanct, intensively studied and held in high reverence. There were no shy or retiring objects in a cabinet of curiosities as its acquisition policy focused on collecting and displaying exceptional objects paired with compelling stories. In part, the cabinet took on the dimension of an early theatrical storage facility where artefacts became props used to tell an alternative world narrative.

**Performative techniques in the wunderkammer**

The theatrical nature of the curiosity cabinet developed during the height of its popularity in the late 1700s. Mauries writes that:

| It was now considered the height of good taste for the host to deck himself out in some of the choicest items of ethnographical interest in his collection |

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feather headdresses, tunics and the like – in order to provide a running commentary on the history and provenance of each of his objects.  

This scenario is depicted on an etching entitled *The Shop of Remy* where a man handing the shell to the woman is believed by art historians to be costumed in ethnographic garb, in perhaps one of the first recordings of costumed interpretation. Mauries suggests that the man is Remy, dressed as an ‘Indian’. The invitation to the woman to handle the shell also speaks to the early incarnations of the sensory museum, where visitors were encouraged to handle and to engage with objects in ways beyond the act of looking. This method has regained momentum in museums over the past decade, despite the tension between preservation and education. The British Museum in London is one such institution that has instigated a ‘hands on’ program, sustained by the argument that the educational value of visitors handling and therefore connecting with the artefacts far outweighs the possibility of damage.

A sixteenth century engraving depicts the owner of a curiosity cabinet taking his visitors on a tour of his collection. The owner is evident from the authoritative manner he exudes when pointing out artefacts with a long sword, possibly also part of the collection. In addition to the role of the owner as a theatrical protagonist, there is evidence that other types of human artefacts were used to ‘perform’ the collection.

Collectors such as Manfredo Settala and Ulisse Aldrovandi used dwarves as guides for

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158 Ibid, 193.
163 Ibid.
the cabinets, a practice which accentuated the notion of curiosity, while also making an underlying statement about the cabinets representing the world in miniature.164

The verbal and curatorial interpretation of the collection by the owner speaks to many contemporary problems of performing artefacts. This early example of ‘ventriloquising objects’ by developing factual or fictitious narratives sparked a key research interest, namely how objects can be bent to fulfil the narrative of the enactor without convoluting their authenticity. Carbonell points to the problems of narrating the history or significance of artefacts, suggesting that, ‘depending on the voice that spoke for them, these objects could be enlisted to educate, elicit wonder and/or testify to the acquisitive powers of their collectors’.165 The objective of the wunderkammer was to celebrate the mysteries of the known and unknown universe, and theatrical conventions were employed accordingly. They fell out of fashion as the socio-economic upheavals and the effects of the thirty-year war drew the public towards reality and accuracy, and away from the more whimsical elements of the cabinet. As overseas travel improved, foreign objects were more easily obtained, effectively undermining their unique status. While there has been much acknowledgement of the quantities of art to emerge in response to war, collections have always suffered during conflict due to looting, lack of resources and the re-allocation of time and finances. While cabinets of curiosities passed on, they left numerous legacies in the form of museum displays and their influence on surrealist art. The influence of the wunderkammer on museum theatre lies in the accentuated meaning of artefacts and the only partially realised theatricality inherent in their presentation and narrative of objects.

The rise of the ‘object cult’ due to the wunderkammer underpins the longevity of human fascination with the function, origin and purpose of objects from the past, and the drive to collect and display. The wunderkammer was the owner’s personal taxonomy of the world with himself as the omnipotent curator. Gaston Bachelard speaks to the omnipotent behaviours associated with early forms of collection, curatorship and interpretation: ‘the cleverer I am at miniaturizing the world, the better I possess it’.\(^\text{166}\) The collection itself was central to the performative techniques used in the wunderkammer due to the overarching cult of the object. In the cabinet of curiosities the object was celebrated, but any theatricality was simply an extension of the process of creating a world in miniature. As ethnographic clothing was often part of the wunderkammer collection, it seemed natural for the collector to wear them, thereby imbuing him with feelings of ownership, authority, knowledge and adventure. In their roles as additional interpreters, dwarfs and giants took on the dual roles of performer and exhibit.

**Skansen: Developing performance to contextualise objects**

Hughes nominates Artur Hazelius, the founder of Skansen, a Swedish living history museum opened in 1881, as a key figure in laying the foundations for contemporary museum theatre.\(^\text{167}\) While he was a pioneer in bringing together museums and historical enactment, Hazelius’ initial motivation for founding Skansen was fuelled by his desire to preserve the ‘old’ Sweden from the unrelenting modernisation brought about by the industrial revolution. What began as a personal collection, quickly bloomed into an idea for a museum that would not only preserve these objects, but also the dying lifestyle they represented. Sten Rentzog highlights that Hazelius’ objective was to create a museum that diverged from traditional display

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patterns, namely a space where objects were activated through use by museum staff or ‘placed in landscape scenes operating like theatre sets, with sculptured figures shown in dramatic and emotional situations’.\textsuperscript{168} This use of theatricality was designed to act as visual shorthand, where context negated the need for extensive labels or explanation. Skansen was an early example of performance expressly developed to activate, contextualise and enhance the objects, rather than to be employed as a stand-alone interpretive technique.\textsuperscript{169} Initially theatrical aspects were incorporated through the use of wax figures arranged to create a diorama or tableaux.\textsuperscript{170} The trend towards using live humans in lieu of models at nineteenth century international expositions was the next progression towards interpretive performance.\textsuperscript{171}

Hazelius’ museum design choices were enacted to display and consequently preserve a way of life that he felt would be lost during the progressive period of the industrial revolution. Collecting the objects was simply a means to achieving this goal. The artefacts he initially acquired were centred on the themes of folk traditions and everyday activities such as crafting and food production, skills that he feared would be obliterated by an age that produced alternative technologies and disrupted the flow of family traditions. The use of performance followed as a means of preserving the memory of how the objects were used.

At Skansen, the purpose of costumed interpreters was to recreate the daily lifestyle dictated by their historical surroundings. Objects were framed by interactions and activities that gave the visitor a better understanding of the objects original purpose and the impact they had on the people who had owned and used them. Skansen was a museum created in response to Hazelius’ collection, rather than a

\textsuperscript{168} Rentzhog, Open Air Museums: The History and the Future of a Visionary Idea, 15.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid, 30.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid, 233.
planned visitor experience fitted out with relevant props. Visitors could watch an object being made or used, but ultimately these objects became props in a larger production of human lives past. Rentzog attributes Hazelius’ approach towards developing new techniques for object display to the excitement of capturing a slice of time. Each display provided the visitor with a voyeuristic sense that they were interrupting a private, uninhibited moment in the life of the object and its human facilitators.

Skansen still operates as a living history museum founded under the auspices of Hazelius’ approach to performative presentation. His implementation of dramatic presentation was in response to a need to ‘activate’ his collection objects so that they could be viewed in their original context. This had the effect of preserving both object and action. As discussed by Farthing, this emphasises the potential of museum theatre for preserving intangible heritage.172

Dime museums: The age of deception

The nineteenth century was perhaps the richest time in the development of performance in museums and also represented a continental shift in the lineage of museum theatre from Europe to the United States of America.

The dime museums carried on the tradition of the wunderkammer by exhibiting eclectic displays of rare and bizarre objects. Their form and content are best described by Dennet, who writes that ‘for a low, onetime admission charge, the dime museum dazzled men, women and children with its dioramas, panoramas, georamas,

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cosmoramas, paintings, relics, freaks, stuffed animals, menageries, waxworks and theatrical performances'.

One of the earliest examples of a dime museum was Peale’s museum, founded by Charles Willson Peale in Philadelphia in 1786. Much of the collection exhibited at Peale’s Museum was from the cabinet of the ‘American Philosophical Society’ for whom Peale acted as custodian or librarian. Peale’s initial vision for the museum was a serious collection of art and objects, arranged according to the Linnaean binomial system. The initial foray into the use of performative techniques at the Peale Museum was initiated by Peale’s son Rubens Peale who:

persuaded his father to employ live entertainments in order to tap into a wider audience. Live performers added an element of levity to the museum, and the elder Peale began to feel that there was nothing wrong with a touch of diversion.

The origin of vaudeville is frequently attributed to the dime museum. As dramatic pieces performed in the ‘lecture room’ or ‘theatretorium’ became an established part of the museum’s program, actors often performed at both venues. Many performers worked on a circuit that included participation in medical shows, at dime museums and vaudeville. The dime museum was a stationary building with a parade of itinerant objects and performers moving through it. Dennett writes that the inclusion of live performers such as musicians, hypnotists and freaks was justified by

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173 Dennett, Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America, 5.
176 Dennett, Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America, 13.
management as harmless diversion to encourage visitation to museums in lieu of the taverns, brothels and gambling parlours.\footnote{177}

An English visitor to the Western Museum of Cincinnati (1820–1867) wrote that:

a ‘museum’ in the American sense of the word means a place of amusement, wherein there shall be a theatre, some wax figures, a giant and a dwarf or two, a humble of pictures, and a few live snakes ... but the mainstay of the ‘museum’ is the ‘live art’, that is, the theatrical performance, the precious manikins, or the intellectual dogs and monkeys.\footnote{178}

Each one of these early museum/theatre institutes shared characteristics such as common performers, techniques, spaces and handling of objects, which led to a general cross-pollinating effect between the genres.

In the mid-nineteenth century, moral reformers regularly targeted theatres, particularly one that presented ‘tableaux vivants, or living sculptures’.\footnote{179} These performances were enacted by performers in flesh coloured body stockings and although designed to simulate the beauty of the human form in classical art were denounced by moral reformers as the height of indecency.\footnote{180} Dime museums traded on the disreputable reputation of the traditional theatre by creating a respectable venue for performance. As theatre continued to be shunned by society, the popularity and variety of performances in dime museums grew.

By 1891 Doris’ eighth avenue museum had three theatres on its premises.

One housed his resident acting company and presented plays. In another

theatre the manager provided variety entertainment, and in the third he presented such miscellaneous entertainment as puppet shows and comedians.\textsuperscript{181}

In the 1830s, Barnum, later known for his role in the ‘Barnum and Bailey’ circus enterprise, bought Rubens Peale’s dime museum after it was foreclosed by his creditors. He transformed it into the American Museum, an institution that catered to the public’s yearning for the bizarre and grotesque. Barnum reasoned that human nature did not change, an observation that proved to be the keystone of his success. The American Museum housed a range of both static and living artefacts around which Barnum spun a narrative web of fantasy and half-truth in order to boost their popularity and raise revenue.

The dime museum operated at the same time as more enduring cultural institutions such as the British Museum and the Ashmolean. Unlike these ‘ivory towers’, dime museums were ‘low museums’ and catered to the general population. Although marketed as a culturally enriching alternative to the tavern, they did not subscribe to traditional principles of research and display.

Dime museums spanned the tenuous gulf between education and entertainment. Attracting the right audience also provided its own set of challenges, as ‘it was difficult for them to strike the right balance between high brow scientific exhibits and popular theatrical display’.\textsuperscript{182} Unlike contemporary museums, dime institutions were not government funded, but relied on ticket sales much like amateur theatre companies.

In the wake of the dime museum, the hybrid museum/theatre became a socially acceptable institution during the waning years of theatre. Initially, theatres began to develop a reputation for seediness and disrepute due to its use as a venue by soliciting

\textsuperscript{181} Dennett, Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America, 60.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid, 2.
prostitutes: ‘Museum was a common euphemism for theatre’. In the mid-nineteenth century museums represented a respectable alternative for viewing both static and live entertainment. Kate Ryan, a performer at the Boston Museum Theatre in the mid-1800s, recalled it as ‘a meeting place where those who did not wish to be regarded as theatregoers could visit without a blush’. In her memoir Ryan refers to ‘instructive exhibitions in the curio halls’ but there seems to be little connection between the theatre and the museum, as this is the only reference to the collections.

Human artefacts: The exhibition hall

There were two clearly distinct types of performance in dime museums. The first was the performance of human oddities in the main exhibition hall. The exhibits included Mme. Josephine Fortune Clofullia (a Swiss bearded lady), Siamese twins and rubber men. The work of Barnum and other dime museum impresarios in the nineteenth century cultivated a public taste for human oddity, resulting in a shift from the cult of the object to the practice of exhibiting humans in museums. Consequently, what had previously been the subject was now recast as the object. Barnum’s later association with the emancipation movements was somewhat belied by his purchase of Joice Heth, an African-American woman he proclaimed to be both fantastically old and associated with George Washington. Heth was classified as a ‘live exhibit’, a term used in contemporary museums to describe living collection animals. Born a slave, she remained a commodity for her entire life, first as a nanny, then as a living exhibit and finally, due to a public autopsy, a biological specimen. While living, Heth was further objectified by being exhibited in conjunction with papers of authentication such as her

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182 Ryan, Old Boston Museum Days., 5.
183 Ibid. 6.
birth certificate and bill of sale.\textsuperscript{187} Advertising surrounding Heth’s exhibition used language such as ‘relic’, ‘antiquity’ and ‘specimen’, further confirming public perception of her body as a form of commodity and their exhibition an exercise in spectacle.\textsuperscript{188} Heth was a sensory exhibit where visitors could speak with her, touch her and listen to her singing hymns.\textsuperscript{189} After her autopsy, as her age was revealed to be no more than eighty, she became both a fraud and, in some regards, a counterfeit object.\textsuperscript{189} Heth was both a performer and a puppet.\textsuperscript{190} An addiction to tobacco and alcohol made her easily malleable, another aspect sitting uneasily with Barnum’s role as an advocate for the temperance movement.

Conversely, Barnum also profited from the objectification of infants, as in 1855 he used his museum as the venue to launch a range of ‘baby competitions’.\textsuperscript{192} Judged on the basis of superlatives such as ‘prettiest’ and ‘sweetest’, infants were judged before a crowd of paying customers. Barnum later extended these exhibitions to include mothers who were also required to be present on stage as part of the display.\textsuperscript{193} While both Barnum and Hazelius exhibited humans, they differed in method and intention. In Skansen, performers remained as subjects, employed to activate objects, while in the dime museum, inanimate objects were often marginalised, as performers were objectified.

The lecture room

The second type of performance associated with dime museums was the more traditional theatrical space of the lecture room. It was a later addition to dime

\begin{thebibliography}{199}
\bibitem{188} ibid, 81.
\bibitem{189} ibid, 35.
\bibitem{189} ibid, 90.
\bibitem{190} ibid, 90.
\bibitem{193} ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
museums and subsequently created a new space where large-scale performances could be enacted during a period when visiting the theatre was considered to be immoral and vulgar. Performances enacted within a museum were considered to be edifying and more highbrow. Proprietors such as Barnum capitalised on this and advertised their museums as alternatives to public houses, even extending opening hours, a move which reflected his own temperance sensibilities and managed to divert attention from some of his more low-brow exhibits such as the freak shows. Dime museums rallied against a movement of ‘anti-theatricalism’ propagated by the Calvinistic attitudes of mid-nineteenth century moral reformers by providing venues for the enactment of moral dramas. Popular documented performances in the lecture room at Barnum’s museum included *The Drunkard*, a tale of the dangers of alcoholism, and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a protest against the American slave movement.

Rather than relating to its location and the objects housed within the museum, handbills from the Boston Museum Theatre Company show a predisposition towards morality plays. As the museum became the preferred alternative to the theatre, many dime museum theatres developed a reputation for commendable theatre practice. Dennet’s research revealed a high quality of performance with reputable performers and museum theatres, such as the Boston Museum Theatre. Woods’ Museum and Metropolitan Theatre in New York were eventually transformed into highly reputable playhouses.

A poster from the Boston Museum Theatre advertises it as ‘the best dramatic company in the world’, with performances every evening and matinees on Wednesday.

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194 Ibid, 102.
196 Dennett, Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America, 35.
197 Ibid, xiii.
and Saturday afternoons.\textsuperscript{198} The image of the building is surrounded by classic figures in the style of ancient sculptures while a sign advertises ‘half a million curiosities’. There are no pictures of these curiosities, a rare omission for dime museums of this period. This suggests an advertisement designed to attract a higher class of visitor seeking culture rather than the titillation of the bizarre and grotesque.

While cabinets of curiosities lay dormant during the thirty-year war, dime museums, such as the Boston Museum Theatre, fell out of fashion during World War I.\textsuperscript{199} As the theatre began to reassemble its association with class and culture, the dime museum fell by the wayside.\textsuperscript{200} Dime museum theatre, which helped to shape vaudeville, had also been usurped by it. This can be attributed to a number of factors, such as: the disrepute of the theatre, its associations with alcohol and prostitution, and the push for greater civil morality. The temperance movement was in full swing and the family audience was leaving the museum for the reinstated status of the theatre. As theatres began to regain their reputation and original purpose of presenting art and entertainment rather than harbouring vice and illicit activities, the dime museum theatre began to face a new set of problems. In 1892, twenty-one out of twenty-five museums requesting licenses for staging performances were turned down, possibly due to the presence of minors in the ‘theatoriums’.\textsuperscript{201} Dennett suggests that the rejection of these licencing requests may also have been influenced by the death of Henry Stratton on 25 October 1892 who suffered from a heart attack while taking part in a fasting contest at the Huber museum.\textsuperscript{202} Rodger implies that the widespread closure of

\textsuperscript{199} Dennett, Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America, xi.
\textsuperscript{200} Ibid, 45.
\textsuperscript{201} Ibid, 59.
\textsuperscript{202} Ibid.
theatrical venues was part of a bigger social reform movement aimed at closing ‘irrational amusements’ that contributed to juvenile delinquency.203

While the dime museum era is known for its inherent theatricality, little evidence exists of the use of traditional performance to interpret the gallery collections. Although exhibition objects such as the ‘feejee mermaid’ were accentuated by arresting visual advertising and fanciful narrative, they still remained static wonders. Dime museums were early examples of the ‘believe it or not’ museum genre. Rather than guaranteeing the often-preposterous claims, the audience was invited to draw their own conclusions. The characteristics of the performing artefacts were most aptly embodied by the human oddities who, through the process of objectification, were exhibited as both subject and object. Despite the hybridisation of the museum theatre during this period, the spaces such as the ‘lecture room’ and ‘theatre’ traditionally operated separately with little cross-pollination with the collection. These performances rarely focused on the collection, instead concerning themselves with wider social concepts, not unlike many contemporary museum performances. In the case of Joice Heth, the line between object and subject had become blurred. Exhibited around her were documents such as proof of sale, meant to ‘authenticate her’. But like Heth, the provenance of these was most certainly dubious.

**Museum theatre and education**

Almost sixty years after the decline of the dime museum, performance in museums emerged from its association with the ‘age of misinformation’ and was recast within the genre of theatre-in-education (TIE). Larry Gard of the Science Museum of Virginia reframes museum theatre by placing it in a sub-category of educational

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In many ways this recasting documents a strong shift from object-based performance to a stronger interest in performing themes, and engaging with social concepts beyond the scope of the museum. This may have been a result of a movement against the objects representing the past and towards sharing transformative and socially relevant ideas.

The development of TIE has been attributed to a movement that emerged in Coventry in the mid-1960s, although, in reality, information and instruction has been transmitted via performance, dating back to early tribal cultures. Jackson cites it as a genre that harnessed ‘the techniques and imaginative potency of theatre in the service of education’. It encompassed community and children's theatre, and became a force to promote social change. TIE promoted a new brand of dramatics that was realistic in content and promoted reflection and critical thought about emotive concepts such as war, pollution or bullying. Throughout the duration of a performance, an issue or problem was raised and the audience encouraged to form an opinion on how they thought it should be handled or resolved. This was achieved by ensuring that the audience developed an empathic connection to the issue or the characters being presented. Overall, TIE offered a more palatable method of discussing and reflecting on educational or controversial issues.

The connection between TIE and museum theatre is the use of drama to present fact or perspective. The role of the museum theatre performer shares common characteristics with the actor-teacher who must make learning fun and facilitate engagement with the content. The actor-teacher must be as accessible as the teacher in that the dialogue between performer and audience cannot be blocked by the fourth

204 Larry Gard, (Science Museum of Virginia) quoted in Bridal, Exploring Museum Theatre, 4.
The wall of traditional theatre. Kay and Baskerville suggest that a pivotal skill in facilitating this two-way interaction is the ability to pose meaningful questions. The non-traditional setting of museum theatre opens channels for questioning that are generally not available in the playhouse where the actor is separated from the audience by a proscenium arch and curtain. This aspect is a key consideration in considering how spatial characteristics shape the content and presentation of both museum theatre and TIE.

Like museum theatre, TIE fits into the category of ‘applied theatre’, that is, theatre which is not simply created for an emotional or entertaining experience, but a type of performance that serves a particular purpose such as workplace training, simulated experience, political protest or education. This is exemplified in historical performances such as Barnum’s morality plays, where productions were designed to garner support for the temperance movement and promote the fight against slavery. Kay and Baskerville counteract the allegation that genres, such as educational performance, that exist for its own ends are theatrically sub-standard. They contend that educational performances must simply work harder to ensure that both objective and form are equally considered in the development of TIE.

Ideally, contemporary museum theatre is influenced by both TIE and new developments in museum education led by practitioners such as Hooper-Greenhill, who speaks on the importance of ‘teaching from and learning with objects and specimens’. Education and visitor programming is now part of core business for museums and is designed to maximise learning and engagement during the visit. In addition to identifying the learning styles and needs for a range of audiences—such as

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208 Ibid, 63.
seniors, migrants, children, school students, families, teenagers, and people with disabilities—the overarching objective is to engage visitors with the collections.

**New generation museum theatre**

The Performance, Learning and Heritage Project states that the practice of museum theatre has ‘grown considerably during the past two decades’. Many factors contributed to the formation of new generation museum theatre and its industry association, (IMTAL). Bridal founded the museum theatre professional interest group council under the umbrella of the American Association of Museums in 1992 but credits Quinn as a pioneering force in new museum theatre from the 1970s. Initially, Quinn approached the Science Museum of Minnesota with some ideas for performance, but as lack of funds prohibited the development of a theatre program, she was hired in the dual roles of security guard and performer. By 1984 she had created enough momentum to offer the first ‘Theatre in Museums’ workshop that is still run by Bridal at the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis.

When Bridal began developing the museum theatre program while employed at the Science Museum of Minnesota, she revealed the problems of a dormant industry: ‘there was nowhere I could go to see an example of museum theatre. No one was doing it’. Fortunately for researchers such as myself, this changed when Hughes founded the International Museum Theatre Alliance in 1990. The formation of the organisation introduced a new sense of collegial practice, conferences, forums and a network where people could share their work. In 1999, Europe founded its own

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211 Bridal, Exploring Museum Theatre, 16.
212 Tessa Bridal, interview.
214 Ibid.
branch of IMTAL and was followed later by the launch of the International Museum Theatre Alliance (Asia Pacific) in 2008.

The definition published by IMTAL states that:

Museum theatre involves engaging visitors in the willing suspension of disbelief—in pretend, or imagination—to enhance the educational experience that happens within a museum. It ranges from storytelling and living-history interpretation, to musical and dramatic presentations, to creative dramatics, puppetry, mime and much more. There are many ways to use museum theatre, and a variety of techniques and approaches to choose from, depending on the particular educational goals and needs of the institution. First used by only a few pioneering institutions, theatre in museums has grown into a full-fledged movement. Innovative museum professionals around the world have turned to theatre as a successful medium for educating visitors, and evaluation studies have confirmed its effectiveness.215

Due to the inclusive nature of museums and their objective of being accessible to all potential audiences, any performances during opening hours need to be suitable for visitors of all ages. Some museums open after hours for events and functions, and it may be that more complex, controversial or adult themes may be explored at these times. However, due to the expense of operational costs, museums rarely open outside hours aside from functions.

As tourists make up a large proportion of visitors, it is important not to make any cultural assumptions or rely on assumed knowledge. In countries such as Canada, museums generally need to offer multilingual shows. Performances enacted in both Spanish and English were observed at the Monterey Aquarium in California. Another

group to consider are the special needs of visitors who may be blind, deaf or disabled. Rather than trying to create a performance that appeals to all of these groups, it is instead important to create several target audiences for each performance and develop a bank of performances that focus on a few specific groups. Oddey points to a feature of TIE performances where the target audience is often chosen before the subject matter as ‘it is crucial to decide who the piece is being devised for before any other decisions can be made’.216

As maintained by numerous practitioners, museum theatre is an excellent vehicle for bringing to light difficult and controversial aspects of history. The power of narrative to distance people from their fixed viewpoints encourages discussion and debate:

By seeking out the human stories behind the objects, and involving audience members experientially, many museum theatre programs ‘pushed the limits’ by purposefully targeting new diverse audiences and inspiring discussion about controversial subjects.217

Museum theatre may provide fewer challenges in terms of representing the past through performance, as it tends to draw a greater cloak of narrative around a history event, object or figure. Additionally, object-rich museum performance seems like the perfect vehicle through which to deliver the many conflicting voices of the Australian colonial/indigenous historical narrative. As Hughes writes: ‘An object can tell different stories, rather than only one’.218 In many ways, this may provide an opportunity to let objects tell the story of many people, not only that of the individual.

216 Oddey, Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook, 33.
218 Hughes, Museum Theatre: Communicating with Visitors through Drama, 10.
These definitions show that while industry publications and documents often omit the mention of objects from the process of developing and performing museum theatre, there are many practitioners who believe that objects are an integral part of the devising and performing of shows in museums. The connection between object and performance may not always be explicit, but generally, if a conceptual model of development is used, the theme is derived from a permanent or temporary exhibition. The key definitions by the IMTAL, Hughes, Bridal, Jackson, and Rees Leahy suggest that the dominant motivations behind the development of contemporary museum theatre are ideas, engagement and education. It must also be considered as to what degree the online definition continues to shape the practice of museum theatre. By failing to specifically reference the function of museum objects within the genres, does it contribute to the marginalisation of objects in museum theatre?

The case studies collected for my research into the role of the object in museum theatre demonstrate clear links to the historical examples examined in this chapter. The space used for both the *Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* and *The Dora Fay Davenport Show* resembles that of the Boston Museum Theatre Company or Barnum’s lecture room. In each example the performance areas were physically separate from the gallery; however, unlike the segregation of theatre and museum in the lecture rooms, the contemporary examples used visual and verbal clues to connect the show back to the museum collection. *The Bog Man’s Daughter, Troubled Times* and *The Dora Fay Davenport Show* share characteristics with the living history museums, such as Skansen, where visitors can see objects being used in their original contexts. *Robbie the Rat* most closely represents the cabinet of curiosities where a narrative is woven around decontextualised, curated objects. By donning the persona and costume of a rat, Robbie bridges the gap between subject and object.
In contrast to the representations of museum performers in the dime museums, contemporary practitioners can be both subjects and objects without being objectified. They retain a sense of agency and see themselves as interpreters rather than a transient and impermanent part of the gallery collection. While practitioners have retained some of the showmanship and innovation of Barnum, the objectives and integrity of museum theatre have changed significantly. As the IMTAL definition of museum theatre states, the key value of this discipline is its ability to draw an audience into an imaginative world that is both entertaining and educational. In Barnum’s museum regime, museums were driven by publicity and profit.

Ultimately, in this lineage of object-rich museum theatre we see changes in both form and function. Barnum’s gallery performance is perhaps closer in structure to object performance, but lacks the factual integrity that is so closely bound to contemporary museum education and performance. Hazelius’ instincts for authenticity and preservation were well placed but are more closely related to living history museums. By using a first person interpretive technique, performers at Skansen were limited in their ability to reflect on the objects in a greater historical context.

**How could new museology shape the role of the object in museum theatre?**

The changing role of the museum from private collection and ivory tower has led to the development of new museology, a movement committed to inclusivity and the democratisation of knowledge. Hooper-Greenhill terms it ‘the post museum’.²¹⁹

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New museology reimagines and redefines the relationship between visitor and object. According to Weil, the reconsidered museum represents a shift from objects to ideas. This suggestion mirrors the hypothesis that objects have become subordinated in the evolution of museum performance. This thesis argues that objects and ideas need not be incompatible but rather that the perception of artefacts be adjusted from silent monuments of the past to repositories of encoded ideas. Watermeyer touches on this by suggesting that while the objectives of the traditional museum were linear and non-arbitrary, the emergence of post museum ideology focuses on a more polysemic role for artefacts.

The evidence presented in this chapter suggests that the relationship between performance and museum objects had been tenuous, with guides but no strict protocols as how best to combine the two. The flexibility of the museum theatre theory and practice allows contemporary museum theatre practitioners to redefine the role that the collection object should have in the new museum. With the added force of education at the forefront of museum mission statements, contemporary museum theatre must move beyond connoisseurship to play a significant role in educating the public on the material remains of the past.

New museology provides a supportive platform for museum theatre due to the many shared objectives, such as: democratising knowledge, introducing contestability, increased interactivity and the use of museums as a public space and for a wider range of activities. Traditionally, museum theatre has aimed to bring in new audiences,

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220 Weil, Rethinking the museum and other meditations, 43.
move away from passive viewing and move towards developing a museum that is both a public and pedagogical space.\textsuperscript{222}

In its drive to divorce itself from the perception of museums as graveyards for objects, does new museology place less importance on the collection object and more emphasis on experiential engagement? Hooper-Greenhill argues that museum education still primarily uses objects to engage students with the past, but does this translate into public programming such as museum theatre? The post-museum provides fertile ground for using artefacts to communicate complementary and contrasting social narratives.\textsuperscript{223} Watermeyer credits the post-museum with moving the making of meaning from something 'uni-directional, undiscriminating, detached and one-dimensional into an immersive, multiple, collaborative event that exhibits many voices and perspectives'.\textsuperscript{224}

McCall and Gray suggest that new museology has provoked a re-evaluation of the role of the curator as the custodian of objects.\textsuperscript{225} This leaves the museum performer ideally placed to act as a liaison between the public and the curator. A seeming side effect of new museology is that, in an effort to make the museum more inclusive, the pendulum has swung away from the close study of artefacts. Contemporary museum theatre aligns with the principles of new museology, but makes a case for the empowerment of objects through performance.

\textbf{Conclusion}

The history of performance in museums demonstrates that museum theatre has changed shape, as the museum has evolved from private collection, to dime museum, to ivory tower, to laboratory, to an educational institution and to an interactive tactile

\textsuperscript{222} Ibid, 1.
\textsuperscript{223} Ibid, 4.
\textsuperscript{224} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{225} McCall and Gray, “Museums and the 'New Museology': Theory, Practice and Organisational Change,” 24.
space. With the irrepresible forces of the Internet shaping education, museums have worked to generate a larger online presence and worked to digitise their collection. As the museum has changed in response to social, museological and educational trends, so has museum theatre.

Major world events have been the catalysts for change in museum theatre, such as the industrial revolution, World Wars, the movement towards popular entertainment and then the re-establishment of museums as places of knowledge. All these have left their imprint on the genre. Through periods of activity, dominancy and re-invention, object-rich museum theatre has retained the common objective of making museums more engaging. Contemporary object-rich museum theatre draws much from the influences of TIE founded in the 1960s, and is currently still learning to accommodate the specific requirements of performing in a museum environment. As exhibition designs have become more interactive and curation styles more integrated, museum theatre has developed in line with the new museum.

While the introduction of new museology may play a part in the shift from object to subject, Napp Schindel suggests that museum objects are the ‘building blocks of programming’. As museum theatre is often tied to programming and education, it is surprising that collection objects are only infrequently the foundations for museum theatre performance. In some ways the shift from object to idea can be attributed to the changing roles and responsibilities of museum staff. TIE represents a swing away from the performed object, as it emerged at a time when museum education was also in a key developmental stage. Napp Schindel notes that objects are often considered to be the domain of the curator, while the key objectives of public program staff is to

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convey stories of human interest. By emphasising the different skill sets of curators and public program staff, it is easy to see how each may feel that they lack the expertise needed to perform objects.

Objects and possessions are universally associated with status and wealth. Subconsciously, in democratising the museum, new museology has moved away from the commodification of objects to the more egalitarian focus of ideas and emotions. This has had both positive and negative ramifications for the inclusion of objects in museum performance. Each of the four historical examples covered in this chapter show a marked progression towards a more reflective and critical relationship between ‘performer’ and object. In each example, the objects were performed for a specific purpose. Each type of presentation utilised different performative techniques. In the cabinet of curiosities performative actions signified ownership. The presentation of human oddities as artefacts in the dime museum was designed to evoke emotions of morbid fascination. Skansen performed utilitarian objects as a means of preserving intangible heritage. TIE paved the way for performances that are no longer bound by their collection, but can use ideas to build performance.

Hughes views the movement from object-rich to concept-based performance as a progressive and innovative attribute of new generation museum theatre. She describes the freedom to move past collection-based performance as ‘radical’ and calls for greater attention to the process of devising such shows. The findings of this chapter suggest that object-rich museum theatre is tainted by historically motivated perceptions of the performed object as ‘dishonest’ and ‘inaccurate’. The museum object also suffers from perceptions that it is ‘elitist’ and ‘non-participatory’. While new theories of participation and equality in the museum have enriched the

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227 Ibid.
228 Hughes, Communicating with Visitors through Drama, 10.
experience of the museum visitor, an often over-zealous application of theory has contributed to the displacement of the object in museum theatre.
Chapter Three: Introducing and analysing the case studies

Introduction

This chapter introduces and describes the seven case studies that have informed my research and helped to chart the role of the object in museum theatre. The case studies were collected in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States and were selected due to their common characteristic of activating museum artefacts through performance, using a variety of methods and styles. These examples were also chosen because I was able to meet and interview the practitioners, thereby providing a more intimate insight into the development process of object-rich museum theatre.

In the introduction to the Performance, Learning and Heritage Project, Jackson and Kidd consider whether it is necessary for a researcher to think that their case studies are examples of high-quality museum theatre.\(^2\) I consider all the case studies discussed in this thesis to be examples of good practice but, rather than evaluate them for overall quality or effectiveness, I have taken a approach that deconstructs the characteristics of each work and reveals the parts that relate to the interpretation of artefacts. Rather than gather data from the audience viewing each piece, the case studies are interpreted from the perspective of an educator evaluating potential resources, and for their ability to successfully activate museum artefacts and fulfil learning objectives, such as the acquisition of skills and knowledge.

The length of each performance description reflects its duration and also the specific elements chosen for analysis. Some case studies, such as *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur*, focus specifically on one forty-minute theatre show, whereas the discussion of museum theatre at the National Railway Museum in York deals with

three small fifteen-minute site-specific productions developed to a specific formula. I was able to observe the performances of *Troubled Times, V for Victory, Newcastle Rocket* and *Is Your Journey Really Necessary?* live during my fieldwork in the UK in 2007. My observations were supported by educational documentation provided to me by Chris Cade and by interviews with both Cade and Brownson from Platform 4 Theatre Company.

I was introduced to *The Dora Fay Davenport Show* at the 2006 IMTAL conference in Melbourne, Australia through a live presentation of extracts from the show and a publicity DVD that also featured scenes from the performance. Unfortunately, *Robbie the Rat* was performed prior to my undertaking of this research and had (regrettably) never been filmed. However, some photos existed and I was able to piece together the narrative of the performance through interviews with the creator Nigel Sutton and the then National Museum of Australia programs manager Daina Harvey.

I came across some of the props used in *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* while working at the Melbourne Museum in 2008 and was lucky that the creators and performers, Bernard Caleo and Susan Bamford Caleo, were still around to be interviewed. They generously provided me with the only copy of the filmed performance, which meant that I was able to describe the narrative, historical, spatial and interactive elements in greater detail.

As mentioned in Chapter One, Hughes’ book has been pivotal in developing a research project that draws on both the practice and academic theory surrounding the interaction between performer and artefact. *The Bog Man’s Daughter* was performed before I began this research project and reconstructed predominantly from Hughes’
account in her book. It introduced me to the idea of performing with and to objects exhibited in cases and opened the doors to an exploration of fixed performance spaces in galleries. An interview with Dan Dowling Jr., who was employed at the Science Museum of Boston during the research period of this thesis, provided an almost historiographical perspective on the performance, many years after the theatre program had closed.233

Case studies

The following section introduces and analyses the case studies that have contributed to the data collection for this thesis. The case studies are: *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* (Melbourne Museum, Australia), *Troubled Times* (York Castle Museum, UK), *Robbie the Rat* (National Museum of Australia, Australia), *The Dora Faye Davenport Show* (National Museum of Australia, Australia), *The Bog Man’s Daughter* (Museum of Science, Boston, US), Platform 4 Theatre Company (National Railway Museum, UK) and the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis (US).

The analysis in this chapter seeks to resolve the following research questions:

- Which techniques are used to ‘perform’ museum objects in each case study?
- What role does the performer in each case study play in facilitating the relationship between object, performance and audience?

This chapter provides a framework for the exploration of the factors that contribute to the marginalisation of objects in museum theatre. These are examined in further detail in Chapters Four and Five.

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233 Dan Dowling Jr., interview.
Case study one: *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur*

*The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur*, performed at Melbourne Museum in 2004, demonstrates how performance can be used to communicate the process of curating and managing collections. It shares the journey of collection objects from use to display. Set in a collections storeroom at the museum, the performance begins with a harried character called Harry Call who is searching desperately for an important artefact that he has mislaid. Charged with unboxing the 150 objects to be exhibited for the 150th anniversary of the Melbourne Museum, Harry becomes distracted by morning tea and subsequently loses a fossilised dinosaur tooth. Terrified at the ramifications from the museum management, he enlists the help of a machine called the ‘Fabulous Query Confabulator’ to help him find the tooth. By pointing the confabulator at any box in the storeroom, Harry is able to talk to the objects inside and understand as they speak back to him.

The first object Harry points the confabulator at is a CTM2K radio transmitter, originally owned by the Australian Wireless Association. The transmitter (CTM2K) explains that he was used at Point Shank as a means of sending messages to ships, but was made redundant on 1 February 1999. CTM2K expresses sorrow at his current defunct status and proudly shows a photograph on the screen of himself ‘at work with his mates’ (other machines). He also confides his concern at collecting dust in the storeroom, as dust is the enemy of collection objects and could cause him to breakdown and become permanently redundant with no hope of ever returning to active duty. Through the story of CTM2K, the audience experiences the sadness of objects that have outlived their ‘active’ life and now move into a second stage as a ‘display artefact’.
Throughout the performance, CTM2K transmits morse code from the executive offices on the third floor, which represent the museum management. Harry is concerned that the boss has discovered his mistake in losing the tooth and asks the audience to assist him in translating the message with the help of the morse code sheets they were given as they entered the performance space. The message is revealed as, ‘Is it a tooth?’ After considering the question, Harry realises that he must never take facts for granted, but must instead ask questions, look for clues and undertake research, just like a treasure hunt. At this point, the members of the audience assume the role of Harry’s research assistants and are consulted on a regular basis during his inquiry.

The next message transmitted from CTM2K is, ‘Look around you’ and prompts Harry to compare his picture of the missing tooth to the teeth of the members of the audience. One of the objects displayed on the stage is an animal skull with large pointed teeth. Using the confabulator, Harry interviews the skull, which answers with an American surfer’s accent. The skull reveals he is a replica of a sabre-toothed cat’s skull (Smilodon) recovered from a Californian Le Brea tar pit. When Harry makes the assumption that the sabre-toothed cat must have been a dinosaur, the skull reminds Harry that not all fossils are of dinosaurs and that his kind only died out 10,000 years ago, when early humans were already roaming the earth. The skull also shows Harry a photo of what palaeontologists thought he had looked like and explains that scientists had been able to determine he had a loud roar from the construction of his neck bones. The skull offers to demonstrate his roar and the audience roars back as requested. Before the confabulator is turned off and the skull is silenced, he shares his opinion that Harry’s lost artefact was indeed a fossil and that it was significantly older than he is.
While Harry ponders his interaction with the skull, CTM2K transmits a new message; ‘Be thorough!’ which Harry interprets to mean that he should be both methodical and scrupulous in his research methodology. Following on from the clue that the fossil might be as old as a dinosaur, Harry points the confabulator at a locked crate labelled ‘Dinosaur’. A menacing English voice emerges from the crate, belonging to a Deinonychus, a carnivorous dinosaur from the cretaceous period. Deinonychus explains that his teeth are sharp and pointed, indicating that he ate meat. He asks the audience if they know what kinds of dinosaurs had flat, grinding teeth and receives the correct answer of ‘herbivore’. After hearing Deinonychus’ information, Harry becomes certain that the missing tooth could belong to a carnivorous dinosaur in the ‘Evolution Gallery’ and is on his way to check when another message comes through: ‘Don’t jump to conclusions!’

To decode this instruction, Harry uses the confabulator to consult another object on stage that is difficult to identify. It looks like a twisted piece of stick and Harry wonders if it has been broken. The object indignantly retorts that he is whole and is actually a sacred object from Papua New Guinea. He was made from the roots of a mangrove tree and called a Kakahni. His role in society was to teach children where they were allowed to go and which areas were forbidden or too dangerous. Kakahni tells Harry that he will not find the tooth in the evolutionary gallery and warns that ‘sometimes the path to research can be difficult and disappointing, but you must keep on going’. This is followed by a new message from the boss upstairs, who advises Harry to ‘compare and contrast’.

As advised, Harry must find something he is certain is a dinosaur tooth and compare it to the photo of his missing artefact. There is only one solution: open up the crate with the model of Deinonychus inside to inspect his teeth. The Kakahni reverts
to his original function of warning against danger and tells Harry not to open the crate. Harry considers his advice, but opts to open the crate anyway. As expected, Deinonychus is not only unfriendly, but also hungry. He leaps from the crate, chases Harry and terrorises the small children in the audience. Fortunately, the confabulator comes with a safety feature, a ‘reboot boot’ mounted (of course) on a walking boot. By pressing this button, Harry is able to deactivate Deinonychus and inspect his teeth.

Harry is distressed to discover that none of the dinosaur’s teeth bear any resemblance to the tooth in his photo and even more so to discover that Deinonychus has done a poo in his crate. However, on closer inspection, Harry realises that what he mistook for faeces was actually the missing artefact. As he bends down to retrieve it from next to Deinonychus’ foot, he realises through a direct comparison that it is actually a claw. Remembering the advice given to him from the boss upstairs, Harry invites an audience member to hold the object while he interviews it through the confabulator. In a tiny voice to match its size, the specimen confirms that he is a replica of a Cape Paterson claw that came from an Allosaurus and that he came from an era when Australia was much closer to the North Pole and therefore colder. Satisfied with his research, Harry thanks his assistants, invites them to come and handle the replica of the claw and shows them how to get to the evolutions gallery where they can see it in context.

Object performance

*The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* relies on the development of an imaginary artefact, ‘The Fabulous Query Confabulator’, as a means to bring to life a range of collection items. The machine is a mash-up of several recognisable objects including a gramophone horn. Its purpose is to facilitate dialogue between the human protagonist
(Harry Call) and his anthropomorphic cast of artefacts. The show provides a literal interpretation of translating object into performance, as the objects are cast as performers. The technique used in the performance is ‘object into performer’ rather than ‘object into performance’, as the artefacts become key actors in the show. The dramatic conventions and fanciful method used to interpret the artefacts are heightened by the performance environment: a black box space. The black box theatre is a flexible performance space where distractions such as daylight are blocked out. Away from the visual reminder of the gallery the objects are free to become inherently theatrical.

This show embodies the notion that objects are not silent. By imbuing them with voices, accents, genders and vocal inflection, the artefacts become what Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt terms as ‘actable and speakable’.234 The dialogue of the object-performers is sculpted from curatorial notes and exhibition labels. Each character speaks about their place of origin, their significance, their carbon-dated age and original function. While the characterisation of the artefacts provides greater opportunity for juxtaposition, the objects do not subscribe to Carbonell’s principles of conversation and never speak to each other.235 Instead, the character of Harry acts as an intermediary between the objects and the audience, taking on the role of a surrogate curator. The process of selecting the objects for performance is comparable to developing theatrical characters. Each artefact embodies a range of key characteristics and provides opportunity for a ‘story arch’, namely moments of conflict, climax and resolution. The objects tell a story simply through their inclusion in the performance. They embody themes of human interest such as evolution, religious beliefs, extinction, evolution, technology, communication and biology.

The focus on the behind-the-scenes aspects of the museum allows *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* to be classified as what Kirschenblatt-Gimblett calls ‘performing museology’.\(^{236}\) The performance takes place in a set designed to look like a collection storeroom, a part of the museum not traditionally open to visitors. Throughout the performance, the audience learns about the process of theming exhibition and object selection through the actions and decisions of the key protagonist.

**Objects as subjects**

In the style of object-theatre, *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* provides a performative environment where objects are recast as subjects. This provides a counter-narrative to the historical examples of performance discussed in Chapter Two where human oddities were often displayed as objects. While the objects in *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* are inanimate, they have been personified and their life-experience manufactured through curatorial research.

While impractical on stage, the ‘inanimate actor’ has been present in the museum for many years in the form of the mannequin or wax figure. Wax figures were popular in the Victorian era largely due to the work of Madame Tussaud and displayed in dime museums as works of art and wonder. Living tableaux were also popular in this period as ‘static frames’ were set to music to concisely communicate a story or replicate a piece of art.\(^{237}\) Mannequins continue to be used to ‘people’ museum spaces in much the same way as actors in living history museums. Once the initial cost has been outlaid, they require little maintenance for a low-budget museum. At the Pirate Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, live performers are paired with mannequins.


Through this coupling, the live actors act as the agent between the visitor and inanimate figures. At the Witch Museum in Salem, a wax figure is brought to life via a voice-over recording in which he addresses the audience directly and shares his traditions, beliefs and activities.

The phenomenon of objects as actors also manifests itself at the National War Memorial in Canberra, where the story of World War II military submarines is told using only sound, light and the museum objects. A human aspect is incorporated by the use of voice-overs portraying the submarine crew but, in this performance, the actors are the objects and the human presence is invisible.

In The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur, Harry Call uses the confabulator to speak to and listen to a range of objects in the collection storeroom. As a nod to the meta aspects of museology, the character-objects in The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur give voice to their reasons for being part of the museum collection. Meaning is derived from museum objects, but also from the processes used to acquire and interpret them. The show aligns with the notion that the key to interrogating seemingly mundane objects lies in asking the right questions of it. Harry Call’s dialogue is formed from the experiences of a museum employee but also embodies the voice of the visitor, who has no prior collection knowledge. His lines are punctuated with the language of inquiry, with the frequent use of ‘why?’ or ‘where?’ The performance is a journey to acquire knowledge, played out for the benefit of the audience.

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**Anthropomorphic objects**

The character artefacts in *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* are positioned as anthropomorphic beings, that is, inanimate objects that have been imbued with human voices and characteristics.

The Australian CTM2K radio transmitter speaks with a 1950s-style broadcasting accent. He is highly personified in that he shows pictures of himself with ‘workmates’, experiences sadness at his retrenchment and communicates fears of loneliness, isolation and illness while in storage. The tone of voice is friendly, sometimes jovial and generally helpful, characteristics that reflect the important role CTM2K had in helping ships. The voice of the sabre-toothed cat’s skull recovered in a Californian Le Brea tar pit pays homage to a Californian surfer ‘dude’ with a beachy American accent. This references its place of excavation, but also provides some comic relief for a rather fierce looking specimen. All the tension is reserved for the model of Deinonychus, whose menacing English soccer hooligan voice growls from the crate with the threat of violence and destruction to come. The timbre of the performer’s voice changes again as it issues forth from Kakahni, a sacred anthropological object. Yet again, the use of a booming male Papua New Guinea accent suggests a racial caricature but the voice lends dignity to the object while referencing the culture from which it was collected. When the tooth is finally identified as a claw and interviewed through the confabulator, its most notable vocal characteristic is the lack of projection, an attribute that mirrors its small size.

*The object and the ventriloquist*

Contrary to many museologists who believe in the communicative power of artefacts, Spencer Crew and James Sims comment on the problem of ventriloquising
museum objects, which they maintain are inherently ‘dumb’. Their theories focus on the misrepresentative powers of interpretation, stating that ‘if by some ventriloquism they seem to speak, then they lie’.

The ventriloquising of objects is occasionally mentioned as a metaphor for constructing a narrative or past for an object, but in the case of *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* it is both literal and figurative. Caleo and Bamford Caleo developed a script whereby the confabulator machine allowed the audience to hear the object speak, a convention that necessitated the development of dialogue and a voice-over artist to speak on behalf of the objects. In the case of this performance, all voices were created by the same male voice-over artist who was also a staff member in customer service at the museum. Although none of the objects were specifically gendered, machines and dinosaurs are generally associated with stereotypically male characteristics and interests. In order to construct attitude, accent, tone and knowledge for each object, Caleo and Bamford Caleo researched the history of each piece, also taking into account the era, region, culture, religion, the history of its acquisition, biological facts, and general aesthetic.

*The spoken object*

Hooper-Greenhill reflects on the power of interpretation to give voice to objects, but cautions on the dangers of reading curatorship as the indisputable voice of an object. It is important to consider the effects of interpretation, as ‘Objects are likely ... to be spoken, rather than to speak’. The spoken object appears in a variety of manifestations, but most literally in *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* where the

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241 Ibid.
storyline relies on the ability of the objects to vocalise their history, views and perceptions. The character of Harry knows little about the collection objects, thereby making it essential that they are able to speak for themselves.

Garoian references the speech theories of J.L. Austin as providing an important classification for speaking about museum artefacts, primarily in the differentiation between ‘constative’ and ‘performative’ speech. He maintains that when constative speech is used, ‘(the) viewers’ understanding and appreciation is limited to the curators’ academic assumptions of museum culture’, while performing speech helps visitors ‘critique and reconsider the museum’s authoritative speech’. The case studies analysed for this thesis draw on both the constative and performative styles of speech as they integrate curatorial knowledge with a presentation that challenges the traditional paradigms of museum presentation. According to Garoian, by imbuing artefacts with voices and opinions, the museum object can move into a more polysemic role as an initiator of conversation, rather than dictation, further democratising the displayed artefact. He advocates the use of dialogue rather than statement in order to breakdown conventions of knowledge and experience.

Performer and playwright Greg Hardison from the Kentucky Historical Society contends that helping actors ‘speak objects’, allows human interpretation to bring greater depth of meaning to artefacts, ‘Putting [objects] into the mouths of a performer, you’re able to find all the nuances, all the highs and lows of a person’s thoughts.’ While this technique is more easily applied to textual documents, collection objects often provoke an emotional response and provide opportunities to explore a variety of historical contexts.

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244 Ibid, 238.  
245 Ibid.  
246 Ibid, 237.  
247 Greg Hardison, interview.
Object autobiography

In an effort to allow the object to ‘speak for itself’, *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* takes on many characteristics of the eighteenth century ‘it-narrative’ literary genre. Also known as ‘novels of circulation’, ‘spy novels’ or ‘object tales’ these stories told the autobiographic tales of everyday objects. Written as short stories, they revolved around the concept of an object-protagonist sharing its life story and interactions with humans. The most common objects, selected for their oratory powers, were coins and banknotes, items that had the ability to change hands quickly. Generally of a low-denomination currency, the coin or note has the ability to traverse easily between social classes, thereby providing commentary on a range of socio-economic issues.\(^{248}\) The prime function of the object in these works was to provide a narrative hub or to help readers speculate on an object with perspective and consciousness.\(^{249}\) An example of objects with consciousness is apparent in *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur*, where the objects know their own provenance and are able to offer information and advice gleaned from both their first and second life.

Criticised as ‘hack literature’, the it-narrative conformed to the same basic template where the object-hero (such as a coin) could easily be substituted with another object that could tell its own tale about its encounters with the human race.\(^{250}\) While the use of the ‘it narrative’ proforma for object-rich museum theatre could prove to be useful, the repeated use of this structure could also result in ‘cookie cutter’ theatre. Conversely, the structure of the it-narrative aligns well with the objective of object-rich museum theatre, as it provides an opportunity to discuss both the social significance and the provenance of objects.


This is evident in the 1772 it-narrative, *The Birmingham Counterfeit: or, Invisible Spectator*, where the protagonist must come to grips with the fact that he is forged currency and created for the purposes of deceit and greed.\textsuperscript{251} Much of the narrative details his struggle with authenticity. Other works depict objects such coins being ‘captured’ as they are taken out of circulation and hoarded; an issue reflected on by the talking and thinking objects in *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur*. What is perceived as a restrictive structure could also be recast as a useful theatrical convention in that objects are allowed to have their own thoughts and opinions. The ‘Fabulous Query Confabulator’ featured in *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* proved to be a useful theatrical convention and was used for a range of performances, as it acted as an excellent translation device between the museum artefact and the audience. As Liz Bellamy remarks, ‘the essence of this genre is its flexibility’.\textsuperscript{252} Interestingly, as it waned in popularity, the it-narrative was repackaged as children’s literature at the end of the eighteenth century, lending precedence to performances such as *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur*, a performance primarily designed for children and families.\textsuperscript{253}

*The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* accomplishes what many museum labels do not have the space to achieve, namely providing a space for sharing the stories of both common and esoteric objects. It conforms to the highly museological principle of the object biography, although in this performance it is presented as ‘object auto-biographies’. According to Alberti, the use of ‘object biography provides an appealing narrative hook’.\textsuperscript{254} Essentially, it creates a solid shape around which dialogue and human characters can be formed.

\textsuperscript{251} Ibid, 190.


\textsuperscript{254} Alberti, “Objects and the Museum”, 561.
While material culturalists are preoccupied with the complexities of whether objects can ‘speak’ or should be ‘spoken’, museum theatre provides an opportunity for exploring these issues outside the framework of curatorship. The theatrical dimension allows for the suspension of disbelief without undermining the authenticity of the institution. As Kevin Moore proclaims, ‘Stones can be made to speak – and the most ordinary of objects to sing – by creative museum staff’.255

The object gaze

In The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur, objects enact their own biographies in order to exercise agency. This draws on the literary canon of it-narratives, where objects are able to testify, judge and observe. Valarie Casey uses Jacques Lacan’s theory of the Gaze to show how the relationship between subject and object has been transformed in the new museum.256 Lacan’s initial writings on ‘the gaze’ theorise on the effect that being ‘viewed’ has on the individual. He frames the Gaze as both possessive and desirous and through the process of being scrutinised, the individual becomes disempowered and is seemingly reduced to the status of an object.257 Casey contends that the concept of the Gaze can also be applied to the constructed and artificial layer that curatorship, display and interpretation create between the museum object and its viewer. These attributes form a type of ‘screen’ whereby the museum is able to exercise some control over the viewer’s understanding and response to the object.258

While curatorship is a means of shaping the meaning of exhibits, the concept of the ‘screen’ can be applied to museum theatre. Is performance another way of controlling

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258 Ibid.
the visitor’s interpretation of objects? In many ways it dictates what is looked at and how it is perceived.

In Lacan’s theory of the Gaze, the subject and object of the Gaze can be reversed, as the watcher becomes the watched.259 This principle is mirrored in *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* as the objects reveal detailed observations of human behaviour, both in their first life and in their subsequent status as museum objects. Casey contends that often the direct relationship between subject and object has been complicated by developments in interpretive methodology where the interpretation supersedes the object.260 This is evident in *The Clue of the Claw of the Dinosaur* through the presentation of the Deinonychus puppet. The interpretation causes the audience to focus on the living creature, rather than the process of discovering and fossils, although these are the objects that form part of the collection.

Museum theatre allows the concept of the Gaze to be explored across a range of contexts, as it confronts the key themes of power and ownership. Performances about objects of slavery, racial discrimination, violence, and gender inequities can address difficult concepts through the eyes of the objects that witnessed oppression or were used to enforce it. Lynn Festa refers to the ‘gaze of the object’ as both ‘dispassionate’ and ‘satirical’.261 Very few it-narratives demonstrate an object’s loyalty to their owner, as one purpose of this genre was to highlight the fallibility of the human condition and a society ruled by consumerism. In *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur*, apart from the character of CTM2K, Harry does not develop any meaningful friendships with the objects in the storeroom. His interaction with Deinonychus implies that the nature of

259 Ibid, 4.
260 Ibid, 6.
artefacts should not be tempered or pacified through their interaction with a human facilitator.

In addition to charting the journey of an everyday item, the object-protagonists in it-narratives are generally quite critical of their human facilitators. Many stories cross into the genre of ‘moral tales’, in a vein similar to those enacted in Barnum’s lecture hall. The ‘spy object’, like the ‘testifying object’, is aptly named for its ability to both inform and gossip. Festa cautions that ‘if objects give social status, they can also take it away: your possessions may snitch on you’.262 Authorship of these novels was often attributed to the objects themselves, thereby removing any responsibility from the hand that penned them.263 In this manner, the author becomes the medium or transcriber of the message. Museum theatre is often introduced to institutions as an effective means of tackling difficult or controversial subject matter, as the material is filtered through a character, rather than a real person. Similarly, the object is used in it-narratives as social commentary facilitated through an un-rebukeable inanimate object.

**The performer as object learner**

The role of the museum theatre performer in each case study is shaped by the form, function and location of the show. In *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur*, the function and characterisation of the protagonist is shaped by the youth of the audience. In *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur*, there are multiple interactions between object and performance. Harry acts as both the facilitator of the object’s dialogue and a representative of the audience.

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262 Ibid, 300.
Carol J. Fuhler, Pamela J. Farris, and Pamela A. Nelson propose a set of research-based teaching strategies to support the building of object literacies that are broken down into ‘scaffolding’ (the structure, guidance and instruction provided by a teacher) such as ‘activating prior knowledge’, ‘predicting’, ‘teacher modelling’, ‘think-alouds’, ‘questioning’ and ‘summarising’.264

The voice of the ‘teacher’ in *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* is CTM2K as his role is to transmit advice from the museum director, a figure of authority. Through this system, Harry Call is cast as the ‘student’ and given instructions on how to analyse objects and consider how information is obtained and presented. The audience becomes part of a greater metaphorical classroom, as a sub-set of students who learn through the experiences of Harry. Like an ancient Greek chorus, the audience is given the opportunity to support, contradict and comment on Harry’s journey of discovery. It acts as his confidant and assists in finding the lost paleo-object. The performance has a magnifying effect by isolating individual objects, letting them tell their stories and allowing the viewer to re-experience artefacts through the eyes of a child.

The scaffolded aspects of the experience are contained within the overarching structure of the show. Students are provided with all the information they need to solve the mystery through object testimonials, visual information on stage and Harry’s engagement with CTM2K. As in a school environment, they are provided with a set time limit to reach a set conclusion by the end of the performance. The children used their prior knowledge of dinosaurs and their observations of the museum interior.

In order to arrive at the correct classification of the mystery paleo-object, Harry and the audience make a series of predictions through the use of deductive processes, such as comparing and contrasting.

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Within the performance, there are three distinctly different types of teacher-like roles. The first is of the ‘peer mentor’, while Harry, as protagonist, is cast as a learner so as to represent his audience, made up primarily of children and families, he also serves in a dual role as facilitator of the learning experience. He guides the audience through the performance by sharing his knowledge of museum procedures and processes. The second classification is of the ‘teacher’, the voice of authority, and therefore the teacher, is provided by CTM2K. The final principle of teacher modelling is evident in the concept of ‘the invisible teacher’; in a classroom situation, the invisible teacher is often the textbook, a point of reference that provides authoritative content information. Within the performance, the disembodied voice of the invisible teacher is the morse code messages from the museum ‘boss’ tapped through and interpreted by CTM2K. These instructions to Harry and, through him, the audience, include directions such as ‘look around you’, ‘be thorough’, ‘don’t jump to conclusions!’, and ‘compare and contrast’. These instructions are usually provided when Harry is at a ‘dead-end’ or in the process of making an incorrect deduction.

As in a Shakespearean soliloquy, Harry needs to ‘think-aloud’ in order for the audience to ‘listen in’ and participate in his thought-making process. This is a practice encouraged in primary, secondary and tertiary education to help students engage in the deductive process and collegial learning, and to arrive at a correct or ‘educated’ conclusion.

The first question asked by the director of the museum via morse code is, ‘is it a tooth?’, causing Harry to re-think his classification and his own tendency to make false assumptions. The process of re-examining and re-interpreting artefacts is a legitimate
practice undertaken by curators when new information about a field comes to light, particularly in the area of palaeontology. Many of the questions in the show are posed by Harry himself as he attempts to interrogate objects and draw from them the relevant information required to help him find and identify his object.

At the end of the show, Harry revisits and summarises the process of deduction he and the audience have undertaken to: (a) find the specimen and (b) correctly identify it. By the end of the performance, there is considerable evidence of Harry’s teaching and learning process.

Conclusion

The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur creates a platform where collection objects are interpreted in an entertaining and educational way, suitable for young children and their families. The personification of artefacts centralises the museum object in the performance, and engages with academic discourse on the ‘speaking object’.

The show uses a behind-the-scenes look at museological practice to address questions of authenticity, curatorship and cultural significance. It interprets objects not on display, thereby demonstrating how museum theatre can be used to enhance public access to ‘hidden’ collections.

Case study two: Troubled Times

Troubled Times provided an example of a piece of object-rich museum theatre, written and performed by an educator and developed specifically for school students in accordance with the criteria of the British National Curriculum. It interpreted a Victorian streetscape exhibit through a combination of interactive performance, interpretation of exhibits and more conventional teaching methods. It was devised by Cade and performed in the York Castle Museum in York, UK as an interactive solo
performance. It activates the artefacts in an ‘indoor open-air museum’, which was part of the permanent Kirkgate exhibition at the York Castle Museum.

The primary learning objectives of Troubled Times were to animate people and interpret Kirkgate’s 1890s streetscape, as represented in the museum. It also served to highlight the differences between the rich and poor in Victorian York; to illustrate the law-keeping procedures of the time; and to engage students with the Victorian judicial process. A secondary objective was to help students create parallels between their own lifestyles and those represented in the Kirkgate streetscape. This particularly included the perception of ‘time’ in many formats, such as ‘doing time’, ‘awareness of time’ and ‘living from day to day’.

The performance I observed was being presented to a group of twenty-five primary students aged 8–10. The duration of this piece was approximately an hour, which by museum theatre standards is quite long; however, Cade justified this by highlighting the many educational objectives the performance was trying to meet and the various teaching and learning techniques that it incorporated:

There can be shorter performances because they are just a performance. But if it’s with school groups, yes, there is an element of teaching and sharing and allowing the audience not just to be done to by the doers. It’s more of an interaction to ensure that understanding is taking place.\textsuperscript{268}

Troubled Times was scaffolded to the British National Curriculum, which served as a guide for the skills and content covered during the performance. As it was specifically designed for student audiences on excursion to the museum, it was also structured to a specific duration and to a target audience. The show was aligned with the Stage Two

\textsuperscript{268} Chris Cade, interview.
History and Stage Two Citizenship outcomes in the English primary school curriculum.

**Education and the performed object**

The performance begins in the York Castle Museum ‘Main Street’, then moves into a re-created historical school room and then finally into an education centre, where a learning activity is facilitated by the museum’s educational team. During the post-performance activities, an education officer takes the students to view two ‘rooms’ within the museum that contrast the living conditions of wealthy and poor people during this era. This is followed by an inquiry session where students have to identify and interpret mystery household objects pertaining to the time period and determine whether they came from high- or low-socio-economic houses.

Cade begins his piece by introducing himself as a performer and explaining that his costume is the garb of a character named Joseph Beedham, a man just like many others who lived and worked in the Kirkgate Main Street in 1891. He explains that, although the audience will be introduced to life in Kirkgate by Joseph, he will also be playing a range of different characters. Cade stresses that it is important for the students to listen carefully to Joseph, because at the end of the hour, they will be asked to help determine his fate. According to Cade, the significance of performing a ‘character transformation’ in front of the audience is to help them understand that museum theatre is a combination of historical fact and drama, ‘They need to know when it’s started and if there’s a change in the rules. So I think that there is a drawing up of the parameters in which we are going to play.’

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269 Chris Cade, interview.
The importance of induction was a focal point of Jackson and Kidd’s 2006–2008 study on learning through museum theatre. Jackson and Kidd found that having the actor step into a role in front of the audience helped to bridge the gap between fact and performance, thereby ensuring that the information is not being lost through the creative nature of the presentation. Cade too recognises the importance of providing the audience with a set of rules for museum theatre. He advocates the use of third person interpretation in Troubled Times because it allows him to set up important social parallels for the students to recognise and thereby allow them to compare Joseph’s story to their own lifestyle and reflect on what brought about these social changes:

In the style I use, we can step in and out of role and therefore we can address modern day issues. We’re not trying to become an historical figure and take you back to live life as it was then. You’re coming with all the baggage of the twenty-first century as a member of the public or a school child and we don’t try and dismiss that. It’s not theatre they’ve come for; they’ve come to a museum to understand how things were in the past and to learn how it led to how things are today.

‘Rosy Red Apples, only thrippence a pound’ sings Joseph as he describes his day as a street-seller of apples, which begins at four am every morning. Already, the students are beginning to be provided with a number of clues as to Joseph’s social status as they listen to his speech, observe his clothing and hear about the hardships of life as a street-seller. To introduce the concept of economics, income and also to cement the time period in which Joseph is operating, Cade hands each student a coin with the head of Queen Victoria on it. As the students examine the coin, Joseph speaks about

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271 Chris Cade, interview.
what money means to him. He was unable to finish school, as he was required to earn a wage to help support his family, so consequently can’t read or write.

When interviewed, Cade explained that the objective of making Joseph illiterate was to encourage the students to read the labels, signs and information on the exhibits to him and thereby engage more strongly with them. The strength of this approach was that Joseph asked the students to identify objects with which they had some connection through present day: ‘always a touchstone, something they recognise, something that they can identify with’. However, Joseph also introduces the audience to new objects such as the jars of leeches in the apothecary window, once used medicinally and now defunct in modern day York.

_The indoor-outdoor museum space_

After his initial introduction, Joseph takes the students window-shopping in Kirkgate. Each shop window adds a new layer of understanding to life in 1891 by providing information on trades, medication, objects used for work and home, and the vast differences in socio-economic status between Joseph and the people who could afford to live and shop in Kirkgate. When interviewed, Cade stressed the importance of gallery performance in helping students engage both educationally and emotionally with the objectives of the museum. He also felt that, while the living history element of the museum achieved this, a performer has the capability of forging a more emotionally involved contract between the visitor and the exhibition objects:

The environment is very important as it sets the tone, and there are so many contextual clues for the children as to a) the period, and b) the well to do, or otherwise nature of the place and the way of life. So the artefacts, or objects if

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272 Ibid.
you like, to me are very important, but it’s my job to illuminate them and bring out the personal stories behind them. To make them accessible.\textsuperscript{273}

While most museums have adopted a more contemporary style of curatorship that is highly interactive and often tangible, Cade believes that this does not necessarily entail that the exhibitions engage visitors with human stories:

\begin{quote}
In museums in general, things are no longer behind glass showcases as such, but they can be inanimate and they can be very removed, if not detached as far as they used to be when displayed. They still need that interface, I would call it, and that’s what an actor can bring; the personal story of an actual person or a type of person.\textsuperscript{274}
\end{quote}

The performance area for \textit{Troubled Times} is an outdoor living history museum, built inside a traditional museum, and is consequently a space that is both ‘outdoor’ and ‘indoors’. The Kirkgate streetscape embodied some aspects of immersion techniques and was at various times of the day peopled by staff that helped visitors interpret their surroundings. The collection objects were displayed in context within the street scene. The majority were products such as food, medical supplies and toys in shop windows, while others were used to illustrate modes of transport relating to the era. As explained by Cade during the introduction to the performance, his character ‘Joseph’ was not an historical figure that had actually lived in Kirkgate, but a compilation that represented the lifestyle of a working-class person. By doing this, he was able to convey some of the more generic characteristics of the time for a person of Joseph’s standing, rather than focusing on the traits of an individual.

\textsuperscript{273} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{274} Ibid.
The students’ interaction with collection objects is shaped by three distinct types of exhibition space. In the re-created Kirkgate street, the objects are displayed in theatrical sets as a means of providing context. In some styles of gallery performance, the job of the performer is to render the display cases invisible. In Troubled Times, the display cases are disguised as shop windows. Joseph’s character participates in the environment as both a seller and consumer. He sells apples and buys tea for his ill daughter. The living history aspects of the Kirkgate space provide limitations on what types of objects can be exhibited. Each object is included on the basis of its role as a consumable item or an object such as a cart that may be found on the street.

In the second space, students look at examples of objects in a traditional museum display case. The objects are arranged in a ‘high status’ living room and a ‘low status’ living room. Many objects from the time period are displayed in exhibition cases with labels.

In the third space of the education centre, the objects are taken out of both an historical and a museum context. The education staff use unprovenanced, interpretive objects so that students are allowed to handle the artefacts and examine them closely. The theme of object status is emphasised through each part of the museum experience. Students are asked to categorise the handling objects according to whether they are low or high status. Using an inquiry methodology, they then analyse each group of objects to discover more about the daily life of both rich and poor people in York in the 1890s.
Object status

In Troubled Times, display and interpretive objects are used as a platform for exploring both historical context and socio-economic issues. A key interpretive outcome of Troubled Times is the message that objects can be imbued with either a high or low status. While taking the students window-shopping, the character of Joseph regularly comments on the cost of objects and the class of person who would own them. ‘Would yer tea taste any sweeter from one of them china cups?’ he asks the children. Joseph only physically interacts with low status objects. He has a cart, rather than a shop. When he asks the students to analyse a coin, it is of a low denomination. Towards the end of the performance, Joseph is accused of stealing a toy for his daughter (an ‘upper-class object’) and is subsequently arrested.

Post-show education session

Troubled Times differs from the other case studies in that the performative elements were coupled with a session led by a museum educator in the institution’s education centre. Here, students applied the information about the social status of objects learned through Cade’s performance to activities allowing them to exercise their critical thinking skills.

The education session involved a visit to the museum where students were shown two exhibits. Each one featured a living room. One was curated with high-status objects and the other with low-status objects. On returning to the education room, students worked extensively handling a collection that contained household objects from poor and wealthy Victorian families. Students were divided into two groups and asked to identify which objects may have come from each house. This task was made all the more difficult, owing to the fact that many of the artefacts were household
objects made redundant by developing technology and consequently unrecognisable to the students. However, through a process of teacher-led inquiry, the students were able to form educated guesses as to what each unknown object had been used for in its time.

*The object whisperer*

Cade uses his educational background to help students acquire greater knowledge about the York Castle Museum collection, but also to support them in the skills of observation. The theatrical style of the Kirkgate streetscape ensures that objects are curated in such a way that they are put into social context. This is achieved without object labels. The visitor relies on an object’s context, such as its positioning with similar objects, to guess its function. Through the character of Joseph, Cade acts as collection translator or ‘object whisperer’. Through a series of questions, comments and observations, he is able to translate nineteenth century objects in a way that allows students to recognise their function and significance within the historical context. The volume and clarity with which objects speak is often dependant on the age of the audience in relation to the age of exhibits. Older visitors may recognise their intrinsic function and meaning, where to younger visitors they speak a foreign language. In this way, the character of Joseph acts as an intergenerational translator.

*Conclusion*

Like *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur*, the performer-object-audience interaction in *Troubled Times* is dictated by the age of the audience. As the show was designed for primary-school-aged children, the objects are used in the performance as visual prompts to engage students with concepts relating to the history of Kirkgate during the 1890s.
Created after the development of the Kirkgate gallery, the performance was shaped by both the curriculum and the collections on display. The show features several types of object: the contextualised objects in the Kirkgate street, the props kept and handled by Joseph, the traditionally-displayed objects in the York Castle Museum and the interpretive collection used in the education centre. Students have the opportunity to see artefacts used in context and also to examine them from a critical contemporary perspective.

**Case study three: The Bog Man’s Daughter**

*The Bog Man’s Daughter* was performed at the Museum of Science, Boston within an exhibition space chronicling the unique natural history, chemistry and geology of bogs in Europe and North America.\(^{275}\) The objects surrounding the presentation area included photographs, video and artefacts preserved in bogs. According to playwright Lipsky, the development of *The Bog Man’s Daughter* was a study in how form follows content.\(^{276}\) In the *Bogs* exhibition, the performance was commissioned to atone for the fact that the gallery did not actually include any artefacts relating specifically to Irish bogs.\(^{277}\) Consequently, the piece falls into the category of museum theatre performance where the show becomes an exhibit.

A key catalyst for developing *The Bog Man’s Daughter* was that there were few objects relating to Irish bogs in the exhibition. It was thought that performance could be used as a substitute for collection items. A secondary consideration was the decision that visitors would respond better to the *Bogs* exhibition if it contained a stronger

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\(^{275}\) Hughes, *Museum Theatre: Communicating with Visitors through Drama*.1.


\(^{277}\) Ibid, 10.
The plot of the performance highlights the life and work of the Irish communities who lived beside the bogs.

The key strength of this piece as an example of object-rich museum theatre was the manner in which it used artefacts in cases. The actor interacts with a case containing the body of Tollund Man, a man found perfectly preserved in the peat. Through the actor's story and gesture the object is propelled back in time to the moment of discovery. It is no longer treated as a museum object on display and the glass vanishes.

It gets darker, and an orange light is cast on the Tollund Man model in the case. The actress creeps over and tells how peat cutters come across bodies like this, bodies so well preserved that cutters think they've come across a recent murder victim.

This passage illuminated many of the factors required in successfully interpreting objects in cases. In this instance, the performance area was rigged with theatrical lighting, a technique that can render the case almost invisible and consequently suggest to the audience a much closer physical interaction between the actor and Tollund Man. An important aspect of object-rich museum theatre is the development of a legitimate reason for pointing out the artefacts on display. The bog man's daughter's justification for alerting the audience to the remains of Tollund Man is the recollection of an event that happened in her village where a preserved corpse was thought to be a recent murder victim. Although Tollund Man was not found in an Irish bog, he effectively adds to the ‘peopling’ of the exhibition. His presence reminds the audience that humans have lived and worked around bogs for many centuries.

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278 Ibid.
279 Hughes, Communicating with Visitors Through Drama, 3.
In addition to adding humanity to the exhibition, *The Bog Man’s Daughter* worked towards communicating facts about bogs to the audience. As part of the script development process, Lipsky worked with exhibition and education staff to choose what factual information would be integrated into the narrative, effectively finding a balance between information and drama.280 Lipsky’s ten commandments for writing museum theatre consist of nine repeated lines of ‘Thou shalt not be boring’ and concludes with ‘Thou shalt always deliver the information’.281 His approach to developing performances for museums stipulates that writers should ‘Listen to the educators, experts and exhibit planners respectfully, but not too respectfully’.282

The female protagonist (the bog man’s daughter) was adapted from an historic photograph of a woman carrying turf dug from a bog.283 As the actor arrives in the space and takes off her shoes, her feet are noticeably dirty, a visual clue to the poverty and back-breaking labour experienced by the people who worked in the bogs.284 In Ireland, the term ‘bog-poor’ emerged from these communities. The title *The Bog Man’s Daughter* not only speaks to her geographic location, but also the economic hardships she faces.

In addition to lighting, this performance utilises other performative conventions such as music and sound effects to set the mood. At the end of the performance, the audience has learned about the etymology of the expression ‘Boogie Man’, which they now recognise as having been being adapted from the term ‘Bogie Man’ (a man who comes out of the bog). They have participated in the process of digging peat with a peat shovel, found out about the lifestyle of communities living in the region of the

280 Ibid, 10.
282 Ibid, 11.
283 Ibid, 10.
Irish bogs. They have discovered another side of immigration to America from Ireland, namely the employment of bog girls in the Boston factories.

**Enacting interpretive objects**

*The Bog Man’s Daughter* integrated interpretative objects into the performance as a means of showing the audience how they were used in context. As the actor speaks about her life in the bog, she invites members of the audience to learn the skill of peat cutting and to use an interpretive object for its original purpose.

She [the actress] grabs a long shovel called a *sliarne*. She demonstrates how her father cuts peat with it and even gets a child up from the audience to help her set several pieces of peat into a stack for drying.285

The set of *The Bog Man’s Daughter* is Brechtian in style. There is no pretence of realism as the actor sits upon a series of prop rocks thrust into relief against a painted backdrop of the Irish bog lands. The flatness of the image is juxtaposed with interpretive artefacts such as a peat shovel and a kettle. Photographs are attached to this wall and include the image of a woman with a peat basket.286 The performer interacts with a number of different kinds of objects and transitions effortlessly, from showing a volunteer how to dig peat to telling the story of Tolland Man without letting the glass case in which he lies stem the flow of her dialogue. The performance does not draw undue attention to the fact that the action is taking place inside a museum, but resets the scene in the bogs of Ireland, transforming the audience into visitors passing through the peat. The realism of this piece is not bound to the recreation of real life, but rather a compilation of personal stories relating to young women working in the bog.

While the previous chapter alludes to the historical display of people in museums, Casey revives the issue in a contemporary context by asking whether museum theatre performers could reasonably be classified as part of an exhibition and therefore, a museum object. Historically, people have been displayed in museums since 1501.\textsuperscript{287} Casey builds on this history in the contemporary era and theorises that, like multimedia, performance can become an object when enacted within a museum and indeed achieve the same status as an artefact. She argues that live performance in the contemporary museum has not only dispensed with the primacy of the object, but has also \textit{become} the object.\textsuperscript{288}

In \textit{The Bog Man’s Daughter}, the performance was developed in response to an absence of objects acquired by the Museum of Science, Boston relating specifically to Irish bogs. The lack of objects was not intentional, but simply the result of what was available. The performed monologue of the show communicates information that could also have been presented through objects. Her musings on the many girls born in the Irish bogs immigrating to America to work in Boston factories could also have been presented in the form of factory photos, industrial objects or travel documents. Instead, this idea is conveyed through the device of a letter to the bog man’s daughter from her brother who has already immigrated to America. In addition to providing historical information, this story creates a connection between Ireland and Boston, helping visitors understand their own link to the story.

The theatrical set placed in the corner of the exhibition re-enforces the idea of performance as object. Its permanency speaks to a show that is more than an ‘add-on’, but rather contributes valuable content-knowledge to visitors.

\textsuperscript{287} Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, \textit{Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage}, 402.
Performing antisocial objects

Simon’s work on making museums more participatory identifies the ‘social object’ as a key factor in helping visitors communicate and share their experiences.289 The social object is defined as something thought-provoking, connected to the human condition, often visually interesting and with room for multiple interpretations. *The Bog Man’s Daughter* works at the opposite end of the spectrum by interpreting an object deemed by Simon’s definition to be ‘antisocial’. At first glance, bogs appear to be a physically unengaging geographic feature with little human connection. Initial evaluations of the *Bogs* exhibition suggested that visitors weren’t exhibiting signs of deep engagement. The decision was made to retrospectively develop a piece of museum theatre to fill both gaps in content and to enliven the exhibition. A conversation between the Museum of Science’s playwright-in-residence Lipsky, and Mike Alexander, Manager of Public Programs and Science Theatre, is particularly telling in terms of how the project was initiated:

Mike Alexander, Manager of Public Programs and Science Theatre, called me into his office the other day, handed me a yellow legal pad, and said he had another play for me to write. I thought: great, I like working for the Museum of Science and I need another gig; wonder what Mike’s got up his sleeve this time?

*Bogs*, he said.

*Beg your pardon*, I said.

*Bogs*.

The word hung in the room like a leaky balloon.

*Bogs? What about Bogs?* I said.

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For a minute I thought this was some sort of code word, or maybe a curse, like a variant of “bugger!” – “Oh bogs!”

But no, with a resigned sort of sigh that could only mean Mike was not totally happy with the assignment himself, he averred:

That’s what the play has to be about – bogs.

Oh, yes, I see, of course: bogs, I said, looking down on my nice clean, yellow pad, wondering whether it would be supportive or rude to write BOGS!! in big letters at the top of the page.

And just what do you want me to do with “Bogs” I asked.

Make them irresistible, he said.290

Robert Richter responds to Lipsky’s reflections on writing *The Bog Man’s Daughter* by suggesting that ‘not every exhibit has built-in drama’ and that adding a human-interest story provided colour and movement in addition to contextualising the social history of the bogs.291 The deep-seeded notion that bogs are not ‘irresistible’ speaks to the need of finding alternative ways to present antisocial objects. In response to this, Lipsky developed a character that could tell the story of humanity in the bogs and help the audience develop an emotional connection to a series of geographic features.

**Conclusion**

*The Bog Man’s Daughter* presents as a relevant case study because it provides a platform from which to consider the idea of performance as a substitute for collection. As an extension of this, it paves the way for discourse on whether actors can be legitimately classified as museum objects. The performance and surrounding

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290 Lipsky, “Playwriting for Museums or: How to Make a Drama out of Slime Molds,” 9.
documentation also provides a secondary research interest, namely the process of developing performance to enliven existing exhibitions.

Case study four: Children’s Museum of Indianapolis

The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis is an institution that uses museum theatre as an integrated part of its core programming and exhibition design. Each gallery space is designed to accommodate a piece of live theatre and a small audience, a luxury rarely enjoyed by most museum theatre practitioners. My findings in this institution were based on the observation of a series of performances in two of the galleries: the Power of Children and the Take Me There: Egypt galleries.

The Power of Children gallery tells the stories of three children whose lives have influenced social and political attitudes: Anne Frank, whose diary provides an account of her experiences as a Jew in hiding during World War II; Ruby Bridges, who was the first African-American child to be integrated into a ‘white only’ school during the civil rights movement; and Ryan White, whose HIV status as a result of a contaminated blood transfusion caused him to be excluded from school in the 1980s. Anne’s story is told from the perspective of a variety of characters, with actors performing the roles of Anne, Miep (a family friend) and Otto Frank (Anne’s father). I was able to observe ‘Otto Frank’ in a part of the exhibition with sliding doors that closed to create an intimate and soundproof space. Once the door has closed the space becomes the annex where the Frank family hid during World War II. Otto shares his pain at returning to it as the only survivor of the former inhabitants.

In a different part of the gallery, an actor portraying Ryan White stands in a replica of his bedroom surrounded by items belonging to the real Ryan White. The audience is transported back to a moment in 1988, when White is preparing a speech
for President Reagan’s AIDS Commission and he explains something of his current life and history of discrimination, referring to objects in the room as he does so.

Towards the back of the exhibition, visitors pass through displays that speak to the discrimination suffered by African Americans prior to and during the civil rights movements and focuses specifically on the media coverage of a little girl called Ruby Bridges. The performance of her story is enacted by one of Ruby’s school friends inside a replica of her classroom. Her friend is portrayed as an adult and is recounting Ruby’s story from a period of time approximately twenty years after the fact.

In *Take Me There: Egypt*, a steward from Air Egypt welcomes visitors into the gallery as they step through a plane. Visitors are invited to attend a traditional celebration called a Sebou where a new baby is welcomed into its family home. The performance begins outside the façade of a house and anybody who wishes to watch or participate is invited into the house. Sliding doors create a quiet space away from the gallery and an intimate setting where visitors do not feel silly participating. Once inside the interior of the house, visitors are treated like guests, given tunics to wear and asked to help prepare gift boxes. After this inauguration into the celebration, the audience steps back out into the gallery playing tambourines, singing and becoming part of the performance.

In Sebou and the other performances situated in the *Power of Children* gallery, space and performance collude to subordinate the museum object. A unique property of the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis is its approach to exhibition design. Museum theatre is incorporated into each gallery via a series of spaces that are open for visitors to look at, but closed via sliding doors while a performance is being enacted. Although some spaces such as Ryan White’s room are filled with authentic artefacts,
the rooms relating to Ruby Bridges, Anne Frank and the Sebou ceremony are furnished more in the style of theatrical sets.

When considering whether space usurps object in the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis, it is important to note that the artefact plays a significantly different role in children’s museums than in mainstream museums. Visits to children’s museums throughout my research period suggested that permanent galleries focus on tactile and functional objects, rather than ancient or precious ones. Up to a certain age, children have little conception of time and are often more interested in the aesthetics of an object, rather than its historical authenticity.

The ‘curators’ carts’ at the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis were positioned within the Power of Children exhibition and staffed with paid facilitators. Each contained interpretive object adds an extra dimension to the stories of Ruby Bridges, Anne Frank and Ryan White. As the target audience for the museum is families, the objects were selected to appeal to several different levels of experience and understanding. A child approaching the cart may be drawn to the G.I. Joe figurines that will help them understand that despite the stigma that Ryan White fought against, he was an ordinary boy with toys like theirs. In also helps children place Ryan in his historical context and handling now-defunct toys help them understand that he died decades before they were born.

Most adults are well versed in the symbology of World War II and will immediately focus on the swastika or Jewish star, a perfect opportunity to discuss exclusion, racism or prejudice with their child. Being able to handle these objects with a one-on-one explanation of their importance provides a younger visitor with the tools to better understand the exhibition. In addition to providing a visual vocabulary to the exhibition, facilitators encourage visitors to use their deductive thinking skills by
asking probing questions such as ‘What do you think this Third Reich insignia was used for?’ and ‘There are screws on the back of it, what does that tell you?’ Eventually, through a series of ‘leading questions’, the visitor is able to determine that this particular symbol was affixed to the front of a car, opening further discussion for the use of transport technology in the war.

The use of curators’ carts directly outside the performance area creates an additional dimension to each performance. Children and families experience each story through three different mediums: first person interpretation, displayed objects and handling collections. Each aspect contributes to developing stories that feel authentic, emotive and historically researched. They simultaneously help to put authentic objects into the context of the performances occurring within the gallery.

*Performing personal possessions*

Performing ‘autobiographical objects’ is a challenge for the museum theatre practitioner as it comes with a responsibility to respectfully and accurately portray the person represented by the objects. The voice of each child represented in the *Power of Children* gallery was captured from a different source. Anne Frank’s life story was derived from her diary. Ryan White’s character was recreated from interviews with family and friends, recordings of public appearances and the contents of his bedroom, donated by his parents to the museum. Ruby Bridges is still alive and asked that she not be performed as a character in the exhibition. Instead, Ruby’s story was told by a friend and a policeman employed to protect her from racially motivated violence.

When interviewed, Sutton noted that, as a deviser of museum theatre, he avoided playing real people as he believed that any form of improvisation would lead to an unintentional bastardisation of history, ‘You cannot speak for someone from history.'
No matter how much research you do, you cannot be that person. He preferred to create a character that may have been there, and work through the medium of third person, rather than first person narrative, ‘Interpretation is about windows into truth. Facts remain. They don’t change. The way you view them does. You open different windows to view them’.  

The exhibit of Ryan White is perhaps the best example of how character can be built from objects. As soon as the audience steps into the reconstruction of Ryan’s bedroom, his possessions conjure him up. His belongings are arranged as they were in his original room with glass panels to protect them. Inspecting his toys, posters and videos can provide either a precursor or postscript to his performance. Many elements of his character are revealed even before the actor portraying him steps into the space. The museum worked with his family to develop the character of ‘Ryan’ in order to avoid the issues of performing real people as expressed by Sutton.

Conclusion

The museum theatre performances at the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis sit at the crossroads of object- and character-driven shows. This museum presents a unique case study as its mission statement defines it as a space created for children and their families rather than a wider age demographic.

In both the Power of Children and the Take Me There: Egypt galleries, museum theatre is used to provoke humanitarian responses to the collections. In contrast to the concept of ‘antisocial objects’, the displays are comprised of ‘emotional objects’. The performances are developed around the themes of adversity, discrimination, heroism

292 Nigel Sutton, interview.
293 Ibid.
and cultural tolerance. Characterisation is used to as a means of translating the significance of the collection to young visitors.

**Case study five: Robbie the Rat**

*Robbie the Rat* is identified as object-rich museum theatre due to its close development with the curatorial team and its key objective of providing the audience with a more in-depth interaction with the objects displayed in the galleries.

The performance begins with a process that Jackson and Kidd have termed ‘induction’. In this case, the induction was a storytelling session conducted in the hall to introduce the audience to the overarching themes of the performance, such as immigration and adaption to a new landscape. The induction provided the audience with guidelines outlining the duration, content, place of enactment and link to the museum’s galleries. It also gave the audience the freedom to choose whether they wanted to attend the gallery performance. The second part of the performance was also led by the character of Robbie the Rat who took the visitors on an object-based tour of the *Horizons Gallery*, containing an exhibition that looked at people in Australia since 1788. This style of museum theatre is defined by the Performing, Learning and Heritage Project report as a ‘promenade tour’, where the audience encounters different spaces and artefacts. This was complemented by stops at related exhibitions such as the *Tangled Destinies* gallery that housed adjacent themes. In some ways, these gallery stops became the illustrations of Robbie’s story, but at the same time dictated his narrative.

In the guise of Robbie, Sutton donned a huge rat costume, complete with a rubber mask partially covering his face and an enormous tail. His choice of character

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295 Ibid, 45.
was based on the desire to stand out as a performer within the gallery, appeal to people of all ages and to find a persona that could connect on a personal level to the exhibits in a range of galleries:

Robbie was a cockney rat who had come out from London with the first fleet. The idea behind that performance was that he’d travelled over from another country to Australia. He was an immigrant; he was coming to a new land. Being a rat he could travel everywhere in a little saddlebag and move to different places. He was there when history unfolded. 296

Robbie bears a similarity to the character of Wally in the Where’s Wally? books in that he is often the anachronism in each story. The advantage of playing a rat was that the character could represent an individual, but also represent the many rats that have been present in each part of the Australian story. As an allegory, Robbie travels through time and space, and was able to be there at the time when all the artefacts were being used in the first stage of their lives. As a performing rat that trod the boards in English vaudeville and acted on stage during the gold rush, his ability to engage the audience through storytelling is an inherent quality. Thus, Robbie interprets the objects through their relationship to his character and their functional role in the larger story of humanity.

Learning to look

To what degree does object-rich museum performance shape or control visitor understanding of collection items? Robbie the Rat uses similar techniques to The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur, as it employs inquiry methodology to help visitors extend the process of ‘looking’ into one of ‘seeing’. Many of the interactions that Robbie creates around objects were designed to help visitors notice and question certain objects

296 Daina Harvey, interview.
rather than just bestowing them with a cursory glance. The description of the performance clearly demonstrates how certain ideas and themes were teased out of each exhibit. Taxidermy animals are items beloved by visitors, but rarely examined on a more complex level, as they are presented as scientific acquisitions, used for the purposes of natural history and not for interpretation. Children often enjoy visiting them, but purely for their aesthetic properties and links to living animals. By linking these display animals to eras, such as the Australian depression of the 1930s, Robbie helps them tell a more human and memorable story. This interaction also provides a valuable moment that helps the audience understand the mutual bewilderment experienced by both early settlers and indigenous Australians on encountering each other.

What I think worked really well is the way in which the audience would look really closely at a particular object ... He [Robbie the Rat] would talk to the audience about that object, engage with them and get them to look really closely at it, look for details that they might not have seen, get them to think about what that object might have been. The power of that type of theatre is that people looked much more closely at the objects than they might have if they were just going through the galleries.297

Robbie the Rat worked with two types of museum objects: those in the main collection, i.e. those displayed behind glass in the galleries, and interpretive objects, which he kept in his pockets. His tour through the Australian galleries of the National Museum of Australia included points of interaction with a variety of objects in the cases. As he generally only chose one or two artefacts from each gallery, he was re-curating them by creating links between objects that had not been grouped together in the museum. While the objects were authentic and labelled with information about their use and

297 Daina Harvey, interview.
provenance, the fictional element of the performance was the character of Robbie himself, who weaved his own narrative around his connection to each object and applied it to his own history.

**Performing objects**

When interacting with cased collection items, Robbie often supplemented them with items he pulled out of his pocket. Rats are known to be scroungers and hoarders; therefore Sutton used this characteristic to add additional interpretive objects to the performance.

Harvey relates an example where Robbie stopped by an exhibit on convict women, showed the audience a twenty-dollar bill he had taken from his pocket and asked them to identify the woman featured on it. He used this interaction to tell the story of Mary Reiby, an English convict transported to Australia who ended up being involved in one of the first banks. The significance of this interaction between Robbie the Rat and the audience members was that they now had some information on the twenty-dollar note, an object that they handled everyday and which would now be linked in their memory to this performance. The advantage of a partially improvised performance over a scripted one is that Robbie takes the role of a tour leader rather than an orator and consequently can encourage and answer audience questions.

In *Robbie the Rat*, artefacts remain as ‘captured objects’ within gallery cases, and the process of converting object into performance relies on storytelling. Robbie uses the basic structure of a gallery tour, where he weaves a narrative around each object and writes them into his own life story. The artefacts are chosen for their ability to be

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298 Ibid.
integrated into Robbie’s autobiography as a rat that immigrated to Australia by boat with the early settlers and has remained to see the changes in Australia up to the present day. As a cockney rat, he hails from an imperial, colonial background and is keen to engage with new ideas and interpretations of the past. His choice of interpretive objects acts as punctuation to his ‘origin story’.299

The structure of Robbie the Rat relies on extensive research and a strong curatorial knowledge of each artefact, as much of the performance is improvised. Robbie pauses at relevant exhibits and engages with the audience to gauge their level of knowledge about the object. His role is to contextualise the artefact by placing it into his own chronology. This may be achieved by speaking about its use on a convict ship or on the Ballarat goldfields. He also presents alternative stories, focusing on narratives that challenge the curatorial decisions.

In the ‘Australia Gallery’, an exhibit focuses on the introduction of rabbits to Australia, their devastating impact on agriculture and subsequent building of the rabbit-proof fence. As a rodent, Robbie is affronted by the label of ‘vermin’ and reminds his audience that rabbits saved many Australians during the Great Depression where they were an affordable source of meat and fur. Robbie’s improvised dialogue is influenced by several aspects of the collection. He expands on the curatorial decisions of the exhibit, but also provides a counter-narrative that places the rabbit into a larger historical and social context. While Robbie’s interpretation of the gallery artefacts is positioned in a unique narrative-driven interpretation, they cannot be considered ‘exhaustable’. They are bound by their past life use, their historical context and supporting historical documents. As a representative of the rat species, rather than a time-travelling individual, Robbie brings some ubiquitous

aspects to his character, but never traverses outside the rules of his character’s universe.

Collaboration between performer and curator

Napp Schindel suggests that the artefact is the prerogative of the curator and that if the development of performance becomes the sole domain of the museum’s education and programs department, the object is frequently disregarded. When interviewed on the lack of objects in performances, several museum theatre practitioners referred to the lack of collegiality between public programs staff and the curatorial department. They felt that there was a perception that performance threatened or contradicted the narratives of exhibitions. Richter suggests that the ‘add-on’ effect of museum theatre often prevents true collaboration between playwrights and exhibition staff. However, in Robbie the Rat, Sutton worked collegially with exhibition staff to develop a performance balanced in content knowledge and visitor engagement. When interviewed, he emphasised that the relationship between performer and curator should be complementary rather than competitive:

You’re not bringing life to an exhibition; it already has life, which had been given to it by the curator. You’re just changing the nature of the narrative by adding to what they’ve already created.

Sutton worked with curators and collection staff at each stage of developing museum theatre performances. His works, Robbie the Rat and The Dora Fay Davenport Show, provide examples of works devised to complement and enhance collections.

300 Napp Schindel, Museum Theatre: Telling Stories Through Objects, 10.
301 Robert Ricther on Lipsky ‘Playwriting for Museums or: How to Make a Drama out of Slim Molds’ in Case Studies in Museum, Zoo and Aquarium Theatre, 18.
302 Daina Harvey, interview.
303 Nigel Sutton, interview.
As a means of bridging the gap between performer and curator, Watt coined the term ‘curactor’.304 According to Watt, the synergy of the nouns curator and actor is a necessary component for defining the prerogatives of the museum theatre performer and working towards a positive partnership between actors and museologists. Watt defines the curactor as ‘an amalgamation of curators and actors coming together to develop a meaningful theatrical interpretation of an object or objects in the museum’.305

While Watt’s definition implies that the curator is a partnership between an actor and a curator, he concludes that the curactor could also be an individual with skills in both content and presentation. An individual curactor is more likely to work in a small institution where budget and staff are limited and create self-devised works out of financial necessity, whereas larger institutes are more likely to work collaboratively in a ‘curaction’ team where responsibilities are delegated. Watt accents the importance of working collegially with staff in other museum departments in order to develop a richer performance.

Evans introduces the idea of an arbiter, someone who, as a content specialist, acts as a conduit between actor and audience.306 This figure often takes on the role of a museum worker, such as a curator, educator, historian or collections registrar. This model works well as a means of separating fact and narrative by providing a Brechtian reminder that the audience is in a museum rather than a theatre. Evans advocates the use of arbiters to heighten the Verfremdungseffekt (alienation effect), keeping audiences vigilante to the message of the performance and giving them the opportunity to express their opinion on issues raised through the performance.

304 Patrick Watt, interview.
305 Ibid.
306 Evans, “Personal Beliefs and National Stories: Theatre in Museums as a Tool for Exploring Historical Memory,” 190.
While the arbiter is portrayed as a character representing the museum, Watt’s model of the curactor suggests that the performer can also be trained in content knowledge, allowing them to clothe an exhibit with both story and curatorial information. This is particularly evident in the character of Robbie the Rat who effectively becomes the conduit between object and audience without an additional content specialist.

**Conclusion**

*Robbie the Rat* uses a highly participatory model of performance to transmit collection information to the audience while also allowing them to share their interpretation or personal connection to featured objects. This style creates an environment where knowledge is democratised. Robbie’s status as a cockney rat and ‘low status’ character further separates the museum from the historical perception of an ‘ivory tower’ or ‘academy’. It reinforces the idea that meaning is both personal and fluid. Unlike performances such as *The Bog Man’s Daughter*, the conventions of museum display such as glass cases and labels are acknowledged by Robbie, who discussed the objects both in their first life and current iteration as a collection item.

**Case study six: The Dora Faye Davenport Show**

*The Dora Faye Davenport Show* was another performance devised and performed by Nigel Sutton of NDS Productions for the National Museum of Australia (NMA) in Canberra. A two-hander, the performance revolves around Dora Fay Davenport (Jenny Hope) and Clarence Cartwright (Nigel Sutton), presenters on ‘The Dora Fay Davenport’ lifestyle television program. Set in 1957, the show depicts Dora as the

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307 Patrick Watt, interview.
‘epitome of Australian womanhood’\textsuperscript{308} in a time when Menzies was prime minister and television was in its infancy. The performance is a tongue-in-cheek look at 1950s gender values, as Dora advises housewives whose husbands have just bought a television to tuck the antenna into a corner of the room and to ‘run up a little curtain across the screen.’\textsuperscript{309}

The show is connected to many of the 1950s domestic objects in the galleries and these are mirrored by the interpretive artefacts on stage. The overarching performance genre of \textit{The Dora Fay Davenport Show} is ‘reminiscence theatre’. As promised in the promotions (voiced by Sutton as Clarence Cartwright), the show ‘evokes countless memories of the 1950s for those who were there and [for] those who were not it will offer a fascinating insight’.\textsuperscript{310}

The performance was enacted in a theatre space within the National Museum of Australia, unconnected to any of the gallery spaces. The stage was constructed to look like a studio set and the audience were cast as the viewers of a live television broadcast. The plot of the show rests on Dora, who has her own lifestyle program where she gives home-making tips, such as how to create a table centrepiece using a gravy boat and how to deal with demanding husbands. There is comedic banter between Dora and Clarence, her on-screen husband/co-presenter. The set is littered with advertisements for products of the time such as Bex (a housewife’s best friend) and product placements for home wares such as a Sunbeam mixer. To enhance the comedic value of the production, Clarence and Dora often make segues into advertisements for products, such as soap powder, by holding up the matching advertising poster.

\textsuperscript{308} Dora Fay Davenport Promotional Video, National Museum of Australia, provided by Daina Harvey.
\textsuperscript{309} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{310} Ibid.
The Dora Fay Davenport Show introduces a new element to the concept of authenticity in museum theatre by presenting the performance in the genre of a television show. The show delves into the region of a play within a play as the characters of Dora and Clarence are situated in a replica kitchen. On the other side of the camera, the audience are placed within the world of a 1950s television studio, while beyond the doors exists the real world of the National Museum of Australia in Canberra in 2004. This triptych illusion creates a vastly different frame for the performance as compared to other case studies that acknowledge their presence in the museum. Interestingly, the television studio was actually a real space of the museum, built for broadcasting lectures and ultimately the inspiration for the presentation style of The Dora Fay Davenport Show.

Setting the narrative inside a 1950s television studio makes any reference to the museum collection impossible. The objects on stage are authentic to the time period, but have been sourced from eBay rather than the museum storerooms. The audience is free to come into the performance space at the conclusion of the show and touch the objects, a practice that evoked recollections of owning similar home wares for some of the audience. The objects from the studio set are mirrored in the exhibition, but to an audience who once incorporated them into their daily lives, it is alien to see them displayed rather than used. In many ways, the interpretive objects, with their lack of provenance, are more attuned to history than their exhibited counterparts as they have only recently been removed from circulation. Sutton believes that there are many situations when the use of replicas in museum theatre is acceptable and indeed more practical. He maintains that the only condition is that the audience must be informed whether an object is authentic or a replica. In the case of Dora, all the objects were purchased by Sutton’s production company, as using museum objects or buying
them for the use of the museum would require them to be catalogued and generate a great deal of administrative work.

*Building performance from exhibition*

The objects that inspired the show were located within the ‘Nation Gallery’ in the National Museum of Australia. The concept behind this exhibition was to document the development of Australian culture and the national aesthetic. Dora Fay grew from the observation that one particular part of the exhibition, which was quite theatrical in curation, was spawning a consistent dialogue amongst visitors,

> Our visitors were engaging with the collection through their own memories, and they were having conversations about these memories within the exhibition space. There was one particular part of the exhibition which always started them talking, and it was this 1950s kitchen display which housed domestic objects. The idea behind this display was the rise of suburbia and the way in which new technologies were changing domestic life. Particularly after the restraint of wartime, Australian women were encouraged to spend, and there was a great deal of advertising of new labour-saving products that would end domestic drudgery and show they were modern and successful.\textsuperscript{311}

The three exhibition objects on display in the kitchen display became the key ingredients in the development of *The Dora Fay Davenport Show*. According to Harvey, this system was regularly adopted by the National Museum of Australia during the initial stage of performance planning, ‘Quite often when you’re in the galleries, you’ll be looking at what’s engaging people or what they might be interested in’.\textsuperscript{312}

\textsuperscript{311} Daina Harvey, interview.
\textsuperscript{312} Ibid.
Connecting object with audience

In contrast to the case studies, such as *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* and the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis, *The Dora Fay Davenport Show* was developed specifically for an older demographic of visitor:

Seniors are an important audience for museums, as they do tend to visit museums, but they don’t always have a program designed especially for them. Demographers have recognised a trend towards an ageing population and an increased proportion of seniors. For example, in Australia, the Australian Bureau of Statistics research shows that the senior proportion of the Australian population has grown steadily and is projected to grow further, so that by 2051 almost half of the population will be over 50 and a quarter over 65.\(^{313}\) As the fastest growing population group, seniors are a key audience for museums and this will continue to be increasingly so.\(^{314}\)

In addition to pre-development research, the NMA team also continued to evaluate the responses to the performance during and after its season. At the conclusion of the show, Luke Cummings, the assistant coordinator on *The Dora Fay Davenport Show*, reflected that the season had produced many successful outcomes not necessarily associated with performance, including: the development of a body of research on senior museum audiences, the successful collaboration of theatre and museum professionals and a show that ‘links strongly back to the National Historical Collection, brings the collection to life and engages the audience with it’.\(^{315}\)

*The Dora Fay Davenport Show* represents a style of object-rich museum theatre that also falls into the genre of ‘reminiscence theatre’. This style of performance works on

\(^{313}\) Harvey obtained these figures from: L. Kelly et al., *Energised, Engaged and Everywhere: Older Australians and Museums*, (ACT: Australian Museum and the National Museum of Australia, 2002), 11.


\(^{315}\) Ibid.
the premise that drama can be used as a memory prompt to help senior citizens recall and share their experiences growing up and during significant periods of history. A secondary benefit of the genre is that, through reminiscence theatre, the experiences of the elderly can be shared with younger audience members, leading to intergenerational learning. In the performance, the collection objects dictate characterisation, attitude and action. Both the characters and the majority of the audience are historical natives in that they are recalling the past. For younger audience members they provide opportunity for empathetic understanding of a different era and generation.

The older audience members responded to evaluations by expressing the effective ways in which the performance had embodied key issues of the 1950s. It was a rare opportunity for senior citizens to see themselves represented in museum theatre:

'This is our era'.

'It's a week later and I'm still talking about it'.

'I was surprised at how many things I had forgotten: the show brought back a lot of forgotten memories'.

Audience members connected with the characters of Dora and Clarence and the interpretive artefacts of the show so strongly that they often returned to contribute their own 1950s objects to the performance:

[Some people] came back the next day with their own objects for Dora and Clarence, including TV cups and saucers, cookbooks and a pair of sunglasses from the 1950s. The sunglasses belonged to one visitor's mother, and she felt that Dora's original sunglasses were a bit too late – being early 60s – and she wanted Dora to have her mother's glasses from the late 50s. They [the

audience] wrote letters to Dora and Clarence and visited and revisited the
exhibition.\textsuperscript{317}

The performance of the show coincided with a renewed interest in the 1950s aesthetic
and retro fashion. Objects such as those featured in the exhibition and performance
were highly desirable objects sold as 'collectables' on eBay.

A survey taken of visitors after viewing the performance was both revealing and
edifying. It showed that many memories were directly connected to the objects
featured in the show and exhibition:

‘I was 7 in 1957 and it brought back a lot of memories’.

‘My mum has the exact same table [as in the show]’.

‘We didn’t have a TV until I was 10 but I would go around to our
neighbours and watch it there: the whole street would watch it together’.

‘Grandma’s remedy for a sore throat was a spoon full of kerosene and a
spoon full of sugar’. \textsuperscript{318}

In \textit{The Dora Fay Davenport Show}, the role of the museum theatre was inverted. Unlike
other case studies where the emphasis was on a performer who could teach, facilitate
or interpret objects, the actors in this show were there to play back the past and
become object learners.

At \textit{The Dora Fay Davenport Show}, a half-hour discussion slot was allocated after the
show where the audience could speak to the actors about their own memories and the
objects of the 1950s. Pre-show research on the benefits of reminiscence theatre
focused on the opportunities for shared collective memory among senior citizens:

\begin{itemize}
provided by Daina Harvey).
\item \textsuperscript{318} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
Seniors have long memories to draw on and research indicates that seniors are interested in attending programs that refresh their past memories as well as providing opportunities for social interaction, and the opportunity to relive their experiences for children and grandchildren. Museum theatre provides an opportunity to stimulate these memories and validate their life experiences.319

Conclusion

In *The Dora Fay Davenport Show*, the objects were compiled to provide a representation of both an era and a lifestyle, that of the 1950s housewife. The artefacts used in the body of the show are not used to provide historical information, but rather prompt collective memory. The construction of the show as a 1950s television lifestyle program allows the objects to be used as sentimental portals to the past, rather than provide a critical commentary on the era.

Case study seven: Platform 4 Theatre Company (*V for Victory*)

At the NRM in York, museum theatre programs offered by Platform 4 Theatre Company, the resident performance group at the museum, I observed *V for Victory* performed by Brownson.

The shows at the NRM were unique, in that, as with the museum itself, they all had to adhere to a specific theme, namely the history of rail transport. The museum was divided into a series of spaces where smaller objects were displayed in a more conventional museum setting and the visitors were able to pass into a large hall where several deactivated and restored trains were displayed in the old train station. Platforms separated the engines and visitors moved around the space as they would

have when the station was in operation. Other halls displayed a variety of other defunct transport facilities. Each performance I viewed was a one-hander, which relied heavily on the environment and the past life of the trains displayed. An interview with Brownson after a performance of *V is for Victory* was conducted in a guard's van that had been converted into a green room for the actors.

Platform 4 Theatre Company was formed in 1990 by Ford and is consequently one of the longest running museum theatre companies in Europe. Unlike most museums that include performance in their programming, the NRM has a huge repertoire of frequently performed shows on rotation. The ongoing nature of the company can perhaps be attributed to the fact that each show is a one- or two-hander and performers are employed on a casual basis to perform only on weekends. Each performance runs for approximately fifteen minutes, to complement the transient nature of audience, the awareness that there are many exhibits competing for their attention and in some way to mimic the amount of time that passengers generally spend on a train platform. The NRM also incorporates performance and costumed interpretation into their weekday educational programs, which aim to deliver presentations that conform to the objectives of the British National Curriculum.

*V for Victory* is set in the aftermath of ‘Victory in Europe Day’ (VE day) and introduces the audience to Alice, a young woman who has been recruited to work on the York railways while the men are away fighting during World War II. She discusses the problems of taking on a job that has always been considered a male occupation and considers how things will change for her after the war. She is happy that women are being recognised for their efforts but thinks that they should be financially compensated, ‘I think they would rather have equal pay, don’t you?’
The performance takes place on one of the railway platforms, in front of a decommissioned train. Due to the frequency and length of the performances, the audience is generally small, and seated on railway benches on the platform, as though they are outgoing passengers. Alice confides in the audience as though they are women who she is training for work on the railways. Much of her conversation with the audience is held while she is taking a tea break away from the watchful eye of her male supervisor. This casts an atmosphere of informality over her interactions with the audience, and she shares some of the changes in attitude and habit, specifically the development of arm muscles that she attributes to the drinking of Guinness every day.

The trains at the National Railway Museum can be classified according to Kirschenblatt-Gimblett’s definition of objects both exhibited and performed in situ.²²⁰

Although the performers are not invited to board the train during the performance, the performers activate the trains by performing from the doors, sitting on the steps and demonstrating still-active components. As Alice, the protagonist of the show, beings to ‘train’ the audience, she provides a demonstration of how to couple up an engine by swinging a heavy chain, ‘When you hear that clang, you know you’re doing summit right.’ This statement was followed by a warning about connecting the vacuum pipe to the carriage: ‘that means the engine can move, so you’d better get out pretty smartish’. Owing to the durability of the trains on display, Platform 4 Theatre Company have been able to add a unique aspect to their performances, literally performing on objects,

We’re really lucky here at the Railway Museum because we get to perform on objects. Usually objects are so precious in museums, but here we’ve got massive steam locomotives, big sturdy trolleys and we’re able to use them in

²²⁰ Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage, 389.
the performance space. We’re able to climb up on the engines, climb up on the trolleys and move about. It’s really nice because it’s such an aid to telling the story.321

The content of a museum can particularly dictate audience, as with the NRM, which is dedicated to a specific classification of artefact, namely anything associated with the York railways. While the museum is visited by the usual spread of tourists and families, it also attracted a specific type of visitor, namely the railway enthusiast. As both Cade and Brownson mentioned when interviewed, this had ramifications on the way the museum theatre performances were researched and constructed, and prompted greater attention to accuracy. As Cade mentioned, the museum exhibits attracted train experts, often undermining the role of the performer as an ‘authority’,

You will get experts at the Railway Museum who know every nut and bolt of a particular engine and will take great pains to explain why it’s there and how it works. Now I’m not an engineer, but again working on different levels, you’re trying to be accurate in what you’re saying, so it is well researched, it is answering their questions or giving them an opportunity to speak to you afterwards about what they know beyond what you have said.322

Cade emphasised the importance of listening to the audience after the performance so that they were able to share their knowledge and memories rather than ask questions. In this way, much of the joy of watching museum theatre came from the interpretation of objects the audience loved rather than the opportunity to acquire new knowledge.

In addition to catering for expert train enthusiasts, trains provide a strong example of a social object than evokes collective community memory. Most visitors to
the museum had their own memories of train journeys and older audience members were keen to share their experiences of train travel. *V for Victory* prompted them to recall memories passed on by their parents of train travel during World War II and the post-war period. Brownson’s costume of a boiler suit and headscarf was inspired by the poster of ‘Rosie the Riveter’, provoking further shared memories of women in the workforce during the war. As performed objects, decommissioned trains offered pathways to many interpretive possibilities, although limited by the time period in which they were active.

**Conclusion**

The foremost objective of Platform 4 Theatre Company at the National Railway Museum is to enhance the collection by adding human-interest stories. The trains and other large instruments of transport act as both the set and backdrop to a range of stories told through single character monologues.

Although trains are heavily peopled throughout their active lives, the transient nature of passengers entails that little evidence of human stories remains when the trains are decommissioned. Actors are employed to help visitors connect the railways to significant historical eras or events. They help add a greater depth to the visitor experience by re-animating hidden, intangible histories beyond the visible mechanical aspects of trains.
Chapter Four: The centralisation of the object in museum theatre

Introduction

Object-rich museum theatre is the product of a development and performance process that centralises the object within the story. While the case studies described and discussed in the previous chapter are all examples of object-rich performance, the object is centralised to a varying degree. In shows like *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur*, the narrative is both driven and spoken by the object. At the NRM, trains form a more passive background to the stories being enacted. This chapter explores the intended and incidental outcomes of centralising the object in museum theatre, by focusing on both the perceived value and inherent limitations of object-rich museum theatre. It provides an important point of reference before moving into the following key chapters to investigate if and why objects are marginalised by operational and spatial dynamics in contemporary museum theatre practice.

Function of objects in performance

Like theatrical props, the performed museum object can act as an impetus for performance and a catalyst for action. Objects can be used as a portal to the past, provide evidence to support a performed history or prompt discussion on a range of social issues. They can be used to provide shape or structure to a story. Lwin advocates performance in museums as a means of creating meaningful connections between seemingly disjoined objects. In *Robbie the Rat* and *Troubled Times*, performance is used to create a narrative pathway. Both performers chose to highlight objects that supported their character backstories. Cade, performing as Joseph Beedle

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drew the students’ attention towards objects that most aptly supported the themes of poverty, illness and the divide between rich and poor in Kirkgate. Sutton selected artefacts that fit into Robbie the Rat’s chronology as an ‘early settler’ rat and would provoke lively discussions.

Moore argues that curators fail to engage the public with the process of analysing and displaying objects. He points to the wealth of information such as description, identification, construction, history, location distribution, significance and interpretation contained within the metadata of objects during their ‘working life’ and later as exhibits. While developing Robbie the Rat, Sutton worked closely with the curatorial teams so that his performance could extend the content of the exhibitions. By liaising with the exhibitions team he was able to work with them to build on the content that could not be fitted on curatorial labels. In other ways, he created additional narrative that helped visitors view the collection from a unique perspective: that of a time travelling rat.

In some of the case studies, such as Robbie the Rat, performance democratises the object, allowing for an alternative reading of collection items. Conversely, performance has the means to be prescriptive in its interpretation, creating a new directive for visitors. Lwin writes that an effective storyteller can use performance to enrich visitor interaction with artefacts but ‘cannot be so dogmatic and didactic that the audience feels they have no interpretive opportunities’.

Object-rich museum theatre reinvigorates the merits of the ‘object lesson’, which for a period of time was considered to be educationally passé. With a greater focus placed on ‘inquiry methodology’ as pedagogy in both primary and secondary

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324 Moore, Museums and Popular Culture, 58.
325 Ibid.
curriculum, the object has reclaimed its role as a significant source of historical information. With the advent of object learning comes a greater focus on using museum collections to teach.

Each case study works towards an overarching objective of delivering some form of content knowledge to the audience, whether it be via guided inquiry, memory prompts or a constructed narrative. Performances at the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis, *The Bog Man’s Daughter* and works presented by the Platform 4 Theatre Company deliver information through content-rich monologues. *Robbie the Rat*, *Troubled Times* and *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* are classified by their inquiry-based approach to transmitting information. While aimed at an older demographic, *The Dora Faye Davenport Show* is informative for a younger audience.

Object appreciation or ‘connoisseurship’ is an incidental outcome of object-rich museum theatre. With increased depth of knowledge and insight into the ‘working life’ and display of an object comes greater understanding of their social and historical significance. While curators and museum educators are aware of the enormous amount of information contained within museum objects, the underlying objective of object-rich museum theatre is to share knowledge through the medium of museum theatre. Public Program Manager Grey at the National War Memorial in Canberra—who has devised and performed object-rich museum theatre in the gallery spaces—recalls that: ‘A lot of the time, the responses I have seen is the sense that people have no idea that there is so much depth and information that you can get from an object’. He also mentioned that visitors who had watched the gallery performances seemed much more engaged with the objects after the presentation. He came to this conclusion after observing visitors who had returned to look at the objects mentioned.

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327 Andrew Gray, interview
in the performance, often spending more time in front of these exhibits. In their response to the issue of performance and learning, Jackson and Rees Leahy refer to an observation of museum theatre acting as a conduit to the closer study of artefacts. A discussion within a performance at the Imperial War Museum (London) about the practice of limiting bath water by drawing a black line inside the bath motivated children to revisit the exhibit post-performance to check the tub on display, ‘The power of the drama to prompt further, more focused looking was marked’.329

Object lessons

Centralising the object in museum theatre provides opportunities to use performative techniques to transmit object knowledge. This approach borrows heavily from the educational pedagogy of ‘object lessons’, a method of teaching popular in the mid-nineteenth century. Object lessons found currency in a range of teaching environments including classrooms and churches. Everyday objects were used to convey a concept or represent desired behaviours. Despite the widely held conviction that educational learning techniques of the past were inferior to contemporary offerings, Hooper-Greenhill cites examples of object lessons in the nineteenth century that aimed to assist children in ‘the acquisition of knowledge rather than to merely impart facts or information’.330 The use of object lessons stemmed from the belief that the development of skills such as reflection, judgement and sense perception were highly desirable aspects of a complete education:

329 Ibid.
Object teaching leads the scholar to acquire knowledge by observation and experiment … in object teaching the chief interest in lesson should centre in the object itself.\textsuperscript{331}

The notion of object lessons has been revived in schools and museums as part of a renewed interest in enquiry methodology and problem-based learning. Hooper-Greenhill attributes the initial decline of the object lesson to a reconsidered approach to pedagogy, but expresses a belief that the technique of object lessons continues to influence contemporary museum education programs.\textsuperscript{332}

The objectives of object lessons are evident in three of the collected case studies: The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur, Troubled Times and Robbie the Rat. By the end of The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur, audience members have absorbed information on a range of seemingly disconnected objects, linked only by their selection as display objects for the museum’s anniversary. More importantly, the young audience has been inducted into the process of inquiry, realising that they can apply their skills to all objects. Throughout the performance they: ask questions of objects, use deductive questioning process, and are asked to consider the question of authenticity in museums.

Troubled Times transmits information on nineteenth century medical technology and illness, toys, and Victorian legislation relating to crime and punishment. In addition to this, the student audience had practiced their skills in: deductive thinking, comparison and observation. Robbie transmits information through a combination of guided inquiry and object study. Each object gives up its secrets through his probing questions. A twenty-dollar note introduces the audience to the historical figure of...
Mary Reibey, crafting a connection between artefacts throughout the galleries, leading to discussions on the causes and consequences of the Australian Depression, deportation to Australia, immigration and the Gold Rush. A reflection on the problems of colonial adaption is provoked by a close reading of an early Australian acclimatisation machine.

Provoking numinous experiences through object-rich museum theatre

Cade, Sutton, Hughes, and Bridal all shared moments where museum performances garnered deeply meaningful responses from visitors. These are also termed ‘numinous experiences’. Hughes explored the connection between emotion and museum theatre in her PhD dissertation. Catherine Cameron and John Gatewood’s theory of numinous experiences with objects has also been adapted by Kiersten Latham and applied to visitor interactions with museum objects to investigate the transportative qualities of artefacts.333 Latham argues that objects in museums have the power to act as portals through which visitors are able to make an emotional connection to the past.

Latham characterises one of the most significant measurable outcomes of numinous experiences as the presence of imaginative empathy.334 As Robbie takes visitors through the ‘Australia Gallery’, each object provides a portal to the emotional landscape of Australia’s history. Visitors are asked to empathise with the convicts transported permanently from their homes for petty misdemeanours, to imagine the desperation of people during the Depression, and to consider the displacement felt by

immigrants throughout the history of Australia. Each one of these responses is provoked by Robbie telling the emotional history of an object.

In the *Power of Children* exhibition, museum staff placed boxes of tissues outside the performance areas in case visitors cried in response to the performances. As the themes of the exhibition related to violence and discrimination against children, audiences often experienced highly emotional responses to shows. Visitor evaluations from *The Dora Faye Davenport Show* demonstrate that the presence and use of objects from the recent past provokes deeply nostalgic feelings in an audience who grew up in the era or have memories associated with objects their parents owned. At the National Railway Museum, I observed several post-show interactions initiated by visitors who wanted to share with the performer their memories of travelling on trains. These stories often related to memorable train trips they had taken with parents or grandparents.

While the student audience of *Troubled Times* had no immediate connection to the story of Joseph in Kirkgate, they are provoked into an emotive response when Joseph is arrested and accused of stealing. By learning about the Victorian criminal laws, they are made aware of the harsh punishments for people of Joseph’s class and must vote on whether to convict him. *The Bog Man’s Daughter* also draws visitor response by telling a story of hardship and poverty.

As Robbie moves through the exhibition interpreting cased objects, his stories examine early colonial settlement of Australia by addressing issues relating to the dispossession of Indigenous Australians, the displacement of transported convicts and the environmental damage caused by early settlers.

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Performance has a way of inciting numinous experiences by drawing out and enacting the social stories from an object. Latham characterises the process and outcomes of numinous experiences with attention to the role of the object. She contends that the museum object acts as a ‘trigger’ for emotional response, its materiality providing evidence for the authenticity of the experience.\textsuperscript{336} She argues that the object is paramount to numinous experiences in museums as it provides a platform and anchor for visitors to explore their emotional responses.\textsuperscript{337}

**Finding the human story in objects**

A driving force behind the use of performance to interpret museum artefacts is the objective of finding the humanity in objects or, as Gregory Kohlstedt suggests, ‘thoughts in things’.\textsuperscript{338} Prown argues that the visitor’s interest in an object is its ‘humanness’.\textsuperscript{339} Developing a character to perform an artefact means seeking out the relationship between human and object. The character could have owned, harboured, stolen, made, commissioned, coveted, given, invented, lost, loved, broken, designed, hated or used the object.

The linking of an object to its owner or maker is perhaps the most appealing prospect for a practitioner when devising object-rich performances, as it provides potential fodder for the development of characters and dialogues, and references to its social context. Linking the object to its owner or maker also helps the performer establish provenance. The concept of construction or ownership also denotes a large role to be filled by a human agent. Bachelor lists the concept of an idea or invention as an initial point of discussion in his model for object analysis.\textsuperscript{340} This is a theme

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\textsuperscript{336} Latham, “Numinous Experiences with Museum Objects,” 9.
\textsuperscript{337} Ibid, 11.
\textsuperscript{338} Kohlstedt, “Thoughts in Things: Modernity, History, and North American Museums.”
\textsuperscript{339} Prown, *Art as Evidence: Writings on Art and Material Culture*, 250.
common to museum theatre with there being numerous shows about the invention of the light bulb, telephone or the development of key ideological concepts, such as gravity or the theory of relativity. Many museum theorists have emphasised the drawing power of relating objects to people and thereby humanising them.

The ‘object performance’ in each case study was facilitated by at least one performer who was able to link the objects to a human story. The objects in *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* were interpreted in a contemporary setting through a museum worker. As Harry is worried about losing an artefact, the performance is played out as an exercise in both problem-solving and helping him out of trouble. The performance simultaneously explores the relationship between objects and their human agents by comparing the previous working life of the objects with their current inert state as part of a museum collection.

Both *The Bog Man’s Daughter* and the Platform 4 Theatre company use human connection to collection objects to enliven exhibits that focus on environmental and technological themes, respectively. Both interpreted the objects from the perspective of a low-status historical figure that interacted with the objects when they were first made. *The Dora Faye Davenport Show*’s connection with the objects was in a commercial sense. The purpose of lifestyle shows in the 1950s was generally to advertise products, making the characters advocate for the artefacts they performed. Dora’s story also moved past these themes to look at the struggles of the seemingly perfect housewife of the era.

Train stations are generally hives of activity. Presenting decommissioned trains incites the danger of creating a mausoleum. Platform 4 Theatre Company recognised that the most interesting stories relating to the collection are not about the trains, but the people who travelled and worked on them. While providing a backdrop and
lending authenticity to the stories, the train in *V for Victory* presents as a passive and indistinct object to the uninformed visitor with no expertise in railway history. The drama is created by the performer who projects the stories onto the train and nudges audiences to remember their own memories of the railway.

The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis uses performers to help children engage with unfamiliar cultures or potentially distressing stories; particularly in the *Power of Children* exhibition as young visitors are able to relate to larger world concepts by seeing them enacted from the perspective of children.

*Robby the Rat* subverts the idea of bringing humanity to objects by the fact that he is not human, but a personified animal; however, each interpretation of artefact is linked back to a human connection. Lipsky maintains that part of the appeal of museum theatre is not just making a connection between humans and objects, but that live performance is a temporal experience enacted by a person.\(^\text{341}\)

The differing objectives, environments and audience demographics for each case study underpin the different roles and responsibilities of the performer in object-rich museum theatre. In *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* the character of Harry acts as an intermediary between object and audience, and facilitator of object conversation. Despite working for the museum, he has limited object knowledge and is therefore able to act as a representative of younger museum visitors. Rather than teach, his job is to learn alongside the visitor. Cade, as Joseph in *Troubled Times*, has a prerogative to take students on a tour of the Kirkgate streetscape and help them engage with and understand the collection. Although well versed on the museum content, Cade hides his knowledge behind the character of Joseph, who is street smart but uneducated and illiterate.

\(^{341}\) Robert A. Richter on Lipsky "Playwriting for Museums or: How to Make a Drama out of Slime Molds", in *Case Studies in Museum, Zoo and Aquarium Theatre*, 11.
The role of the protagonist in *The Bog Man’s Daughter* is to act as a substitution for the collection and impart information that visitors might otherwise have gained from viewing objects and their associated labels. In *Robbie the Rat*, Sutton, who plays Robbie, designed a character that is highly knowledgeable and brings several levels of expertise to interpreting objects for visitors. His objective is to increase visitors’ understanding of collection items, while asking them to draw on prior knowledge and to ask questions. Although he is positioned as an ‘expert’, his teaching style is founded on the premise that all visitors have something to contribute to the content of the performance.

Museum theatre is used in all exhibitions at the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis because it is an effective way of interpreting collections for young visitors. It ensures a greater connection to the themes of the exhibition, especially for pre-literate or non-English speaking visitors. At the other end of the age-spectrum were Clarence and Dora of *The Dora Faye Davenport Show*, who provided voices, values and behaviours from the past, delivered tongue-in-cheek to a contemporary audience. Platform 4 Theatre Company peoples the exhibition halls with actors who act as a conduit between the objects and their hidden histories.

**Cultural Capital**

While the museum object has been displaced in the new museum, object-rich performance rests on the belief that the collection and its associated acquisition policies is what makes each institution unique. There is a certain amount of prestige for a museum to be associated with objects perceived as having high ‘cultural capital’, in that they are internationally significant objects. Examples of objects with high ‘cultural capital’ are the Rosetta Stone at the British Museum or the Mona Lisa at the Louvre. Both incite specific visitation and there is generally a line to view them. Each object is also synonymous with its host institution. While there is no reason that the
stories of the Rosetta Stone or the Mona Lisa could not be performed at other institutions, the impact of a performance in propinquity with the real thing enhances the narrative.

Although there is significant value in performing ‘intangible heritage’ or themes unrepresented by the collection, visitors still attend museums with some expectations of the type of objects they will see. This was evident in the responses of younger visitors to the Melbourne Museum during the renovation of the evolution gallery. Many tears were shed at learning that they would not be able to see dinosaur bones during their visit.342

Each of the case studies drew on the strength of the collections contained within their host museum or exhibition. The performances as the NRM all revolved around the trains. While there may have been other stories to tell, the shows played to the strengths of the collection and the expectations of the visitors.

With the centralisation of the object in museum theatre comes limitations. If developed exclusively from a permanent collection, object-rich theatre remains tied to the host institute. If the exhibition is temporary, the performance loses currency once it is removed. If tied to a travelling exhibit, the show must move when the exhibition is transported.

The Museum of Science, Boston devised a system to ensure that shows were not limited by their relationship to exhibitions. As described by Dowling Jr., the model for the development of a performance such as The Bog Man’s Daughter was based on the premise that shows are developed for temporary exhibitions and performed in the gallery space. If the show became popular and could stand alone, its life was extended after the closure of the exhibition; it was added into the exhibits hall schedule and
performed in the museum’s theatre, ‘It became free of that exhibit’. This process ensured that the performance outlived the exhibition.

Conclusion: What are the outcomes of centralising the object in museum theatre?

The primary function of object-rich museum theatre is to help visitors make meaningful connections with collections and individual artefacts. Subject-driven performance tends to focus more on interpreting historical figures, themes and events. Overarchingly, object-rich museum theatre is a sub-genre rarely practised with intent. In many instances, no overt connection is made between the objects and the performance, but they are used subconsciously to clothe the characters and to cement the notion of authenticity.

The case studies analysed in this chapter reveal that centralising the object in performance can provide sub-strands to the grand narrative of exhibitions or provide an alternative reading of an artefact. One of the greatest arguments for the inclusion of objects in museum theatre is the idea that objects make ideas and concepts both visible and tangible. The notion of objects as vehicles for thought and expression is advocated by Ivan Karp and Corinne A. Kratz, who argue that an object’s materiality anchors ideas in a way that abstract concepts cannot.

Each case study shows a different relationship between subject (the performer) and object (the artefact). Latham’s application of numinous experience theory to visitor/object interaction makes a case for using the subject as a means of activating

343 Dan Dowling Jr., interview.
344 Gurian, “What is the Object of this Exercise? A Meandering Exploration of the Many Meanings of Objects in Museums,” 35.
the object. Similarly, Napp Schindel calls for an approach that 'aligns objects with human narratives'. It can be argued that along with imbuing knowledge and inciting inquiry, object-rich museum theatre can heighten appreciation for cultural collections. It has the potential to help visitors invest more in their understanding of the past and respect the role of museums as a hub for the preservation and interpretation of history.

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Chapter Five: The marginalisation of the object in museum performance

Introduction

During the course of my fieldwork, interviews conducted with practitioners indicated that very few institutions were using collection items as the stimulus for performance. Most performances originated from exhibition themes or historical characters. Consequently, it was difficult to find case studies that adhered to the definition of object-rich museum theatre as defined in Chapter One. While the shift of focus from object to subject can partially be attributed to the influence of new museology, there are many operational issues that contribute to the predominance of subject-based rather than object-centric museum theatre.

This chapter examines the key issues that have led to the marginalisation of artefacts in contemporary museum theatre through an analysis of the case studies. These include the shifting focus of new museology, the problems of converting object into performance, issues of authenticity, visitor preferences of 'people rather than things', and the problems of 'voicing objects'.

Subject rather than object

This chapter continues to investigate the hypothesis outlined in Chapter One that the themes of museum theatre have shifted from object to subject. While the findings of Chapter Two suggest that while many early performances were enacted alongside objects, interpreting the objects were not always the focus of performance. The tenet that contemporary museum theatre is mostly subject-based was a reoccurring theme during my data collection. The predominance of subject-based museum theatre opens avenues of inquiry to suggest that visitors are more interested
in people than in ‘things’. In the case of dime museums, the most popular exhibits were human oddities and items that were associated with famous people, past and present. It suggests that humans go to museums to see themselves. Casey observes that deeper connections to the stories of everyday people are increasingly used by new museums to create human connections with visitors.348 This chapter argues that subject and object are not mutually exclusive, but rather that objects can be used as portals to access a range of subjects. It subscribes to the theory offered by Gurian that one of the core values of museum objects is to provide tangible evidence of the story of humanity.349

The marginalisation of the object in museums

The marginalisation of the object in museum theatre is an effect of a larger movement in new museological practices where institutions evolve from their traditional object-centric role to an institution more focused on the power of experience and interaction.350 Casey attributes this shift to the reconfiguration of the relationship between the subject (the visitor) and the object (museum artefact). She suggests that meaning making is no longer the exclusive domain of the object; rather, that it is created by a triangulation between visitor, institution and interpretation.351

Historically, museums presented themselves as authorities through their custodianship of authentic objects. Gurian unpacks the intrinsic value of owning the authentic object as a core justification for the existence of museums, citing that it underpinned the key institutional objectives for many museums.352 However, new museums present themselves as inclusive institutions where information can be shared

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350 Casey, “The Museum Effect: Gazing from Object to Performance in the Contemporary Cultural-History Museum,” 10
351 Ibid, 16.
through a range of mediums, such as images, events, presentations, technology, models, and experiences. While they have collections and displays, the interpretation of objects is not their sole objective. This is evident in many children’s museums, such as the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis, where most objects on display are not necessarily historical, but rather created or selected to facilitate learning. The Benjamin Franklin House in London is an example of a site made historically significant by its association with a famous figure; however, most artefacts associated with Benjamin Franklin are held in American cultural institutions. As a museum without objects, the information transmitted through performance is used as a substitute for information derived from viewing a collection object.

This chapter focuses on presenting explanations for the marginalisation of the object in museum theatre. Many museum theorists have contributed to the debate on whether the object itself may have lost some of its currency in the new museum. Casey attributes the dematerialising of the artefact in cultural institutions to a belief that ‘the primacy of the museum experience has shifted from object to performance’.353 She suggests that the lesser emphasis on collection comes from a shifting focus on enhanced and interpretive display practices and the theatricalisation of the museum.354 Her use of the term ‘performance’ does not specifically refer to museum theatre, but rather embodies a range of engaging interpretive techniques such as audio-visual components. Kate Taylor presents the rise of the story museum as a contributing factor to the diminished role of exhibition objects.355 As in The Bog Man’s Daughter, story museums often use interpretive performance to replace the absent objects.356

354 Ibid, 15.
Conn contends that the role of objects in museums has been displaced by other interpretive technologies.  

Andrea Witcomb addresses technology as a factor ‘threatening the traditional attitude to objects in museums’. Isaac too points to the growing trend of using a range of media or digital technologies in lieu of objects to communicate evidence to visitors. Displays with touch screens, audio/visual narratives or digital versions of objects can be used to either enhance or replace the museum object. In some respects, this form of interpretation is comparable to the secondary interpretation employed by museum theatre, but by displacing the object it poses the problem of how to perform the digital or technological object. The concept and information regarding the object is perhaps more easily transmitted to the visitor through the digital interfaces they use every day. While the use of technology has the potential to marginalise the museum object, it also has the power to enhance it. Digital aids can be harnessed to enhance the multiplicity of the object and communicate the complexities of multiple narratives.

Converting object into performance

The lack of object-rich performance can be attributed to several key issues, the most obvious being the problem of conversion. It is simply much easier to convert an historical figure or textual document into performance rather than an object, as information is available through spoken or written language, ensuring that it is in a script-friendly format. In order to create a piece of object-rich museum theatre, the object must go through several points of conversion before the information can be translated into dialogue. At the 2009 Global International Museum Theatre Alliance conference in Monterey, the Little Lights Theatre Company from the Victoria and

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357 Conn, Do Museums Still Need Objects?, 22.
Albert Museum presented a work entitled *Little Woman: The Story of the Corset*, which used a corset as catalyst for performance. Through this symbol of the nineteenth century, the work was used to explore gender issues, obtaining the vote for women, medical practice, and fashion of the time. The successful exploration of these themes in a performance derived from something that is both an object and a symbol, contradicting the notion that objects should be secondary to themes. Indeed, as outlined in the responses to the ‘Object of Engagement’ conference, ‘when objects are brought into view and their material life recovered on stage, they can serve as dynamic vehicles embodied with the cultural, political and psychological projects that create them’.

The process of interpreting artefacts for museum performance begins with a focus on interrogating the object. A key difficulty in converting objects into performance is that unlike letters, documents and paintings, objects are perceived to be non-textual. Simply put, they are ‘mute’ and do not give up their stories easily. Kavanagh hypothetically questions the need to extrapolate meaning from museum objects, as images and documents are more cooperative and easier to interpret than artefacts.

Moore and Durbin et al. refute the idea that the museum object is silent, suggesting that different approaches need to be taken when analysing them. Hesseltinem places the onus of comprehension back on the viewer who ‘cannot understand their [the object’s] answers’ and suggests that further work is needed to develop a methodology for interpreting artefacts.

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361 Ibid, 12.
363 Moore, Museums and Popular Culture; 52 Durbin et al. A Teacher’s Guide to Learning from Objects. 18
According to Karin Knorr-Cetina, objects can have the character of closed boxes ... [or] the capacity to unfold indefinitely into the depths of a dark closet. Simon too speaks to this in her definition of the ‘social object’. The interpretive potential of objects lies at the core of ‘object-rich’ museum theatre. The role of the dramaturge is to identify the fundamental structure of each artefact and determine how each is to be opened, unfolded and interpreted. Like Pandora’s box, once the lid is lifted, a panoply of human experiences and cognitive associations can be captured, harnessed and developed into a performance; however, it can also be argued that once the process of developing performance has been completed, a script can limit the interpretative possibilities of objects by sculpting a narrative pathway. When suspended unaccompanied in a glass case the object is something that visitors can project their own memories and associations onto, entering into a state that Moore contends renders the objects ‘inexhaustible, capable of an infinite range of readings and re-readings’. Each layer of interpretation restricts its ‘inexhaustibility’. This may include an exhibition label or how it is placed alongside other objects. In order to fashion a script, the playwright must make decisions on how to interpret an artefact, potentially closing themselves off to other possible interpretations.

The complexity of converting an object into performance was reported by several practitioners when interviewed. Key issues related to the selection of objects for performance. Objects were evaluated as suitable for performance if their associated stories were appropriate for all museum visitors. Objects omitted for performance were often religious, culturally sensitive or failed to present a balanced representation. The process of converting an object into performance as documented in the case

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367 Moore, Museums and Popular Culture, 52.
studies rested on the practitioners making a range of interpretive choices in order to ‘perform’ the artefact. Human orator characters were created to ‘speak’ the object. This was tied up with the choice of how to contextualise the object in its original working life, as in *Troubled Times* and *V for Victory*, or whether to re-enforce its role as a display object, as exemplified in *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* and *Robbie the Rat*.

**Selecting objects for performance**

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi refers to the ‘hook’ that can lead on to ‘flow’ experiences, thereby providing a strong analogy for the process of choosing objects for performance.\(^\text{368}\) The hook is the element that provokes interest and draws the visitor to discover more. The hook of a museum object could be innate, in that it is visually arresting. Alternatively, it could be created artificially through innovative curatorial interpretation.

There are no set specifications for choosing objects for performance, but many of the objects used by informers fell into the following categories:

1. ‘Social objects’ that are visually interesting, generate discussion among visitors and are easily interpreted;
2. ‘Misunderstood objects’ that are often misinterpreted by visitors or mythologised through popular culture. Museum theatre is used as a device to re-educate the visitors;
3. ‘Boring objects’ that need performance to enliven them, such as in *The Bog Man’s Daughter*;
4. ‘On-loan’ objects that need to be utilised and enhanced while on display; and

5. Objects that are part of a permanent collection, providing justification for the long-term investment of interpretive budget.

The term ‘social object’ was first coined by engineer and sociologist Jyri Engeström and holds considerable currency in determining which objects could be selected for performance. Simon reminds us that ‘not all objects are naturally social’ and raises the question as to whether a practitioner should rise to the challenge of interpreting an ‘anti-social’ object (as in The Bog Man’s Daughter) or whether they should choose one with easily identifiable points of social context. She considers the qualities that make an object ‘social’ and concludes that the object must provoke questions, cause people to exclaim with surprise or come back for a second look. Her examples of ‘social objects’ include, ‘a steam engine in action or an enormous whale jaw, a liquid nitrogen demonstration or a sculpture made of chocolate’. These things are moving, rare/huge, dangerous or objects of delight and desire. Simon identifies four qualities of a social object: personal, active, provocative or relational. A personal object is one that a visitor can relate to on an individual level as it may provoke memories of events or people. These connections are contemplated quietly or shared with friends or family. Active objects often help visitors engage in broader conversations with strangers through shared public experiences. Examples may include memorabilia from the first moon landing or rubble from 9/11. Provocative objects expand on shared public experiences but add the element of opinion. A provocative exhibit may focus on engaging the public with ethical issues such as racism, gender equality or immigration. The final category defined by Simon is the ‘rational object’ and these are more commonly found in science and technology exhibitions. They include an

369 Simon, The Participatory Museum. 129.
370 Ibid.
371 Ibid.
interactive aspect that requires visitors to work together to activate them. This could include a chessboard or a machine that requires more than one person to operate it.

Museum theatre practitioner Hardison from the Kentucky Historical Society discusses the pleasures of interpreting objects that are ‘easily missed and misunderstood’, such as a small metal can-opener issued to all American troops in Vietnam. The can-opener acted as a social equaliser, as everyone had one, from a General to a kitchen-hand, and without it, food that was stored in cans for preservation could not be accessed.

Another key selection criterion for consideration is whether to select objects that are familiar or foreign to the visiting public. The ‘boundary object’, as described by Margaret Carr et al., is an artefact that draws on both the familiar and the unknown, providing a useful juncture for helping visitors reflect on their own experiences while gaining new information. The boundary object is particularly useful when working with young children, as it engages them as both experts and learners. The properties of boundary objects suggest a strong suitability for interpretation through museum performance, as they have potential for connecting with memory, while providing new information.

Dudley suggests that the nature of object interpretation has evolved with the more considered curatorial approach to representing the multiple interpretations of museum objects. She recounts that in the past ‘objects behaved themselves’ as they were presented with a single narrative. Csikszentmihalyi argues that objects have their own agency and are not always under human control.

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372 Greg Hardison, interview.
374 Dudley, Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations, xi.
375 Csikszentmihalyi, “Why We Need Things,” 21.
Sutton chose objects from the National Museum of Australia that adhered to all the qualities of a ‘social object’ when developing *The Dora Fay Davenport Show*. When conducting research for a museum performance he noticed that the objects in a 1950s kitchen display provoked more discussion among visitors than any other exhibit. The visitors discussed personal memories of owning the objects, and were able to open and close drawers in the kitchen to view more artefacts. The display provoked debate on generational hardship and evoked comparison to their current and past kitchens. The qualities of the 1950s exhibit translated into an engaging performance with a specific target audience.

Oddey emphasises the importance of finding a stimulus or point of origin in devised performances as something for the practitioners to respond to.\(^{376}\) The selection of an object may lead to the development of a performance or a dead end depending on whether it can be successfully unpacked and meet the objectives of object-rich museum theatre. Hardison places considerable emphasis on the correct selection of a document or object for performance in determining the success of the show; he alludes to the need for an object that has obvious nuances and a multifaceted biography, ‘You have to find something that has levels’.\(^{377}\) This points to the fact that not all museum objects can be converted into interesting performances. Some artefacts sing louder than others. The significance of appropriate selection is supported by Simon’s conjecture that some objects are more social than others, forming the impression that a savvy practitioner will not attempt to choose objects for performance indiscriminately. In his work on material culture, Edward McClung Fleming invites the reader to make judgements on the object through comparison

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\(^{377}\) Greg Hardison, interview.
with other objects. This is a model that was used successfully in *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* and is a strong argument for incorporating several objects into a performance as it can inspire dialogue rather than soliloquy.

The selection of an object for performance also comes down to operational issues, as practitioners need to consider whether the object is part of an interpretive or display collection. It must be established whether the object stories are appropriate for all audience types or if there are any problems with visibility. It is imperative to ensure that the object is available during the performance period and is not scheduled for rotation or to be loaned out. In collections relating to sensitive cultural histories, it is imperative to ensure the availability of a performer who can appropriately tell the story of the object. This is particularly important when dealing with Indigenous artefacts that are regularly manipulated to narrate colonial history. The final characteristic for selecting an object for performance is its placement in the museum. To be performed, a collection item needs to be positioned in an area with enough open space around it for an audience to congregate.

**Multiple voices and re-meaning**

Hooper-Greenhill addresses the concept of ‘re-meaning’ (interpreting an object through a different perspective) as a positive rather than negative aspect of interpreting museum objects, ‘It is an openness to re-meaning; a capacity to carry preferred meaning; a potential for polysemia; and the material potentials and constraints, that lie at the heart of the appeal of artefacts’. A prime example of re-meaning occurred throughout the performance of *This Accursed Thing* at the Manchester Museum, a case study of the Performing, Learning and Heritage

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In this piece, objects relating to slavery were performed to tackle the perspectives of both slave owners and the enslaved. The performance was structured in a manner that allowed audience members to participate in debating the issues of justice and ownership raised by the show.

While museum staff may have concerns that performing objects could circumvent the message of the exhibition, the case studies of this thesis show evidence of ‘selected meaning’ rather than ‘re-meaning’. *V for Victory* chooses to take one narrative pathway, namely the role of women working on the railways during World War II. There are many other shows at the National Railway Museum that choose to use the trains as a platform for other stories. All stories have equal currency, but due to the short and ephemeral nature of museum theatre, the practitioner must be selective.

Jos Boys reflects on the advantages of inter-institutional research on the interpretation of objects where both academics and museum professionals can work collegially to ‘open up multiple perspectives on objects and their broader contexts to debate and reflection’. Boys’ opinion on the importance of multiple meanings helps to minimise the tension between fact and fiction in museum interpretation. It adheres to the views projected by Hooper-Greenhill that ‘objects are subject to multiple interpretations, some of which may be contradictory’ and that ‘the meanings of objects are contingent, fluid, and polysemic, but nonetheless constrained by the materiality of the object’. This translates into a situation where different interpretations or pieces of information are being drawn from the same object.

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381 ibid.
382 ibid.
383 ibid.
384 ibid, 10.
385 ibid., 10.
Moore contests the idea of the ventriloquist actor or presenter misrepresenting and convoluting the meaning of objects, as suggested by Sims. Hooper-Greenhill’s notion of ‘re-meaning’ allows for flexibility in finding meanings in objects and then reconsidering them if new information becomes available or the artefact is examined from another sociological or cultural perspective. Hughes adheres to a similar perspective on the multifaceted interpretation of artefacts with the observation that ‘An object can tell different stories, rather than only one’. Conversely, stories about objects can be told in different ways.

An experienced museum performer will be able to find many narrative strands in an artefact and be able to imbue it with a new dimension. Frances Teague introduced a different dimension to the multifaceted object when she wrote that ‘A property has meaning; it may also have meaning as one of a class of objects. A property can carry multiple meanings, which may sometimes conflict’. The notion of conflicting ideas is at the heart of all devised theatre, as it provides the opportunity for climax and resolution within a story. It also effectively introduces the more sophisticated concept of historiography and how different opinions can be formed on objects and moments in time. McAuley too picks up on the many different meanings that performance can extract from an object. The study and practice of ‘gesture’ dates back to very early styles of acting, but today—in its more subdued form—McAuley points out, gesture and action tease out the relationship of the character to the object in question. A floral handbag held by a middle-aged woman will induce all sorts of comic assumptions when held by an alpha male. The ‘inexhaustible’ nature of the museum object as suggested by Moore implies that a seminal aspect of the museum theatre

387 Hughes, Museum Theatre: Communicating with Visitors through Drama, 10.
390 Ibid.
practitioner’s role is to ask questions, listen to the object’s testimony and then make choices about which narrative strands should follow. However, in choosing a narrative pathway, the process of developing a script around an object has the potential to be prescriptive. While object labels focus on delivering basic facts and context, the performance adds another level of interpretation, shaping the way the visitor feels about the artefact.

Evans suggests that performance is a means of collective meaning making. The key to helping visitors maintain their autonomy is through introducing elements of interactivity in museum performance. Here, audiences are invited to share their perspectives, opinions and any personal connections with the artefact, providing a two-way experience where both audience and performer can learn from each other. The inclusion of audience contribution negates the suggestion that meaning is a monochromatic element dictated by the performer.

**Cultural sensitivity**

Message and Frederick note the importance of developing a ‘metaview’ when dealing with object interpretation. A metaview ensures that the audience and performer are aware of the subjective nature of interpretation and acknowledge the extra layer of meaning created by the display process. Performances such as *Robbie the Rat* and *The Clue and the Claw of the Dinosaur* break through the theatrical fourth wall of dramatic illusion by acknowledging that the objects have been taken out of circulation and are part of a museum collection. Alberti emphasises that the object does not stop accruing meaning once it has become part of a museum collection.

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391 Evans, “Personal Beliefs and National Stories: Theatre in Museums as a Tool for Exploring Historical Memory,” 196.
392 Ibid, 189.
Claw of the Dinosaur demonstrates how the process of taking an object out of context and separating it from its label can result in mistaken identity.

The importance of incorporating a metaview into museum performance is evident when developing shows from objects with a contested cultural history. By building a metaview into the script, the characters are able to identify the many meanings of objects and freely discuss why they may be subjected to a range of interpretations. Teague suggests that the selection of a ‘conflicting object’ for performance can be used to highlight the importance of polysemic interpretations in museum theatre.

One of the best examples of using performative techniques to draw out the contested cultural meaning of artefacts was presented at the Melbourne Museum within the Two Laws exhibit in the Bunjilaka gallery. The exhibit was set up as two media screens showing an imagined dialogue between anthropologist, professor and Melbourne Museum director, Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer and an indigenous elder named Irrapmwe, who was dubbed King Charley by the colonials. The screens were positioned above a case of objects belonging to both Baldwin Spencer and Irrapmwe, The conversation between the two men shows how these two might ‘view Aboriginal knowledge, laws and property if they were alive today’. This display is particularly effective because, as the two cultural leaders discuss and debate each issue, an artefact of relevance is illuminated as an example of conflicting cultural beliefs and laws.

First, Baldwin Spencer puts forth the opinion that he is a leader in his culture because he is educated and has written many books and papers to earn his title of ‘Professor’. When Irrapmwe puts forth the notion that he too is a professor in his culture, Baldwin Spencer refutes it by proclaiming that it is literacy that denotes

civilised education, ‘See this pen, this was my pen. I wrote books, letters and reports with this pen’. As he is speaking, the Baldwin Spencer pen (circa 1925) is illuminated. However, Irrapmwe refutes his claims by pointing out that there are many types of script and literacy as he hold up his Arrernye Possum Jaw engraver (circa 1895) and explains, ‘This was my pen. I could carve our stories in sacred places’. He also uses the example of the two adzes (axes), one stone blade (circa 1900) and the other iron blade (circa 1895) to refute Baldwin Spencer’s slur that Aboriginals are relics of a Stone Age culture.

As the two men move onto issues of land rights and the repatriation of sacred Indigenous objects, Baldwin speaks about Irrapmwe’s shield (circa 1890), which he collected for the museum. As he continues, he begins to open a box in order to show an example of a shield to the viewers and is stopped by Irrapmwe who is horrified that Baldwin Spencer is about to put an artefact used for ‘men’s business’ on general display. As the two men debate the problems of a colonial museum telling Aboriginal stories and showing Aboriginal artefacts, Irrapmwe states that ‘we don’t want you to talk about us as though we’re not here’. This leads both figures to reflect on how their national story is told. Baldwin Spencer bemoans the attitudes to Australian law and, as a series of images of Australian flag key rings and socks are displayed on the monitor, he remarks regretfully that: ‘some people make that law into something trivial’. The use of objects is particularly strong as more images of Australian tourist merchandise are shown just as Irrapmwe remarks that ‘people make our dreaming into small things’. The final activated object is Irrapmwe’s breastplate, a monument bestowed by the colonials on leaders in the Aboriginal community. Through his

397 Ibid.
398 Ibid.
399 Ibid.
400 Ibid.
reflection on this illuminated object, Baldwin Spencer realises that Aboriginal leaders were not treated as equals with colonial leaders, with Europeans often renaming them with titles such as King Charley. With this realisation, Baldwin Spencer is taught to pronounce and use King Charley’s real name, Irrapmwe, a gesture of friendship and respect.

While this display provokes discussion on the ownership and display of culturally sensitive or ‘restricted’ objects, an interview with Dowling Jr. of the Museum of Science, Boston exemplified how these issues were not exclusive to ethnographic, religious or Indigenous objects. He noted that as more touring exhibitions such as Star Wars, Harry Potter and Titanic are presented as blockbusters by commercial production companies, production company restrictions meant that materials could not be added, adapted or removed due to copyright issues. Dowling Jr. points to an example where a performance developed in-house for a touring exhibit about Einstein was unable to use his image or words.401 These restrictions were managed by the development of a fictitious character who dealt primarily with ethical questions of science and invention. However, it poses another obstacle for object-rich museum theatre and considers how a performer can successfully engage with objects whose ownership and interpretation is so stringently guarded.

Objects as texts

Fleming, Prown, Pearce, and Kavanagh point to a comfortable relationship with the idea that objects can be read as texts. ‘The formal language of objects that constitutes style, with its own grammar of visual tropes and metaphors, provided evidence of unconscious belief, of culture’.402 The concept of objects as texts is not

401 Dan Dowling Jr., interview.
exclusive to European museums. Maori elders ‘talk’ and ‘listen’ to their objects that preserve cultural and social information, much like the loci system of theatre design. In order to extract information from cultural artefacts the viewer needs to know something about the society. Hooper-Greenhill suggests that the meaning of objects can be invisible to the cultural outsider, as cultural knowledge provides a type of lexicon to understanding the meaning of the artefact. 403 She cautions on misrepresenting artefacts, maintaining that even for the purpose of professional discourse, objects should not be treated as texts:

Understanding objects, then, is not the same as reading texts ... To treat an artefact as a text is to expand the concept of textual meaning too far. 404 Carbonell proposes that, rather than be defined as texts, objects may perhaps be considered as ‘orators’. The concept of the ‘testifying object’ speaks to Benjamin’s theory of ‘aura’, an acknowledgement of the object’s journey. 405 Carbonell maintains that objects engage in a non-verbal dialogue without the added element of performance, and explores ‘the variety of rhetorical platform from which objects speak’ by examining them within a linguistic framework of syntax. 406 She explains this use of linguistic terminology by casting the selective deployment of artefacts in exhibits as the ‘diction’, the ‘contextualisation’ as the syntax and the narrative platform as the ‘point of view’. 407 In this manner, artefacts are anthropomorphised as characters with memory, opinion and the ability to testify to their life experiences. By being cast as ‘compelling witnesses’, 408 they are imbued with the authority to accurately recall and retell their observations over time. Carbonell’s concept of ‘museum-based

403 Hooper-Greenhill, Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture, 73.
404 Ibid, 115.
407 Ibid, 123.
408 Ibid.
dialogues reminded me of a tour I took of the State Library of Victoria's *Mirrors of the World* rare books exhibit. A guide explained that a copy of the Torah, Bible and Qur'an had been placed together in one cabinet so that they could talk to each other at night, argue and debate their different views on spirituality. According to Carbonell, ‘Just as dramatic lighting can give objects emotional power, placing objects in ‘conversation’ with each other can enhance their social use’.410

Carbonell’s concept of object dialogue sits parallel to Stacy Roth’s description of the uses of first, second and third person interpretation in museum theatre.411 Carbonell states that:

Museum exhibitions address visitors from platforms that bear similarities to first-, second-, and third-person narration. Moreover, grammatically speaking, the arrangement of objects creates a syntax similar to the order of words in a sentence.412

In performances such as *Robbie the Rat* and *Troubled Times*, the characters used the objects to validate their stories through historical and visual evidence. The notion of ‘object testimony’ falls into the category of first-person narrative and could potentially remain so if a performer was reading a statement allegedly ‘prepared by the object’. This manner of ventriloquism gives the illusion of first-person narrative. A second-person narrative would be a performer speaking *on behalf* of the object, presumably because it is mute, while third-person interpretation speaks *about* the object with less emphasis on the humanistic characteristics it may conceal.

Carbonell cites a technique used by artist, historian and curator Fred Wilson where objects are radically juxtaposed in a case, rather than being curated to fit a

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409 Ibid, 21.
410 Ibid.
411 Ibid, 127.
412 Ibid.
theme. This accordingly ‘preserved the first-person status of each individual object, since they were not absorbed like parts of a speech into an explicit curatorial sentence. Instead they were allowed to testify to their own essence and difference’.\footnote{Ibid, 131.}

**Translating object to text**

I make objects into sentences.\footnote{The Gleaners and I, DVD, directed by Agnès Varda (2000; France: Zeitgeist Films, 2002).}

The theory and practice of converting text and space into performance has been well documented by performance theorists such as Schechner, Brooks and Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt.\footnote{Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Touchstone, 1968); Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt, ed., *Page to Stage: Theatre as Translation* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1984).} However, the notion that objects can be translated into performance has received significantly less attention, as the lives of people rather than things are most often the subject of dramatic presentation in cultural institutions. I propose that object-rich museum theatre has developed along the same lines as curation and may include two streams: (a) a theme is decided upon and objects chosen to represent the theme, or (b) an object is listed for display and must then be curated. Even though an exhibit is generally designed around a theme, objects are still the core business of, and primary function of museums. To create a piece of museum theatre in a museum without referencing the objects seemingly fails to make use of what is inherently special about museums as a performance venue. Museum theatre creates an opportunity to create stories using objects as the anchor.

Freeman Tilden defines interpretation as the translation from one language to another. Object-rich museum theatre is devised through the translation of the ‘language of objects’, to the ‘language of performance’.\footnote{Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 3rd edition, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1977), 3.} Translation is a term generally applied in the theatrical realm to the process of transposing plays into other
languages or converting theatrical scripts into screenplays. Zuber-Skerritt alludes to the academic discipline of ‘drama translation science’ as the study of techniques used to convert text into performance. In order to adapt this methodology for the conversion of object into performance, it is necessary to revisit the notion of object as text. According to Zuber-Skerritt, a successful translation must be ‘actable and speakable’. Objects are not speakable until they have been mined for information and then converted into text. This calls into question whether objects can be translated into performance or whether they are ‘adapted’, ‘transcribed’ or simply ‘inspiration’.

Christopher Worth uses Douglas Jerrold’s 1832 drama The Rent Day to exemplify how image can be translated into performance. The play was a translation of artist David Wilkie’s 1807 painting The Rent Day, which had been exhibited at the Royal Academy and was well known to the public sphere, ‘Wilkie himself took a hand in arranging the actors into tableaux to simulate his own works’. This process was later utilised by Stephen Sondheim in his 1984 musical Sunday in the Park with George, which was inspired by artist Georges Seurat’s painting A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte. The Rent Day sets a precedent for the application of drama translation science to non-textual works. David Ritchie addresses the problems of conversion between two different values, text and image, by suggesting that ‘meaning on the page is not directly translatable into meaning on the stage since each medium involves a different type of discourse’.

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417 Zuber-Skerritt, ed., Page to Stage: Theatre as Translation, 8.
418 Ibid.
420 Ibid, 158.
Christian Jürgensen Thomsen, the mid-nineteenth century director of the Royal Museum of Nordic Antiquities is credited with developing a ‘language of objects’, which he regarded as a universal language.\textsuperscript{422} His displays focused on using the arrangement of artefacts as the key form of communicating with visitors, often maligning text in the process. His approach centred on shifting the focus from text to object, and heightening the status of artefacts as cultural capital.\textsuperscript{423}

**Bull in a china shop**

At the inaugural Australian IMTAL conference in Canberra, Lipsky referred to the common perception of museum theatre as a bull in a china shop.\textsuperscript{424} The choice of analogy references the seeming incompatibility between the vigorous nature of theatrics and the preciousness of museum objects.

The juxtaposition of object and performer is most evident when performances include the use of handling collections. Each of the case studies in this thesis incorporated the use of ‘interpretive collection items’, while Chapter Two addressed the historical and inclusive attitudes towards objects in cabinets of curiosities, dime museums and early living history museums, the idea of the sacred, precious museum object came from the early academy museums. According to Fiona Candlin, object handling was common in nineteenth century museums including the British Museum, but only for the upper echelons of society.\textsuperscript{425} “The upper classes always had license to touch and their touch was deemed rational and non-damaging”.\textsuperscript{426} She supports this claim with diary evidence that, in 1702, an aristocrat named Celia Fiennes visited the

\textsuperscript{423} Ibid, 31.
\textsuperscript{426} Ibid, 9.
Ashmolean Museum and was permitted to touch and lift objects to compare their weight.427 But as the working classes were encouraged to visit museums as a means of edification and as an alternative to public houses, handling collections became impractical. As traffic through the museum increased, it exposed the collections to greater danger of decay or damage.

Hands-on collections are still utilised in the British Museum. Tactile stations staffed by volunteers allow visitors to handle objects linked to the era, culture or ideologies being presented in the surrounding galleries. Most visitors are astonished to discover that they are being entrusted to hold an ancient Incan engraving or a piece of Egyptian mummy bandage. Thomas Schlereth’s writing emphasises the power of touch for enhancing object interaction: ‘Seeing is not enough, if at all possible the object should be touched, handled and lifted’.428 Participants in Latham’s study on numinous experiences with museum objects emphasised the importance of proximity to object in order to generate the most transportative experiences. Their emotional connection to the object was largely dependant on being in close contact with the real thing.429

While physical interaction with objects helps enhance the visitor experience of the past, artefact handling is not necessary for object-rich museum theatre. The concerns of some institutions revolve around the way performers and audiences change the dynamics of the museum space, creating unexpected pockets of stationary crowds or mass movement. This is discussed in the next chapter. In addition to using ‘pocket objects’, Robbie the Rat, Troubled Times and The Bog Man’s Daughter demonstrate that museum theatre can be used to successfully interpret objects in cases. It has been

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427 Ibid, 11.
well documented by practitioners that performance can inhabit the space around exhibition cases without interruption or breakage.

**Performance and mis-education**

Jackson and Kidd address one of the key criticisms of museum theatre, namely that the act of performance can undermine the historical integrity of artefacts and the authority of the institution. They write that:

The practice of museum theatre has also been widely contested and still encounters resistance within the museum profession.\(^{430}\)

Many of these concerns can be attributed to historical perceptions of performance in museums, as evidenced during the dime museum era, where exhibited objects were subjected to mythology, stylised narratives, exaggeration and flagrant artifice.

The history of performing objects in museums rests on a complicated dichotomy between the aim of presenting the museum as a sanctuary of learning and the actuality of engaging visitors. In the cabinets of curiosity the objects owned by private and wealthy collectors were shown to visitors as a form of amusement and diversion. The narratives connected to the objects and presented orally by the owner were fanciful, and rarely held up to the scrutiny of scientific professionals. Barnum’s American Museum used mis-education and micro-narratives to enhance the spectacle of his displays.\(^{431}\) When viewed through the lens of history, Barnum presents as a larger-than-life figure with a deep understanding of the mechanics of human nature and a gift for constructing fictional narratives around authentic and fabricated artefacts. The piece entitled ‘Museum Song’ from the Broadway musical *Barnum* neatly surmises the key aspects of his museum philosophy:

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Museum Song

Everything about my museum was spectacular,
including the price: one dollar.
Now that may seem a bit steep, but it was worth it.
Look at what I gave 'em:

Quite a lotta
Roman terra cotta
Livin' lava from the flanks of Etna
Statuary
Ride a dromedary
See the Temple tumble and the Red Sea part.

McNamara's band
The fattest lady in the land
A pickled prehistoric hand
A strand of Pocahontas' hair
Crow and Sioux
Who're going to
Be showing you
Some rowing through
A model of the rapids on the Delaware.

Armadillas
Clever caterpillars
Reproductions of the Cyclops' ret'na
Crystal blowing
Automatic sewing
Venus on a shell and other works of art.

Educated fleas
A tribe of Aborigines
Two ladies joined across the knees
A Mona Lisa made of ice
Hottentots
We've gotten in
Forgotten spots
A cotton gin
A night with Lot in Sodom
Better see that twice!

One iguana
Snakes and other fauna
Got no bearded lady but we're get'na
When you duck out
Take another buck out
Run around the block
And see a new show start.432

In contrast to the emphasis placed on learning and education by contemporary practitioners of performance in museums, dime museums frequently resorted to blatant displays of exaggeration and mis-education in order to attract audiences. As Dennett observes, ‘Museum managers routinely lied to the public in order to make their exhibits sound more exciting’.433 Managers generally concocted gimmicks in order to draw more people and enliven the artefacts on display by attaching a story to uninteresting or ordinary exhibits in order to engage the visitor’s interest.

The enduring popularity of animating artefacts with fiction can perhaps be attributed to the public love of nostalgia, curiosities and human oddities. This keen understanding of human interest was avidly exploited by Barnum, who would often devise a story around an object in order to excite public interest. He was also a canny publicist who utilised the print media for his own means. The most seminal example of this is the instance when Barnum reinvigorated the seventeenth century curiosity of the ‘Feejee Mermaid’, a dried out monkey corpse ingeniously attached to the tail of a fish. Prior to the opening of the exhibit, Barnum commissioned several woodcuts of

433 Dennett, Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America, xii.
mermaids that he distributed for free to a variety of newspapers with the suggestion that they could be used in conjunction with any articles printed about the exhibit.

Barnum freely admits in his autobiography *The Life of P.T. Barnum* to dictating public opinion: ‘When I thought the public was thoroughly “posted up” on the subject of mermaids, I sent an agent to engage Concert Hall Broadway for the exhibition’.\(^434\) Barnum also adorned the front of his museum with an eighteen-foot banner depicting a traditional image of a mermaid. He only took it down when it was suggested by one of the managers that the crowd would riot when comparing this wondrous image with the shrivelled specimen inside. Despite Barnum’s techniques, Dennett maintains that Barnum ‘did assemble spectacular geological, ornithological, zoological and ethnographical displays. But it was not his underlying intention to be didactic ... Barnum was fundamentally a showman who devoted his life not to scientific accuracy but to entertainment’.\(^435\) Ultimately the intent to provide educational enlightenment was never a core objective for Barnum.

In addition to fictionalised objects, Barnum frequently exhibited ‘fictionalised people’ such as the ‘What is it?’, billed as a forefather of humans (generally just an oddly proportioned man in a furry costume) and Joice Heth, who was discussed in previous chapters. Dennett writes that in Barnum’s museum ‘history was commodified, distorted and freely falsified to please the public’.\(^436\) She also draws attention to Barnum’s lecture room theatre slogan which was ‘we study to please’.\(^437\) This slogan underpins a key allegation made against many institutions and heritage sites that interpret history through performance, namely that performance distorts information for entertainment value. Living history museums are most frequently targeted for their

\(^434\) Barnum, *The Life of PT Barnum* : Written by Himself, 238.
\(^436\) Ibid, 6.
\(^437\) Ibid, 23.
decisions to omit the less savoury and more controversial attitudes and environments in history. Performing the truth in cultural institutions has proved to be equally problematic. In 1994, Colonial Williamsburg re-enacted a 1773 auction that, alongside land and farm equipment, listed four African American slaves for sale. While the museum wished to portray history as accurately as possible, the event had to be framed carefully to explore both modern perspectives and the attitudes of the time.

While Barnum’s central priorities were to entertain and generate revenue, he found that he could attract a wider and more upper-class patronage if he also claimed that his institution was one of learning and serious scientific information,

    Popular impresarios of the age, such as P.T. Barnum and Moses Kimball, ‘mastered the rhetoric of moral elevation, scientific instruction and cultural refinement in presenting their attractions’. Whatever learning did in fact take place was almost accidental, for the dime museums were established as family recreational centres, not temples of learning. Artefacts were not purchased because of their educational merit but for their drawing power. In addition, many of the items on display had been faked, so what patrons ‘learned was often bogus as well. This method certainly drew a larger crowd but, due to Barnum’s superb powers of persuasion, it could also be argued that this was a contributing factor to the perception of the ‘performed object’ as a ‘dishonest object’.

Performance as the fictionalisation of objects

The reputation of the performed object as dishonest, mirrors the perception that by performing history it becomes inauthentic. Museum scholars and practitioners
remain divided as to how much fictionalisation is already a part of display in cultural institutions. Jackson and Rees Leahy concluded in their study on the authenticity of museum theatre by commenting that:

The resistance to theatrical performance implies a disavowal of the performative nature of museum displays and indeed museum visiting, while distrust of the fictionalizing effect of museum theatre is based on a refusal to acknowledge the role of the subjective, the arbitrary and the expedient in the construction and narration of history in the museum.\footnote{Jackson and Rees Leahy, “Seeing is for Real…? – Authenticity, Theatre and Learning in Museums,” 305.}

A factor contributing to marginalisation of artefacts in museum theatre is Hooper-Greenhill’s suggestions that ‘Curators and museum educators are often suspicious of each other’.\footnote{Ibid, 230.} Many museum staff feel that performance undermines the role of the curator, whose job is to inform the public on the objects in the collections. Sutton states that rivalry is unnecessary, as curators and museum theatre practitioners are actually working towards the same objectives.\footnote{Nigel Sutton, interview.} While curators are limited to the space on a label, performers are able to expand the key information and tease it out through the medium of performance. Sutton emphasises the importance of performers working with curators and liaising with all relevant museum staff during the process of creating a performance.\footnote{Ibid.}

Lowenthal uses the term ‘faction’ as a means of emphasising the frequently overlapping characteristics of fact and fiction in historical interpretations of the past. He underlines the importance of looking at both the virtues and limitations of all interpretive techniques.\footnote{David Lowenthal, The Past is a Foreign Country, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 229.} Paul Dukes defines faction as ‘carefully researched historical matter ... [that fits into] imaginative reconstruction of the past’ and adds his
own hybrid term, ‘fictory’, defined as ‘scholarly history infused by a fiction spirit’.

Crang questions whether achieving authenticity in historical performance is quixotic, indicating that it is somewhat idealist and naïve. Prown pays close attention to the fiction of artefacts stating that he ‘explicate[s] objects ... as fictitious’, but moves on to say that the addition of narrative to object can result in deeper and more profound truths.

Curators are divided as to the usefulness of museum theatre, as some perceive the use of poetic licence as a gateway to compromising the integrity of historical sources. Jackson and Rees Leahy propose that ‘many museum professionals also resist the use of what they regard as an inherently fictionalizing medium of interpretation, which deflects learning away from the interpretation of material evidence’. This suggests that museum theatre can actually derail the museum’s mission statement and have a negative impact on learning in a museum. The notion of harlequins in hallowed halls undermines the long held tenets of ‘truth’ and ‘enlightenment’, which were values associated with the museum during the eighteenth century and it is this, rather than the ‘misinformation movement’ outlined in Chapter Two, that has resonated with the notion of authenticity within the contemporary museum.

Fiona Cameron and Sarah Kenderline comment on the fact that western museums are charged with acting as the custodians of ‘intellectual capital’. However, Tracy Davis undermines this suggestion by theorising that museums inherently superimpose a framework upon truth.

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447 Jackson and Rees Leahy, “Seeing is for Real...? – Authenticity, Theatre and Learning in Museums,” 305.
449 Tracy C. Davis, “Performing and the Real Thing in the Postmodern Museum,” The Drama Review 39, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 16.
custodians and interpreters of knowledge in the museum, foregrounds the argument that museum theatre is a form of fabrication. Words such as ‘artistic’, ‘interpretation’, ‘confabulation’, ‘imagination’, ‘creative’, ‘poetic licence’ and ‘re-creation’ can also be perceived as ‘forged’, ‘inauthentic’, ‘fabricated’, ‘artifice’, ‘fake’, ‘imitation’, ‘replica’ or ‘inaccurate’. However, it must be considered whether these words are mutually interchangeable, and whether a museum theatre performance can be imaginative, without being fictitious. At the heart of these uncertainties, lies the question of whether interpretation through performance undermines the actuality of the museum object.

Museum theatre practitioners view object-rich performance as an additional rather than competing strand to the museum experience. Sutton maintains that there is room for both confabulation and veracity in museum performance, but that it is the performer’s duty to make clear the intention and parameters of a performance to the audience. He uses his own practice as an example of the successful collaboration between performer/writer and museum staff through his performances at both the Powerhouse Museum (Sydney) and the National Museum (Canberra). Museum theatre does not fit into the same performance classification as historical re-enactment. It does not rely on a premise of exact chronology, re-creating people or re-doing an event. If these are not its objectives, non-adherence to them cannot be perceived as its undoing.

There is no universal format for developing museum theatre. Each practitioner makes their own decision on how to balance fact and narrative. While performer Sutton worked closely with curators to ensure that all objects were presented accurately with correct provenance, author of The Bog Man’s Daughter, Lipsky, writes of

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451 Nigel Sutton, interview.
the importance of ‘getting your [the audience’s] attention and reshaping the truth. That in a nutshell is what playwriting for museums is all about’.

Dowling Jr. references the term ‘factoid’ as one that has entered educational performance vernacular. He considers it to be ‘a fact in a sound bite format, something you hope people will retain after you say it’. He emphasises that museum performance can be a useful tool to support the retention of information by the museum visitor. Object-rich museum theatre is frequently successful in linking information to objects as it provides a memory hook. If the difference between fact and fiction is not clearly defined, re-encountering a similar object may cause the false fact to resurface and to be passed on. In the introduction to their book for the Performing, Learning and Heritage Project, Jackson and Kidd write that ‘exhibiting actions rather than objects re-complicates our relationship with what is authentic’.

Performing replica objects

Davis theorises that visitors’ understanding of ‘real’ is highly significant in their interpretation of museum artefacts. Much to the dismay of many younger visitors, many objects in museums, particularly the dinosaur bones, are not ‘real’. They are in fact sanctioned plaster casts or replicas created from original remains that belong to other museums. Many skeletons are comprised of bones from a variety of different dinosaurs mounted together. The reality is that there are simply not enough full dinosaur skeletons to go around. When confronted with a giant stuffed anaconda with beady glass eyes wound against a tree trunk in the atrium of the Melbourne Museum, children will often turn to their parents and ask the most uttered sentence within the

452 Jon Lipsky, “Playwriting for Museums or: How to Make a Drama out of Slime Molds,” in Case studies in Museum, Zoo and Aquarium Theatre, 9.
453 Dan Dowling Jr., interview.
455 Davis, “Performing the Real Thing in the Postmodern Museum,” 15.
confines of a museum: ‘Is it real?’ Before even attempting to establish whether museum theatre is able to give an authentic portrayal of museum objects, it is important to determine whether objects are able to authenticate themselves. Benjamin postulates that objects with discernable lifelines are more valuable than their replica counterparts. His discussion of authenticity as a means of facilitating accurate object testimonies is an important consideration for object-rich museum theatre.

In *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur*, the objects are careful to identify themselves as either genuine artefacts, such as the Kakahni, replicas like the sabre-toothed cat’s skull or models such as the Deinonychus puppet. Both the Cape Paterson claw and the sabre-toothed cat’s skull explain to the audience that they are plaster casts of the originals that are displayed in overseas museums. Towards the end of the performance, when Harry Call is drawing his final conclusions on what his specimen actually is, he invites a child from the audience to hold it. As the truth about the ‘tooth’ is revealed, the Cape Paterson claw suggests that in some ways he is better than the original. Harry challenges this notion by asking ‘how can a replica be better than the original?’ to which the claw explains that he can be handled, whereas the original is too scientifically valuable to be put at risk of damage. This is put into effect at the end of the performance when Harry invites the children to come up and handle the claw before they make their way to the *Evolutions* gallery to see the (replica) skeletons of carnivorous dinosaurs.

While Deinonychus is clearly a puppet operated by a puppeteer in a blackout suit, he is also a version of a museum object. It is an imagined replica that has been constructed in response to what palaeontologists have been able to discover from fossils or coprolites. In many ways, objects in museum theatre are also puppeteered

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Benjamin, “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”
and ventriloquised if they are moved, handled, voiced or positioned in a particular context. In the case of *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur*, the only object handled is the replica ‘claw’ and its movement around the stage for comparison to other objects helps the audience determine its actual identity. The claw undergoes a series of transformations and mistaken identity. It is initially introduced to the audience as a missing dinosaur tooth with its photograph projected onto the back wall of the set. As the story progresses it is mistaken for coprolite, found to be dissimilar to Deinonychus’ teeth through a process of comparison, identified as a claw and then treated as a handling object manipulated by the hands of visitors.

While authenticity is inherently valued in museums, many actors interviewed for this thesis questioned whether using ‘the real thing’ was indeed as important in a theatrical context where the suspension of disbelief was an agreed contract between performer and audience members. Brownson of Platform 4 Theatre Company at the National Railway Museum in York posed an alternative viewpoint that considered the difficulties of obtaining authentic objects and being bound to only telling the stories based around accessible objects. She felt that in a theatrical setting it was often more important to tell the story and illustrate it with replicas, and that audiences did not really care about whether the props used were authentic:

> I do think that sometimes people can get too precious about things being purely original. If people aren’t *au fait* with a subject, if they just see something like what happened, it works. We find that the story is just as relevant, even if the things aren’t massively authentic. It’s about what we’re saying and doing, rather than what we’re using and wearing.\(^{457}\)

\(^{457}\) Gillian Brownson, interview.
In the context of the National Railway Museum, the stage setting comprised trains that had been retired from service and were now relics of a past era of transport. In many performances, the trains did not become much more than backdrops and some simple interpretive objects were used to interface with the artefacts of the period.

**Museum theatre as hybrid**

The hybrid nature of museum theatre contributes to the often uneasy relationship between scholars and practitioners when examining whether performance is a type of fictionalisation. A hybrid is by definition a whole, comprised of two seemingly incongruous parts. Museum theatre pairs the theatre (the domain of the imagination), with museums (repositories of fact). Like Barnum’s ‘Feejee Mermaid’, it is an impossible creature and difficult to classify. The duality of museum theatre is evident in the terminology and descriptive language associated with writings on the genre that are often peppered with hybrid terms such as *edutainment* and *curactor*. While new fields require new language to describe them, museum theatre is a genre that has existed in a variety of forms since the sixteenth century, but only institutionalised in the last forty. Consequently, it relies on these hybrid terms to describe its past, present and future attributes.

The term *edutainment*, is often synonymous with museum theatre and used to critique what is perceived as its ‘pseudo-educational’ characteristics. It is chiefly used to position education as a subsidiary aspect of the museum theatre genre, subservient to the greater objective of entertainment. While the term *edutainment* is predominantly used by critics of museum theatre, it has also been used by practitioners who believe that it does not necessarily have to be interpreted negatively, as museum theatre can comfortably straddle both entertainment and education. Correspondingly, the negative attitudes propounded by critics mirror those targeted at Barnum’s nineteenth
century American Museum, which relied on presenting spectacle to the public rather than the dignified approach favoured by the academy museums of the period.

Another term coined by Watt is ‘scienticians’, which draws together the notion of the scientist and the magician, and points to a performance that incorporates scientific knowledge with the desire to amaze an audience. While this presentation potentially dilutes the purpose of both professions, combined it results in a spectacle that draws its viewer towards the excitement of science education. The term ‘performatation’ was coined by Caleo and Anthony Balla, to define an educational presentation delivered in a performative manner. This has also become a way by which museum theatre advocates have been able to implement attributes of museum performance into institutions opposed to it. A performatation adheres more to the structure of a presentation and relies on the use of the performer-as-presenter to bring it to life.

In his discussion of living history performance, Scott Magelsson considered the term ‘fabulation’ as an appropriate word to describe the pairing of history and narrative through performance. In many ways, the language of the genre echoes the hybridity of its form. This duality is also conveyed in Lowenthal’s coinage of the term ‘faction’, which marries fact to fiction in equal ratio and propounds the idea that no fact is unadulterated by narrative.

Conclusion

This chapter provides several explanations as to how the process of developing performance contributed to the marginalisation of the object in museum theatre. Overall it concludes that the preference of subject over object is generally not intentional. The complexities of interpreting artefacts and converting object into

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64 Public Programs Officers, Melbourne Museum, Australia, 2008.
65 Magelssen, Living History Museums: Undoing History through Performance, 55.
performance means that it is simply easier to develop performance from character and subject. An historical figure translates naturally into a character. An historical event transitions neatly into a narrative situation.

The key advantage of subject-based over object-rich museum performance is economic. Museum theatre based on more generic topics or associated with significant figures has more flexibility for re-use. Additionally it is not bound to the institution in which it was developed. The time and money put into research and development of performance is paid off over a longer period, representing a better investment. Shows are able to exist after the closure of a temporary exhibition or when a permanent collection is re-curated.

Object-rich museum theatre can be marginalised by the limitations of interpreting specific objects owned by a museum. As a consequence of engaging with collection objects, the show cannot travel or be performing in other institutions unless the collection object is also moved. Performers get around this by performing with replica objects or photographs of the originals, as used in *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur*; however, sometimes the impact of the performance is lost when performed out of context.

Despite the limitations of the genre, the findings of Chapters Two, Three and Four suggest that object-rich museum theatre invests more strongly in developing an emotional relationship between collection and visitor. This chapter surmises that one of the key reasons for the limited amount of museum theatre developed from objects is the marginalisation of the museum object itself.
Chapter Six: How does the design of museum galleries contribute to the marginalisation of the object in museum theatre?

Introduction

This chapter examines the spatial dynamics of the case studies and considers how the spatial design of exhibitions contributes to the marginalisation of the object in museum theatre. It outlines and analyses the operational and spatial problems that make gallery performance difficult. This leads onto a discussion of whether the obstacles of enacting shows in exhibition spaces has led to them being presented in parts of the museum with no connection to the collection. Further discussion considers whether distancing performance from an object has the effect of subordinating its presence in museum theatre. Additionally, this chapter considers whether the design of exhibitions contributes to the disconnection between gallery and performance, thereby making it easier to invest in subject-based rather than object-driven performances.

Are museums theatres?

Academic and practitioner discourse has often turned to the debate of whether museum theatre is an appropriate form of interpreting collections. Jane Malcolm Davies controversially proposed that ‘museums are not theatres’, emphasising that performance is not traditionally part of a museum’s mission statement or directive.660

The design of exhibitions with places for both performers and audience members to congregate supports the overarching mission of creating museum theatre with strong links to the collection. While Malcolm-Davies’ statement can be interpreted as a criticism of using performance as an interpretive tool in museums, it also opens a

wider point of discussion, namely that museums have not been designed for performance.

More recent movements in theatre practice have examined the advantages and challenges of devising and presenting work in spaces not designed for performance. These include the genres of site-specific performance, where a performance could be enacted in a non-theatrical space such as a factory, church or shop. By performing in situ within galleries, object-rich museum theatre lends itself to a reading through the lens of environmental theatre. Environmental theatre, as defined and discussed by Schechner, addresses the issues of using both theatrical and non-theatrical spaces divergently and successfully for performance. He differentiates between traditional and environmental theatre by their ability to transmit a sense of dimension to the viewer. As an environment, the exhibition space is far from neutral, as it contains a range of stimuli designed to evoke emotion. A theatre stage aims to be a blank canvas onto which practitioners can illustrate their stories and emotions. As theatre director Brook points out:

One of the inherent and inevitable aspects of an empty space is the absence of scenery ... If there is scenery, the space is not empty, and the mind of the spectator is already furnished.

While the neutral space within a theatre has the advantage of being a more controlled environment, Schechner’s comment about the furnished mind resonates with Susan Pearce’s work on how visitors inscribe the collection objects with their own cultural meaning. The presentation of museum theatre in the ‘furnished’ space of the gallery adds a different layer of meaning in comparison to shows set in black box

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462 Peter Brook, There are no Secrets: Thoughts on Acting and Theatre, (London: Methuen Drama, 1995), 25.
463 Susan Pearce, “Interpreting Objects and Collections” 10.
environments. This idea was further teased out in an interview with Gray from the Australian War Memorial, who suggests that it is the ‘loaded’ space of a gallery that helps audience members take the message of the performance away from the museum.  

Museum theatre practitioners face challenges of creating and enacting a work in an inherently non-theatrical space that already has shape and structure. This is a characteristic that environmental and site-specific performance genres embrace and incorporate into their performance. Schechner suggests that traditional theatre is inherently two dimensional, ‘a kind of propped up painting’, while the techniques of using non-theatrical spaces, such as moving audiences out of their traditionally designated viewing spaces and encouraging plot-altering audience interaction gives environmental theatre its third dimension.

Bachelard refers to the ‘felicitous space’, an area suited to the circumstances. Interviews with practitioners revealed that performance is most often developed after the exhibition has been designed and installed. Due to issues of design, occupational health and safety, conservatorship and, most commonly, the curatorial voice, exhibitions rarely have the flexibility to make physical changes to displays. Consequently, the performer must shape the performance to the environment, rather than expecting the space to be adapted to the performance.

This chapter demonstrates the many ways that exhibition halls are not designed for performance and can inhibit the use of objects in museum theatre. Indeed, I propose that museums should not be treated in the same way as theatres. Museum theatre is a different genre of performance and the space of the museum is not the

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464 Andrew Gray, interview.
466 Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, xxxv.
467 Tessa Bridal, interview; Eric Olson, interview.
same as that of a stage. The rules for audience and performer are different in the museum and these should be clearly defined in order to give museum theatre legitimacy as a genre of both applied theatre and an interpretive tool of museums.

In the contemporary museum, there is a growing trend among exhibition designers to embrace and enhance the naturally theatrical aspects of museums when shaping spaces. Casey argues that museums are subliminally primed for performance due to the close connections between exhibition design and theatrical sets:

Museums have always been elaborate stagings ... taking conscious account of its performative dimensions can open up the museal experience, rather than simply disrupt the closed contemplative circuit and so diminish viewer relations with objects.  

Casey suggests that the museum space is inherently theatrical and constantly making use of theatrical conventions such as the proscenium arch, which ‘separates the audience from the action, but also emphasises the notion that the action has begun before the viewer enters the space and will continue after they leave’. In can also be argued that museums have always been influenced by theatrical practice, drawing on dramatic conventions such as set design and using dioramas to present information in context.

Advocates for museum theatre focus on the theatricality of museums in order to build support for performance as a legitimate form of interpretation. Stephen Greenberg argues that: ‘a museum space is primarily a performance space and as such requires the same kinds of thought and perception’. Museum theatre practitioners need to draw on theatrical convention, but essential performing in the museum

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685 Ibid, 82.
environment carries with it new rules and regulations. Decker reasons that performances presented in museums are similar to legitimate theatre productions, and that it is the ‘the venue or place that differs’. While this view acknowledges that the performance venues of museum theatre are different to those of traditional theatre, it does not make enough of the marked dissimilarities in form and function between the theatrical and museum environments. This is instrumental in shaping the development and enactment of gallery-based museum theatre. During the fieldwork component of this research, many key informants identified the design of museum exhibitions as an obstacle to performing in and among collections. This chapter categorically examines these obstacles in order to determine to what degree the design of exhibition spaces can discourage the use of collection objects in performance.

Spatial dynamics of performing in museums

Fleming emphasises the importance of museum practitioners as being ‘spatially aware’. Sophie Psarra too submits that the layout of exhibitions has the power to shape visitor experience. An understanding of the effect of exhibition design on audience and the interpretation of object is important to both the museum theatre performer and playwrights.

The challenges posed by performing in a pre-constructed environment are outlined by both Lefebvre and Soja in their investigations of thirdspace. The term was coined by Lefebvre’s need to produce terminology for reading, decoding or describing the shapes of socially produced spaces. Museums align with Lefebvre’s definition of

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471 Bridal, Exploring Museum Theatre, 3.
472 Nigel Sutton, interview; Eric Olson, interview; Daina Harvey, interview.
‘produced spaces’ given the deliberation and calculation of every part of the gallery.475

As an inherently trans-disciplinary term, it can be applied to both museums and performance. According to Soja, the first space is ‘focused on the “real” material world’.476 This is the world of the artefact. The second space ‘interprets this reality through “imagined representations of spatiality”’, a concept that can be applied to the function of the exhibition.477 Thirdspace is the dimension that can be applied to the real and the interpretation. It ‘draws selectively and strategically from the two opposing categories to open a new alternative’.478 The treatment of museum theatre as an event produced in thirdspace highlights the issues of performing an object in an exhibition environment. It draws on the concepts of authenticity versus performability as outlined in the previous chapter.

How does space shape content?

Theatre theorists Christofis and Monaghan were commissioned to undertake an evaluation report of the new Melbourne Museum building prior to its opening in 2000.479 The objective of this report was to evaluate the potential of the new museum building as a performance venue. Christofis and Monaghan’s findings supported the use of performance as an interpretive and educational tool, and sought to identify which spaces would be the most suitable for museum theatre.480 The employment of a consultant to assess the performance potential of a museum during its construction points to a willingness to see performance as an integral part of the museum experience rather than an add-on. However, it is important that this same foresight is applied during the design of exhibitions, in addition to the construction of the

475 Lefebvre, The Production of Space.
476 Soja, Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other Real-and-Imagined Places, 6.
477 Ibid.
478 Ibid, 5.
479 Christofis and Monaghan, “Performance at the Melbourne Museum.”
480 Ibid, 32.
exhibition hall. Fortunately, while museum buildings are built for longevity, galleries are constantly being redeveloped and therefore can be more easily adapted.

Christofis and Monaghan emphasise the development of exhibition spaces and themes as the instigator of quality gallery performance. They note that performance potential is most successfully gleaned from the way the visitors use the space. While the fields of spatial syntax and visitor studies have amassed research on how to predict visitor movements, the personal connections to the objects and themes of an exhibit can often produce unexpected results. Within the report, Christofis and Monaghan compile a list of enabling strategies for carrying out their recommendations for performances. They also identify several categories of museum theatre recommended as suitable for the Melbourne Museum venue. They are as follows:

**Integrated:** the performance forms an integral part of the exhibition or gallery as originally devised. An ‘integrated performance’ may relate to one part or the whole of an exhibition.

**Complementary:** the performance stands apart from the exhibition (whether by concept or location) but is related to it in some clearly defined way.

**Peripheral:** the performance is not related to any particular exhibition, but may engage generally with the nature or concept of museums, or with some aspect of a museum.

**Separate:** there is no relationship to the museum or its exhibitions at all; the museum is then functioning as a venue for hire.

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481 Ibid. 5.
482 Ibid.
483 Ibid. 14.
Of the four categories described by Christofis and Monaghan, integrated performance best complements the objectives of object-rich museum theatre. When applying Monaghan’s classifications to the case studies, the shows at the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis are clearly supported by the category of integrated performance as they were developed alongside the exhibitions. This is the only case study where this practice was used. While *The Bog Man’s Daughter*, the performances of the Platform 4 Theatre Company, and *Robbie the Rat* were not part of the original gallery design, I argue that they too fall into the category of integrated performance as the shows were performed in situ, in a manner sympathetic to the design of the exhibition. *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* contains some elements of both complementary and peripheral performance as it was performed away from the exhibit and based on the concepts of ‘interpretation, preservation and collection’ rather than a specific exhibition. *The Dora Fay Davenport Show* can be defined as a complementary performance. While it was located away from the exhibition, it engaged with both the themes and objects in the Australia Gallery. Using interpretive objects that mirrored those on display in the galleries forged a stronger connection between the collection, performers and audience.

Christofis and Monaghan’s definition of separate performance alludes to my definition in earlier chapters of performance that occurs in museums but is not built from the objects and themes within. As this is not the focus of this thesis, none of the case studies subscribe to this definition. Christofis and Monaghan write that:

> The usefulness of any of these modes in the museum will be determined by the particular nature of each gallery and individual exhibitions, and their physical limitations. It is the challenge offered by each interpretive task, each

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484 Ibid.
environment, that will get the creative juices flowing. It is from the inside of each concept and physical structure that the more beneficial and lasting performance ideas will germinate.485

This assertion emphasises the ways in which the design of exhibition spaces can either limit or enhance the development of a museum theatre performance. Instead of focusing on the problematic outcomes of working within a constrictive space, Christofis and Monaghan identify them as a creative challenge inherent to the unique characteristics of museum theatre.

The limitations of spaces to accommodate both performer and audience entails that it is operationally easier to develop peripheral and separate types of museum theatre, rather than those that fit into the classification of integrated performance, as these do not need to be presented within the exhibition space. In this chapter I argue that the marginalisation of the artefact in museum performance is strongly influenced by the physical distance between the exhibition object and the performance. As the proximity of object to performance widens, the emphasis on the artefact diminishes.

**The case studies**

The following sections provide a brief summary of the different ways each case study uses the museum space. These are accompanied by diagrams illustrating the movements of performers and visitors during the performance and their proximity to the artefacts featured in the show. The purpose of these diagrams is to chart the spatial dynamics of each performance as they are analysed throughout the chapter in relation to their unique spatial syntax.

485 Ibid, 6.
The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur

_The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur_ was performed in what is theatrically termed ‘a black box’ performance space. This definition relates to a theatrical environment where there is no visual reminder of the real world. The space was darkened with no visual clues to its context aside from the set and props used in the show. The stage area was adjacent to a large temporary exhibition hall and the audience was separated from the hall with heavy, black curtain divides to prevent sound spill. The action was presented primarily on the stage area with some movement into the floor level performance area by Harry Call and the Deinonychus puppet. The audience of children and their families was seated on the floor and the stage area was raised to create better lines of sight for smaller viewers. The movement of both Harry and the Deinonychus puppet into the audience area undermines the safety of the theatrical experience. It provokes the notion that museum objects are in temporary stasis and could be reanimated at any time. Breaking through the proscenium is akin to a stuffed specimen leaping from its plinth or a skeleton exploding from its perspex case. The visible fourth wall of the stage is imbued with the same properties of a viewing case and, by breaking the rules, the viewers begin to feel the dangers of reactivating static objects.
V for Victory

Many of the shows at the National Railway Museum, including *V for Victory*, were set on a decommissioned railway platform in front of a decommissioned train. Minimal seating was provided in the form of railway benches facing the train. Visitors either sat or stood in the space behind the bench. The movement of the performance was quite localised. Brownson, the actor presenting *V for Victory* remained within the area in front of the railway carriage, occasionally climbing on the train to demonstrate some parts of its mechanism and the duties she was charged with carrying out. The audience remained stationary during the performance.

The exhibition cases and other large exhibits were presented in the main areas of the railway station, which had been redesigned as a series of exhibition halls. These

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Figure 1: Spatial map of *The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur* set, Melbourne Museum.

Diagram by Cam Wilson.
were adjacent to the platforms and ensured that audiences needed to move onto the platform in order to commit to viewing the performance.

![Spatial map of the V for Victory set, National Railway Museum](image)

**Figure 2:** Spatial map of the *V for Victory* set, National Railway Museum

The Dora Faye Davenport Show

*The Dora Faye Davenport Show* was also presented in a black box space. There was no interaction with the outside world and, until the end of the show, the museum outside the door ceased to exist. *The Dora Faye Davenport Show* stage was pre-produced for television and radio broadcasting, and the performance was built around the existing space. The audiences remained seated during the production, but were invited to engage with the set at the conclusion of the performance. The doors of the television studio could be locked to protect the set while it wasn’t being used. Sutton explained that in the initial stages of planning *The Dora Faye Davenport Show*, the idea had been to have the set as a stand-alone exhibition when it was not being used. The opening parts of the set such as the Bex coffee table, refrigerator and oven would

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487 Ibid.
488 Ibid.
have housed objects behind perspex glass for visitors to peruse at their leisure. This did not eventuate due to costs and the extra administrative work involved with using collections.

Troubled Times

*Troubled Times* is a performance that inhabits many different operational spaces in the museum including a street scene, interpretive rooms and the educational area outside the gallery. The majority of the action takes place in the indoor re-created streetscape of Kirkgate. Cade moves sequentially down the street, allowing students to engage with each shopfront as he weaves a narrative around them. His movements are influenced by the dynamic of the school group and also by avoiding other museum visitors. Some of Cade’s observations take place in awkward nooks such as the poverty-stricken alley where he lives, and also inside shops that were limited in their space, causing some students to observe the performance from just outside the

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489 ibid.
doorway. The placement of figures on Figure 4 shows Cade directing the students’ attention towards both himself and the objects he is interpreting.

![Figure 4: Spatial map of the Troubled Times set, York Castle Museum](image)

Figure 4: Spatial map of the Troubled Times set, York Castle Museum

The Bog Man’s Daughter

_The Bog Man’s Daughter_ was enacted within the _Bog_ exhibition as part of both the content and interpretation relating to Irish bogs. The movement of the piece is fairly sedentary for a gallery performance, as the audience seating is clearly prescribed and it is the performer who moves between the set and a nearby exhibit. The show operated as a theatrical piece enacted in situ but with the constraints of a designated performance space. Some audience members move into the space during performance as they are asked to assist in the process of digging peat.

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490 Ibid.
Figure 5: Spatial map of *The Big Man’s Daughter* set, Museum of Science, Boston ⁴⁹⁻¹
Robbie the Rat

Robbie the Rat was a unique example of gallery performance, as it did not limit the audience interaction with exhibitions to one exhibition hall. Instead, Robbie led audiences through several galleries, providing opportunities for discussion on chronology and to compare and contrast the material culture of Australian history. As Robbie moved around the gallery, he stopped at designated exhibits in order to lead a character-driven discussion of the objects in relation to their representation of Australian history and his personal interpretation or association with them. As Robbie stopped, the audience congregated around him, arranging themselves in order to maximise their view of the exhibit. Other visitors to the exhibition who had not arranged to attend the performance were welcome to join the group (space permitting).

Figure 6: Spatial map of the Robbie the Rat set, National Museum of Australia\textsuperscript{492}

\textsuperscript{492} Ibid.
The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis: The Power of Children and Take me There: Egypt

The performance areas in the Children's Museum of Indianapolis operate on the concept of a room within the exhibition. Figure 7 shows how this style of design can be used to create spaces that are open and closed, full and empty. The diagrams show Ruby Bridges' classroom in the Power of Children exhibition. The classroom sits inside a room located within the exhibition. Performances take place several times a day and are advertised on a sign outside the room. After gathering an audience, the performer closes the classroom doors to create a quiet space. This same technique is used in Ryan White’s room, Anne Frank’s secret annex and the Egyptian house in the Take Me There: Egypt exhibition. The advantages of this arrangement were that it cut back on background exhibition noise, allowed an intensity of performance that would not have been possible in the distracting environment of the gallery and allowed visitors to visit a place outside the museum through the suspension of disbelief.

The Take me There: Egypt gallery is set up as a contemporary Egyptian street, providing visitors the opportunity to go into shops and explore public spaces. The audience is gathered by the performer from the street exterior of the house. By moving through the front door they enter into a more realistic representation of Egyptian everyday life and divorce themselves from the illusion-breaking conventions of the museum outside. Once behind the closed door, they have entered into a contract with the performer to participate in the illusion and to stay for the duration of the performance. The added benefit of a closed stage is that participants do not feel that they are on show for non-participating visitors. They are inducted into a new world and are able to engage with the scenarios presented by the actors with less feelings of self-consciousness.
The performance area within the Ruby Bridges story is a reconstruction of the classroom where she became the sole African American student to be integrated into a white school during the civil rights movement. As a result of all the racial tensions during the integration process, white parents withdrew their children from Ruby's class, leaving her in an insular learning environment with only her teacher for company. The performance is facilitated in the style of a lesson by a fictional friend of Ruby's. As the performance progresses, the viewers are alerted to the significance of the schoolroom furniture and how it represented many of the challenges faced by Ruby in her lonely educational environment. The audience is seated at the school desks that fill the room and face the blackboard. However, they are reminded that in Ruby's time only one desk was filled. On the right side of the room there is a cupboard where Ruby, in response to the stress of her situation, used to hide her lunch instead of eating it. The learning aids around the walls of the schoolroom, such as maps and spelling charts, speak of a homogenised educational experience in conflict with a marginalised one. The space inside the performance room supports the use of interpretive objects and theatrical props; however, this is complemented by the use of authentic artefacts in the exhibition outside the sliding doors.

Each of the performance areas in the Power of Children exhibition communicates the different nuances of space. Anne Frank's story is told inside the secret annex where she and her family hid from the Nazis. The secret, hidden aspect of the annex is effectively mirrored by the closing of the door to separate the performance from the exhibition. Ruby Bridges' classroom is a public space made controversial through the issues of racial equality. It also moved from being a public space to a private one inhabited only by Ruby and her teacher. Ryan White's bedroom was a private space that has become public through its inclusion in the Power of Children exhibition. It has
been recreated using his possessions and furniture as objects like this dictate a personal life story. Unlike the Anne Frank and Ruby Bridges’ performance spaces where visitors can touch and interact with the objects and set, Ryan's possessions are sealed behind perspex with a central area allocated for performer and audience.

![Space map of the Power of Children exhibition set, Children’s Museum of Indianapolis](image)

**Figure 7: Spatial map of the Power of Children exhibition set, Children’s Museum of Indianapolis**

**Operational issues of museum theatre**

When interviewed, Harvey spoke of the unique characteristics of the museum as a place of performance and how, as a programs manager, she needed to be aware of the operational issues involved in commissioning and rolling out performance programs. Key exhibition issues related to respecting the needs of all visitors using

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493 Ibid.
494 Dana Harvey, interview.
the space, the danger of bottlenecks in exhibition areas that blocked traffic flow, audience circulation and dealing with competing exhibits.195

My own experiences dealing with the operational issues in gallery performances related to a communication breakdown between programs and curatorial staff. While working at the Melbourne Museum in 2008, the performance group ‘Bloomsday in Melbourne’ performed their annual tribute to Irish author James Joyce by enacting his novel *Ulysses* as an interpretation of the objects in the Melbourne Museum. This particular performance proved to be a good example of the obstacles of creating object-rich museum theatre, as it revealed the challenges of interacting with objects, external performance programming and coordinating an audience of eighty through several different galleries. The script called for the actors to interact with a selection of permanent exhibits relating to Joyce’s original text. One of these was a permanent display of taxidermy husky dogs that had been situated in the entrance hall of the museum for many years. In this case, the huskies were removed without warning from their case the evening before the performance. Several days later, they were back from the preparator’s department where they had been sent for cleaning.

The Bloomsday performance revealed that interfacing with objects in this environment is only possible with the cooperation of many different departments and it never occurred to me to send out an internal memo asking for a permanent exhibit to remain in situ. As a result, the huskie exhibit could not be used during the performance. This experience emphasised the need for good inter-departmental communication, but also acknowledges that even permanent collections can be a fluid part of the museum experience. Fragile objects are regularly rotated and returned to storage to prevent damage. Others are on loan from other cultural institutions. From

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195 ibid.
an operational perspective, this can influence which artefacts are chosen for performance and whether the show will be permanent or temporal.

Harvey also emphasised the multi-purpose nature of museums, reminding that “The theatre piece is part of a much larger environment with other activities designed to attract the visitor’s attention.” Newer styles of curatorship and an understanding of the power of interactive learning have transformed the exhibition environment. A performer may be competing against a recorded dinosaur roar, a multimedia presentation and visitor-activated buttons, not to mention the general white noise generated by visitors. While the contents of these interpretive displays can often enhance a performance designed for the gallery, additional sound is often distracting rather than complementary to the performance. As multimedia displays are part of the curatorship and often timed on a loop, they generally cannot be stopped for the duration of the show. It is important that museum theatre practitioners do not perform against the grain of these elements, but rather pre-empt and incorporate them into their enactments. Schechner’s attitude to site-specific performance is that ‘Anything that happens in the theatre during the performance time is part of the performance.’ This same philosophy is equally applicable to gallery based museum theatre.

A primary concern of both curatorial and public programs staff, when considering the development of gallery performance, is how the space will impact the exhibition space when it is not being used. The logistics of this are often the grounds for performing in black box spaces, as with The Dora Fay Davenport Show and The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur.

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496 Ibid.
497 Ibid.
498 Ibid.
499 Ibid.
500 Schechner, Environmental Theatre, 84.
Performance [is] an effective way of adding fresh and responsive interpretation to jaded galleries ... But their temporal nature is also their main shortcoming.  

One of the issues is, when we’re not using it as a theatre space, what is it going to be? So it has to be a space that can work when you have theatre and when you don’t ... One of the worries is, if you built a theatre space, without much else, would it look empty when it wasn’t being used?  

In these statements, Lawrence Fitzgerald and Harvey identify the problems of building places for performances in museums. Unlike media presentations that run on a continuous loop, live theatre is unpredictable and needs to be heavily staffed. Transient shows such as Robbie the Rat were designed so that they didn’t require a permanently set-up performance space. The audience was kept in constant motion. Troubled Times used this same technique but also used immersive spaces such as the set of a Victorian schoolroom to seat children for some parts of the performance. The use of this type of space had the advantage of allowing students to rest, thereby avoiding museum (theatre) fatigue. It also allowed Cade to address the students using a different spatial setup with room to change character and guide student learning on a blackboard. Additionally, by populating the schoolroom, the student audience were contributing to the ambiance of the exhibition.  

During the fieldwork for this thesis, it became apparent that the solution to overcoming operational issues of gallery shows was to create a performance space that becomes an exhibit when it is not being used and consequently does not resonate with the absence of performers or performance. At the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis the performance spaces are built into the galleries and, as performance is considered...
to be part of the core business of the museum, the programming staff begin working with the curators and designers from the very inception of a gallery. This process has developed over time and an interview with performer and exhibition manager Olsen charts the initial instruction of ‘find an available corner’ to a partnership with exhibition staff. The fact that Olsen had the dual responsibilities of performing and managing the exhibition space testified to the integrated nature of museum performance at the museum.

Manager Bridal explained that ‘Exhibits are developed with theatre interpretation in mind ... dedicated performance spaces are formed to create environments which link the performance piece to the subject matter of the exhibit’. The creation of ‘dedicated performance spaces’ effectively counteracts the obstacles to performing in galleries as discussed in this chapter. It also ensured that all performances were enacted in a space adjacent to the exhibitions that inspired them and did not become distanced from the collection.

The itinerant audience

When interviewed, Cade emphasised the fact that museum visitors do not necessarily visit cultural institutions to see performance. Often their attendance is incidental. Consequently, gallery performance must be designed for an itinerant audience. Shows are generally only twenty minutes in length, and during museum opening hours include only family-friendly content. The temporal nature of its presence and audience denotes that museum theatre practitioners must take on the challenge of providing unsolicited performances. Richter considers the implications of an incidental audience and how it can be compared to other ephemeral experiences:

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502 Eric Olson, interview.
503 Ibid.
504 Chris Cade, interview.
Generally the museum patron is not visiting the museum to see theatre. If the visitor is even aware that a museum has a particular theatre program, the viewing of theatre will only be part of the visitor’s experience ... Museum visitors can be compared to window shoppers. They are a transient audience, on the move; but sometimes they take a moment here or there to pause because their attention has been drawn to something of interest. Although visitors will stop to explore something, they rarely linger in one spot to await the start of a program. This means that the audience for a theatre piece is those individuals who are in the vicinity when the piece begins. As a result museum theatre should take its cue from street theatre.505

The relationship between the performer, audience and gallery space is also unequivocally compared to street performance by both Bridal and Harvey.506 Even if the performance space and times are clearly marked, the museum theatre practitioner, like the street performer, must often spruik (call out to passers by) in order to gather a substantial audience. This might involve making a general announcement in the gallery that a performance is about to begin, starting to use the space in a theatrical manner or even transforming into their character on stage. An already seated and silent audience is a luxury that the museum theatre performer is unaccustomed to. According to Harvey, being able to perform in the unpredictable environment of a museum gallery is a skill that museum theatre performers must learn and refine:

If you’ve got a skilled performer, you can make it work. Because they will gather people up and find the bigger areas. They can work with multimedia and make sure that they are still the centre of attention. It’s a bit of problem...

506 Tessa Bridal, interview; Dana Harvey, interview.
when you’ve got small gallery spaces. You’ve got to be patient; you can’t expect everybody to move somewhere too quickly.507

At the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis, the performers are charged with gathering an audience for a performance of Sebou in the *Take me There: Egypt* gallery. The performance times are advertised on a sign. In the moments leading up to the performance, an actor arrives to invite the museum visitors to a celebration that will shortly be taking place inside his house. The later use of the audience as part of the performance works as an advertisement for the next show. The shows, like those at the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis, were advertised, regularly performed and unticketed. This created an atmosphere charmingly synonymous with the busy and spontaneous nature of a railway station although it also meant that the performer had to begin the performance by rounding up an audience. Bridal observed the parallels between this system and that of street performers, whose shows are also not structured by a traditional performance space or a ticket-holding audience:

Performers need to be prepared for the fact that performing in museums resembles street theatre in many particulars, and they should receive support and training in how to handle difficult situations.508

In *The Bog Man’s Daughter*, Hughes would step into character before announcing the show and gathering her audience:

Most visitors do not realize it’s a stage until I announce the play, which I bellow in a loud brogue, “If you’d like to hear the tale of the bog man’s daughter, you can come over here and sit in the corner”. I always speak in the accent of this character before the show.509

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507 Daina Harvey, interview.
The announcement of intention to perform marked a transition in the gallery dynamic. Visitors were able to decide whether to become part of the audience, or continue as visitors. In her gathering speech, Hughes created an intermediary space between character and museum staff member. She refers to the Bog Man’s daughter in the third person, indicating that she has not yet fully entered into the role. This bridging period allows visitors to ask for further information about the performance before the illusion sets in.

Spruiking for audiences was also used at the Platform 4 Theatre Company. Brownson of the National Railway Museum gathered her audience as though she were providing a final warning for a train about to leave the station, ‘Final call, ladies and gentlemen, for V for Victory’310 When performing at the NRM, Cade also adopted a persona and a patter similar to that of a sideshow ringmaster:

Ladies and gentlemen of York: For your entertainment and education, for your delight and delectation, your instruction and your improvement, your enlightenment and edification, step this way for a short play in front of your very eyes!311

Once the audience had registered its interest in attending the performance, they were invited to sit on the railway benches positioned on the platform. The performance spaces for many of the Platform 4 Theatre Company shows were located between these benches. Performing on the platform created an intimate environment, but also limited the size of the audience. The advantage of having seating is that it mirrored the conventions of a traditional theatre and indicated subliminally to the audience that, by sitting, they were committing themselves to stay for the duration of the performance, which was generally only twenty minutes. Cade reflected on the

310 Gillian Brownson, interview.
differing needs of visitors: ‘They haven’t come to the theatre. They’ve come to see the museum collection. If this helps them, they stay. If it doesn’t, they don’t’.

After observing performances presented by Platform 4, it became apparent that the transient nature of the audience not only mimicked that of a railway station, but the informality of the performances encouraged a relationship between the performer and viewer that exceeded the length of the scripted performance. At the conclusion of each show, at least three or four museum visitors introduced themselves to the actors and shared memories of their wartime experiences or engaged them in a conversation about railway technology. Brownson states that, ‘More often than not, the audience will stay and talk to me about the experience they’ve just had, but also about their memories’.

The use of exhibition space entails that museum theatre can rarely be ‘ticketed’. Instead, it becomes a public performance where any museum visitor may watch or participate. Robbie the Rat operates on this principle, whereas performances presented in a closed theatrical environment have the option of charging an additional fee. To date, museum theatre practitioners have overcome many of these issues by utilising the conventions of theatrical performance such as advertising the performance, creating a designated space and using theatrical conventions to show when they will begin and conclude their performances (such as putting on a character’s jacket). Jackson suggests that by providing these markers ‘The rules of the game are in this way made clear, the experience is clearly framed and signalled as theatre, and the aesthetic distance generated allows for stress-free engagement in the subject matter of the event’. These speak to the importance of framing a theatrical event with signage.

512 Gillian Brownson, interview.
513 Ibid.
and advertising, and having clear-cut rules that underpin the theatrical etiquette of museum theatre.

**Sitting and standing**

Performers who enact shows in galleries need to be mindful that they understand and address the same issues made evident by visitor research, most notably those relating to museum fatigue. Both the length and content of the performance should adhere to Bitgood’s principle that museum fatigue can be brought on by both physical and mental tiredness.\(^{515}\) In *Robbie the Rat*, museum fatigue was combatted by keeping visitors on the move by utilising the space in a manner similar to a guided tour. By circulating through the exhibition halls visitors were exposed to a range of different stimuli and walked rather than stood. As *Troubled Times* was devised for primary-aged students, Cade was careful to ensure that there was a mixture of movement and sitting. After touring the Kirkgate street, the students spent some time sitting in an historical schoolroom, and then moved between the galleries and education centres to collect and sort information.

Tilden reflected on the nature of walking and standing in the museum environment, commenting that: ‘people are not conditioned ... to much reading while standing’.\(^{516}\) This would apply equally well to museum theatre audiences, as audience are not used to standing while watching performances. Kidd and Jackson discuss how the Performing Heritage Project revealed three tiers of positioning in museum theatre performances that affected the audience’s commitment to viewing the performance.\(^{517}\)

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[The first was] created by those who gathered before the performance began and chose to sit on the chairs ... displaying the behavioural characteristics of the traditional theatrical encounter. The second tier was created by people who stood to watch the performance, choosing to stay but wanting to keep their options open, or perhaps feeling compelled to stay by spatial restrictions. At the very back was the third tier: usually people who were prompted to join by hearing or seeing the performance after it had begun, displaying interest but less commitment, and treating (or perhaps being forced to treat) their encounter with the whole spectacle of the performance as if it were another display in the museum to be viewed in passing.\textsuperscript{318}

The dynamics of the spaces inhabited by the audience during the performance differ between institutions and presentations. In productions such as \textit{The Bog Man’s Daughter}, seats are located in the corner of an exhibition. Adults have access to stools and children can sit on the carpet. However, with tours such as \textit{Robbie the Rat}, directors must use their knowledge of the size and demographic of the target audience to determine whether they will all be able to see the objects being accentuated and be able to withstand the duration of the performance without access to seating. Dowling Jr. addressed the problem of physical elevation in the seating. In gallery performances ‘there’s no real space to lift someone above the audience.’\textsuperscript{319} Visitors who can’t see will inevitably become disengaged and may leave the audience.

As \textit{Troubled Times} was enacted as part of an education program, students had no choice but to stay and participate. In the darkness and tiered seating of the \textit{Dora show}, audiences obey the rules of traditional theatre and, as it was designed to appeal to an elderly demographic, many may fear injury while exiting the stands in the dark. The informality and younger demographic of \textit{The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur} allowed

\textsuperscript{318} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{319} Dan Dowling Jr., interview.
families to come and go with crying or disengaged children. It is sometimes the fear of becoming the spectacle that prevents an audience member leaving before the conclusion of the piece. A departing viewer of a street show, who leaves just before the hat is passed around, is often named and shamed by the performer as being ‘cheap’. Techniques such as this prevent other audience members leaving prematurely without making a financial contribution.

While museum theatre can, and should be, influenced by its environment, it also has the power to inscribe the space with its own narrative. To some, the ‘Tangled Destinies’ gallery of the National Museum of Australia is forever impregnated with the memory of a huge talking rat leading a group of visitors. A glance at the display of the problems of an overbearing rabbit population in Australia is softened by the recollection of his explanation that rabbits were an affordable source of meat for those ravaged by the depression. The performance narratives have resonated and remained permanently inscribed on the exhibits. The script of the performance is encoded in the objects themselves, acting as a prompt for information and context.

A point regularly raised by museum theatre practitioners is the presence or absence of a relationship with gallery curators when devising a performance. Narrative can be incorporated into the exhibition through interpretive panels or media, but extended by performers who can either enhance or contradict it. Sutton suggests that the potential conflict between curator and performer is simply an invisible circus and that the role of the museum theatre performer is to enhance the curation rather than contradict it. David Dernie champions the move away from ‘the linearity of the encyclopedic museum display’ towards a more narrative approach.

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that complements the intentions of museum theatre. As the gallery performer moves through the space, the objects become the punctuation of a greater story.

Using space syntax to understand the choreography of museum theatre

Pioneers in spatial theory, such as Edward Hall, recognise that space is a powerful entity that influences how humans move, behave and interact. Hall coined the term ‘proxemics’ to describe the patterns of behaviour people exhibited in public and private spaces that were influenced by a range of factors such as culture and the design of the urban environment. This same set of principles, when applied to the museum environment, provide valuable information on how visitors will respond to, or use, the space. Hillier contributed the key term ‘space syntax’ to the study of the museum and consequently initiated a language for describing museum space and a methodology for researching it. In the diagram below, Hillier and Tzortzis classify passages through exhibitions into four categories: a-space signifies a dead end; b-space is a passage that will lead to a dead end; c-space provides two options for direction; and d-space provides more than two options. An awareness of spatial syntax and the effect that each of these four types of space have on the visitor is particularly significant for a practitioner devising shows to be performed in a gallery environment. A-space avoids the problems of street theatre performances in which the audience encircles the performer. A large b-space may be ideal for a gallery performance in that the shape follows the comfort of a more traditional stage; however, it can also leave the actor trapped by the audience. This aspect entails that the actor has to move to the back of the audience in order to lead them forward. Dead ends and exhibitions

522 Ibid.
524 Ibid, 296.
with low capacity for flow through traffic often result in the performer having to constantly renegotiate their proximity to the audience and to move through the crowd so as to set a new course through the gallery. Schechner is derisive of the notion of dead space but perceives the space occupied by the audience as ‘a kind of sea through which the performers swim’. This recalls a gallery performance at Sydney’s Powerhouse Museum where bather-clad actors ‘swam’ through the space of the gallery like a school of fish, projecting new forms of movement onto the space.

Figure 8: Typology of spaces

When applied to the case studies, it is evident how these space types can restrict the performer’s ability to collect groups of visitors around an object for a significant period of time. *The Bog Man’s Daughter* is set in an a-space, as it is enacted in front of a wall. This dead-end ensures the audience cannot pass behind the performer, and the seating of the audience in front of her creates a pocket of space that is not easily infiltrated by other visitors. The exhibition spaces at the National Museum of Australia have been designed to avoid the use of a-spaces as they have the effect of blocking the flow of visitor traffic. Consequently, *Robbie the Rat* utilises mostly c- and d-
spaces, where ideas flow naturally onto each other and areas need not to be revisited. Sutton designed *Robbie the Rat* to respond to the dynamic spatial structures of the gallery. When he saw a bottleneck of people standing in front of a performed exhibit, he would often change the order of interpretation and revisit the exhibit when the crowd had cleared.\(^{271}\)

The design of *Troubled Times* complied with both the open and closed spaces of the Kirkgate exhibition street. Going into shops had the same effect of leading the audience into an *a*-space where turning the audience around and getting them to exit a small area interrupted the flow of the performance. Cade's solution to this was to enter the shops himself and present from the doorway while the audience remained outside. This same spatial pattern was represented in nooks representing laneways. The exhibition layout of a street formation created a *b*-space where Cade and his audience were able to move both forwards and backwards without any physical obstacles.

*V for Victory* positions its audience in a long, narrow space between a train and a passenger bench. This emulates the traditional human movement within a railway station, as the visitors are not mobile and view the action of the play from the same position as if waiting for a train. The actor worked within the pocket of space between the audience and the backdrop of the train. In the real world, train platforms constitute some elements of each spatial typology. When the platforms are empty of trains, the traveller’s movement is restricted to moving straight ahead. When trains are at the station, the traveller is able to move in a perpendicular fashion to either side. As a place of performance, the platform sat adjacent to the exhibits, creating a space with both *a* and *b* characteristics.

\(^{271}\) Nigel Sutton, interview.
The *Power of Children* and the *Take me there: Egypt* galleries of the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis were unique examples of spaces that could be transformed to accommodate performance. Both galleries included elements of *b-, c- and d*-spaces where visitors could move without obstacle around the exhibition. The flexible and non-prescriptive elements of space were testament to an understanding that children use museum space differently to adult visitors.\(^2\) The performance spaces were rooms with at least one sliding door that remained open while the room formed part of the exhibition. Some spaces, like Ryan White’s bedroom, had a sliding door in two points in the room so that visitors could enter and exit without turning around, thereby creating a *b*-space. Others, like the family room in Sebou provided the key entry point into the house set, which shaped it into an *a*-space. The signal to the audience that a performance was about to commence was the closure of the doors, creating a contained performance space. The operational benefits of formation were that the actor had created a ‘room within a room’ where audiences would not be distracted from sights or sounds emanating from the gallery. The actor did not need to speak over background noises or white noise. Additionally, the enclosed space helped visitors momentarily suspend their disbelief and become immersed in a space that was a bedroom, attic, living room or classroom. In many ways, the arrangement used by the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis provides an ideal solution to Harvey’s concern that unused show areas became dead spaces when not being performed in.\(^3\)

Despite the long relationship between performance and museums, as outlined in Chapter Two, exhibitions are rarely designed to provide operational space for both performer and audience. The spatial configurations of galleries are designed for constant movement of individuals and small groups with brief pauses in front of


\(^3\) Dana Harvey, interview.
exhibits. While the visitor is free to make their own movements, there is usually a curatorial narrative that leads visitors along a prescribed pathway. Abigail Hackett’s study of the movement of small children in museums stipulates that children traverse the space more spontaneously in a manner defined as ‘zigging and zooming’. Guided tours break up this pattern of movement by congregating larger groups of people in front of exhibits and pausing to make comment or tell a story. They are careful not to stay too long as to avoid creating bottlenecks of traffic or blocking the exhibit from the view of other visitors.

Performance in exhibition spaces are problematic because they cause a phenomenon defined by Schechner as ‘eruptions’, the effect of stopping and congregating in a transitional place. In plain terms, an eruption in a museum is the interruption of the flow of visitor floor traffic. Robbie the Rat and Troubled Times are both examples of performances that create eruptions in the exhibition environment. Robbie the Rat works in a non-linear gallery space, through which he traces his own path. His movements are not limited to one exhibition and consequently he is able to draw a narrative between galleries. His journey through the spaces can be broken up into linear movements and moments of congregation around exhibits. Troubled Times created patterns of congregation in the exhibition space as the audience stopped and gathered around the performer and the object of attention.

The technique of using a ‘room with in a room’ at the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis solves the problem of eruptions. The part of the museum being performed in is temporarily removed from the public exhibition space. In The Bog Man’s Daughter the eruption has been planned to minimise flow of exhibition traffic as

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531 Hackett, “Zigging and Zooming All over the Place: Young Children’s Meaning Making and Movement in the Museum.”
the performance takes place against a wall. The physical distance between the railway platform providing the set of *V for Victory* and other major exhibits ensures that eruptions are apart from the general exhibition area.

The application of the typology of space to gallery case studies provides a richer understanding of how difficult it can be to create pockets of performance space around exhibition objects. Kirschenblatt-Gimblett contends that museums have been designed to allow the objects to be performers, creating pockets of space for them to be centralised and visible, ‘A great instance of object performance, the museum stands at an inverse relationship to the theatre. In the theatre, spectators are stationary and the spectacle moves. In the museum, spectators move and the spectacle is still (until recently).’ Museum theatre performance inverts this spatial configuration by providing spectacles that move around and alongside their static object counterparts.

A key issue leading to the ease of developing complementary, peripheral or separate performances over integrated ones is the difficulty of finding spaces in galleries that can accommodate both performer and audiences. In order to achieve a strong connection with the collection, the artefacts featured in the show must be in direct line of sight.

One of the first things is moving a large group through the exhibition space, having space for them all to be around the object, basically just fitting them in ... You’ve got those sort of operational issues that can make it quite difficult at times, but in terms of advantages, the object is in context, you’re not looking at it out of context. It could be that the gallery is set up in a narrative way so you’ve got the chronological aspect to it and people can see

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where it fits in on the time scale. Or it might be sitting within the greater theme – so you might be helping them pull out those bigger themes.\textsuperscript{534}

Harvey’s comments underpin the key difficulty in performing object-rich museum theatre, namely that exhibitions are not built to accommodate both performer and audience around an exhibit. The analysis of performance content and spatial dynamics achieved through my field research combined with practitioner interviews has led to a theory that the design of exhibition spaces has a direct correlation to the subordinated role of the object in museum theatre.

Despite the operational issues, Harvey emphasises that the challenges of interpreting gallery objects through performance are outweighed by the value perceived by both staff and visitors.\textsuperscript{535} Performances like \textit{Robbie the Rat} had the advantages of getting visitors to consider objects in their original context and also their museum role. Audience members interacted with Robbie and also with each other. Psarra writes on this phenomenon by emphasising the importance of developing a route structure that allows visitors to maximise meaningful encounters with the exhibits and each other.\textsuperscript{536} Michel Foucault writes of the ‘hererotopia’ that is ‘capable of juxtaposing in a single real space several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible’.\textsuperscript{537} Robbie the Rat asks visitors to take leaps and bounds around the globe and also through time; however, all this is achieved with a level of ‘hypermediacy’, the awareness of the medium by its audience. Similarly, the use of performance space at the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis allowed visitors to engage in a transportative experience. The act of closing the doors of the space

\textsuperscript{534} Daina Harvey, interview.
\textsuperscript{535} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{537} Michel Foucault, \textit{Of Other Spaces}, (Heterotopias, 1967), accessed 2 February 2011, [www.foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/Foucault.heteroTopia.en.htm].
effectively severs the connection with the gallery and allows for a suspension of disbelief. The spaces become Ruby’s classroom, Ryan’s bedroom, Anne’s annex and an Egyptian home on the day of a Sebou. The reality is restored when the doors are reopened.

**How exhibition design effects the connection between object and performance**

The early examples of museum theatre provided in previous chapters suggest that even historically there has been a disconnection between the object and the performance. Theatrical spaces began to take shape in the dime museum in the form of lecture room environments that mirrored many of the spatial characteristics of traditional theatres. Existing documents relating to the lecture theatre at Barnum’s American Museum provide little evidence that performances were ever connected to the exhibitions, but that the theatre was predominantly a free-standing entity. Morality plays such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Drunkard* provided instruction on life values rather than object. Essentially, it was not museum theatre, but theatre performed inside a museum and can be classified by Christofis and Monaghan’s definition of separate performance.\(^{538}\)

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Figure 9 above depicts the lecture room at the American Museum in New York and shows little difference from a traditional nineteenth century theatre. Iconography associated with theatrical audiences are evident in the depiction of men and women in formal attire, the opera glasses and the tiered seating, which suggest a level of social hierarchy, ‘The proscenium theatre was originally designed to emphasise differences in class and wealth. It was meant to have very good seats, medium seats, poor seats and very bad seats’.

The stance, gesture and costume of the performers on stage suggest a highbrow play to contrast with the ‘platform entertainers’ exhibited inside the exhibition halls. The shape of the lecture room and the museum hall ensured that the social performances of everyday life were being enacted alongside the scheduled performances.

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Even today, very few examples of museum theatre adhere to Christofis and Monaghan’s definition of ‘integrated’ performance.\textsuperscript{541} A combination of observation and interviews with museum theatre practitioners has led me to conclude that object-rich museum theatre is rarely devised with intent. In my interview, Bridal, director of programming at the Indianapolis Children’s Museum, mentioned that object-rich performances were not developed intentionally, but rather occurred organically as the best method of telling the stories of the exhibition.\textsuperscript{542}

**Designing exhibitions for object-rich performance**

The combined methodologies of space syntax, visitor studies and performance observation show that exhibition design is a contributing factor to the predominance of peripheral performance models over integrated ones. This is predominantly due to the fact that most practitioners have to deal with pre-produced spaces that were not designed for the intended purpose of performance. Theatrical designer Dernie suggests that more designers are seeing the potential of constructing theatrical spaces in museums.\textsuperscript{543} As museum mission statements continue to reflect a shift towards inclusiveness and meaningful interpretation, there seems to be more room for designs that congregate rather than isolate visitors. Ideally, in the galleries of the future, performance spaces will be ingrained into the exhibition design, rather than being an afterthought or ‘add on’. It is important to emphasise that performance spaces are not just available for museum theatre but rather become an arena for lectures, classes, live exhibits and demonstrations. These are presentations that are often linked to exhibits, but enacted in irrelevant areas.

\textsuperscript{541} Christofis and Monaghan, “Performance at the Melbourne Museum,” 14.
\textsuperscript{542} Tessa Bridal, interview.
\textsuperscript{543} Dernie, *Exhibition Design*. 
In actuality, the Children's Museum of Indianapolis has created an effective formula for object-rich museum theatre. The success of the *Power of Children* exhibition stems from the symbiotic relationship between the exhibition designers, the curators and the programming team. Despite the collegial development, Bridal maintains that programming takes its cues from the decisions of the designers and curators, as an ‘exhibit needs [to] come first in most exhibitions’. The needs of the performance team are achieved through the creation of ‘real estate’ within each space. The use of an internal exhibition room solves the problem of unused and uncurated spaces raised by Harvey and Fitzgerald. Its transformative design allows it to be used as an exhibit when not being used as a stage, and can be shut off from the distractions of noise and multimedia exhibits when in use. The use of sliding doors means that it can be both a public and private space. This is a model that I would like to see being used internationally for both adult and children's exhibition design. In most traditional museums a large gap exists between what object-based performances need and what they have to work with; however, many practitioners would argue, it is these challenges that make their work more adaptive and dynamic.

Contemporary museum design incorporates elements from each era of its history but, under the auspices of new museology, institutions now aim for exhibition spaces that are dynamic, educational, inclusive and democratic. Greenberg argues that in order for museums to evolve, they need to leave behind the relics of past building traditions. We need to think of spaces in a different way, leaving behind our old habits of monumentalism and permanence, in both buildings and their content, and

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544 Tessa Bridal, interview.
545 Ibid.
546 Lawrence Fitzgerald, “Building on Victorian Ideas,” in *Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, Design, Exhibition*, 137; Dana Harvey, interview.
think instead of dramatic performance spaces. Dernie is also an advocate of performance spaces in museums due to their ability to bring a new dynamic into an exhibition space:

Performance is one of the most significant developments in contemporary exhibition design since it reaches beyond the semiotics of exhibition display and develops the notion of experience design in the recognition that the body plays a fundamental role in communication and learning.

Conclusion

The key findings of this chapter indicate that although exhibition spaces have evolved past a predominantly visual method of display, they are rarely designed to comfortably accommodate object-rich museum theatre. Object-rich museum theatre thrives on a close physical proximity to the object or replica of the object being interpreted. This can be achieved through gallery tour performances such as Robbie the Rat or through the use of photos and replicas as in The Clue in the Claw of the Dinosaur. Interviews with practitioners have indicated that propinquity to the object being performed results in a more meaningful interpretive experience for the audience, who are able to re-examine the object in a new light at the conclusion of the performance and view it with alternative or additional understanding. If, as Harvey mentions, the performer and audience cannot be ‘fitted’ around the object, it is likely that either a different space or different subject of performance may be chosen. While practitioners revel in the challenge of gallery performance, they unanimously agree that, from an operational perspective, performing in separate environments is

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548 Dernie, Exhibition Design, 46.
549 Nigel Sutton, interview; Dana Harvey, interview; Andrew Gray, interview.
The flow-on effect of exhibition spaces not equipped for performance is a key contributing factor in the diminishing role of objects as the subject of museum theatre performance.

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Nigel Sutton, interview; Dana Harvey, interview.
Findings and Conclusion

The overarching aim of this thesis was to engage with the properties of object-rich museum theatre and determine whether my hypothesis that 'the content of museum theatre has moved from object-centric to subject-based in contemporary museum theatre' was correct. My research has allowed me to engage with practitioners and their practice over several continents and led me to findings that I hope will be both helpful and practical to those in the industry. In this conclusion I revisit my key research questions and demonstrate how I have addressed them.

Historically, has the content of museum theatre shifted from object-rich to a focus on subject?

The shift from object to subject aligns with Hughes' tenet that the genealogy of museum theatre is neither neat, nor consistent, nor linear. 551 While the marginalisation of the object in museum performance is symptomatic of the key ideologies of new museology, the shift to subject-based performance predates it. The findings of Chapter Two, in conjunction with the definitions of object-rich museum theatre offered in Chapter One, suggest that the shift from object to subject was neither deliberate nor clearly polarised.

Early examples of object-rich performance in cabinets of curiosities reflected the sixteenth century preoccupation with exotic things, but were also indicative of the fledgling nature of the concept of 'museum'. Although Hazelius Skansen began with the idea to preserve pre-industrial revolution objects, the artefact was subservient to the greater performance of historical life. While the dime museum inherited many of the characteristics of display associated with the cabinet of curiosities, Chapter Two reveals that the key elements of performance involved the objectification of human

551 Hughes, Museum Theatre: Communicating with Visitors, 33.
oddities or the presentation of traditional theatre shows within the separate space of the museum stage. Although the objects in dime museums were ostensibly ‘social’, they were rarely interpreted through performance. The evolution of TIE moved performance in museums further away from the object and towards the idea. During this time period, objects were frequently regarded as the prerogative of the museum educator, effectively creating a disconnection between education, material culture and performance.

New generation museum theatre is inherently inclusive and continues to develop a metacognitive approach to the intentions and outcomes of performance in museum. Its key objective is to make meaningful connections with visitors to the museum, whether this be through object-rich or concept-based museum theatre. The obstacles of performing in gallery spaces discussed in Chapters Five and Six suggest that there are less operational and spatial hurdles to performing concept-based work. This entails, that often, the choice to perform objects is deterred by operational issues.

Based on interviews with practitioners, the contemporary museum theatre performer, as discussed in Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six comes primarily from a theatrical or educational background. Most practitioners of museum theatre do not come from a museology or history background, suggesting that they have not had foundation training in material culture.

As discussed through the thesis, the meaning and handling of props and interpretive objects is very varied. Napp Schindel notes this divide between museum educators and performers and its subsequent influence on who is responsible for the interpretation of artefacts. While performers and presenters are often given additional training in communicating museum content, they come from a professional background whose currency is text and ideas rather than objects.
Has new museology contributed to the marginalisation of objects in museum theatre?

The findings of Chapter Two indicate that while the role of objects is currently being re-evaluated through the lens of new museology, the shift from object-rich to subject-based performance pre-dates the new museology movement; however, there is much evidence to suggest that the movement has played a part in shaping new generation museum theatre. The key lies in Hughes' statement that it is difficult to separate the objectives of museum theatre from those of the museum themselves.

Practitioners of new museology advocate for a museum that is both inclusive and participatory. Key texts support the movement from objects to ideas in the belief that the historical display of objects was designed for the upper-class visitor who had the necessary education and cultural background to 'read' them.

In many respects, the shift from object to idea is founded in the noble pursuit of making the museum more accessible; however, I suggest that the pendulum has swung too far and that object-rich museum theatre can be equally inclusive. The case studies of this thesis demonstrate that objects can be harnessed for performance for audiences of any age. The shows provoked discussion, provided information and unleashed memories.

Object-based performance has the freedom to engage with ‘intangible heritage’ as cited by Farthing or concepts not represented by the collection. However, object-rich museum theatre draws on the important cultural capital of the museum, the collection. The concept of ‘museum’ has stretched, but they are still defined by their acquisition policies and collections. By performing collection objects, practitioners accentuate the qualities that make each museum unique.
What function do objects play in museum theatre?

The analysis of the case studies in Chapters Three and Four determines that objects add value to museum theatre, and that museum theatre adds value to the interpretation of collections.

Previous research projects have discussed how museum theatre can add value to the interpretation of objects. The Performing Heritage Project suggests that one of the impetuses of museums developing museum theatre is to ‘see the museum’s various collections used in innovative ways and in order to attract new audiences’.

Benefits of museum theatre also explored by the Performing Heritage Project include: ‘opening up aspects of a museum’s collection or an historic site to a wider audience’, helping audiences ‘understand the social meaning of the artefact or architecture, animating the inanimate’ and throwing ‘light on, or fill[ing] gaps in, the partial knowledge offered by the exhibition’.

My research builds on these findings and delves deeper into the value of performing collection items. I theorise that object-rich museum theatre:

- Helps audiences make stronger connections to the collection of the museum;
- Encourages audiences to reflect on their own understandings and experiences of the object being interpreted;
- Creates opportunity to add to or re-interpret the curatorial label;
- Encourages reflection on the polysemic and contested aspects of object interpretation;
- Adds more authenticity to the stories being performed;
- Becomes part of the exhibition;

553 Ibid, 57.
- Interprets objects in a manner that makes them more accessible for pre-literate children;
- Makes audiences feel that the performance is special and unique to the museum they are visiting;
- Adds a dynamic element if performed in gallery spaces.

How do the operational issues of museums contribute to the marginalisation of the object in museums?

The most significant finding of my fieldwork was that contemporary practitioners and playwrights were not deliberately subverting the role of the object in museum theatre. The discourse of Chapter Five demonstrates that the absence of objects in performance is the result of a range of issues including collection loan agreements, problems of ticketing, issues of cultural ownership, and lack of spaces to accommodate both audience and performer. The general consensus from informants was that while objects provide a wonderful anchor for performance, subject-based performance posed fewer obstacles and limitations for development.

How does exhibition design marginalise the use of objects in gallery performance?

The findings of Chapter Six make it clear that for object-rich museum theatre to be a successful part of museum programming, the shape of the exhibition hall must be adapted to accommodate it. While the operational issues discussed in Chapter Four are part of the inherent challenges of enacting museum theatre, much can be done to minimise adverse impacts on shows. The most significant need for change is reconfiguring the exhibition space. The museum that demonstrated the most museum-theatre friendly spatial dynamic was the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis,
where performance had been inherent to the exhibition design and flexi-spaces meant that parts of the gallery could be interchangeably opened and closed. Rather than remain as an 'add on', institutions must commit to offering live performance in their galleries by factoring them into the design of the exhibition halls. Performance offers a break from the usual patterns of audience movement in the museum and can redirect the visitor gaze and allow audiences to experience the space differently. The result is a more dynamic and less prescriptive interaction between the museum and the visitor.

Reflections on the research process

Within my thesis I combined a range of methodologies to arrive at my findings. These included documenting case studies, interviewing practitioners, critical observation and the spatial analysis of exhibition areas. Each methodology had its own strength and limitations.

**Strengths**

The key form of data collection was the use of case studies as a means of identifying and analysing examples of object-rich museum theatre. The case studies helped me to look at the sub-genre in a range of iterations and compare different handlings of artefacts in a performative interpretation.

Qualitative rather than quantitative processing of my data allowed me to address the unique aspects of each case study rather than looking statistically at shared or disparate qualities. By limiting myself to seven case studies, I was able to investigate each in greater depth than if I was dealing with a larger number of samples. By documenting the case studies I was able to capture information for both my own purposes and for future researchers. As discussed in the methodology section at the
start of the thesis, documentation implies that something is valuable enough to preserve.

The case studies were supported by interviews with practitioners. These allowed me to compare actual behaviour compared to reported behaviour, while examining the intention and motivation behind the development of each performance. The interviews focused on several key questions such as the performer’s educational background, understanding of the history of museum theatre, use of museum artefacts to develop performance and awareness of spatial dynamics in exhibition spaces. While participants were asked to report on these areas, I adopted an unstructured style of interviewing to allow practitioners to discuss wider aspects of their work and thereby broaden my general understanding of the genre. In this way they were used at the start of my investigation as a type of exploratory research, allowing me to cement my research questions and identify key aspects for further analysis.

Limitations

Initially, the most challenging aspect of using case studies as a research methodology was identifying enough examples that fitted my expected definition of object-rich museum theatre. As there was a limit of live performance to observe, I instead reconstructed some case studies from written documentation and filmed recordings. A key limitation of documenting and analysing the case studies was the lack of consistency. The samples were recorded across three countries and a range of museum types. They differed in length, number of performers, target audience, performance area and intended outcome. While these differences generated rich material for analysis, their inconsistency must be noted as a factor in attempting to present definitive findings.
Contributions to the field

The initial objective of this research was to investigate the role of the object in museum theatre and determine whether the artefact is marginalised in contemporary museum theatre. Through my research and findings, I hope to reignite discussion among museum theatre practitioners as to how new museum may be shaping their practice.

Concrete example of how my research has contributed to the field comes from my extensive fieldwork. I documented eight case studies of object-rich museum theatre in order to investigate my research topic. A side benefit is that I have preserved them for practitioners and future researchers. Similarly, I captured thirteen museum theatre performers and developers speaking in their own words about both their process and the challenges and benefits of interpreting objects within the museum environment. My research has already been shared through conferences and I have been contacted by overseas performers replicating aspects of my work in their own practice.

Secondary contributions include using common spatial mapping theories to draw attention to how the design of exhibition spaces can either help or hinder the enactment of object-rich museum theatre in gallery spaces. It is my hope that as the new museum continues to develop, the design of exhibition areas will be reshaped to allow space around key artefacts, providing room for theatrical interpretation.

As mentioned in the literature review, several theorists have examined the history of museum theatre, citing examples of movements that make up the history of the genre. I have extended on this by identifying key periods in the history of museums where objects have been the primary motivation for theatrical interpretation. It is my hope that my research stimulates discussion among practitioners as to how
museum theatre can be used more effectively to interpret artefacts, and that greater awareness will translate into new and significant pieces of performance.

Room for further research

The focus on the role of objects in museum theatre leaves much room for further research and practice. When reflecting on their practice during interviews, many informants admitted that they were surprised that their process of development didn’t make stronger links to museum collections. Their comments suggested that an awareness of the displacement of the object would inspire them to reflect more deeply on the inherent purpose of museum theatre. It is hoped that this research project will inspire more practitioners to take an interest in developing object-rich museum theatre.

Further work in this area should ideally sit between theory and practice, and include a large range of stakeholders including single focus museums, historical societies, schools, archives, universities, community groups and theatre companies. Many important artefacts are in the hands of private collectors and theatre may be a means of bringing these private objects into the public sphere. Research could take the form of documenting additional case studies in object-rich theatre, developing new works or building a model for object-rich museum theatre in the style of Prown or Fleming.

This thesis has touched on some of the specific target audiences of museum theatre, including seniors, children, families and school groups. The new museum is re-examining how information is presented for visitors with both physical and mental disabilities with significant attention to interpretation for children and adults on the autism spectrum. Visitors with autism often struggle with interpretation techniques
designed for mainstream visitors, as they struggle with the boundaries of the literal and figurative. Other visitors with special needs are those with hearing or vision loss, or those presenting with learning disabilities. It would be interesting to see how object-rich museum theatre could be developed for these specific types of visitors.

Other challenges could evolve from taking on the ‘anti-social object’ as introduced in chapter three. While is it agreed that ‘social objects’ are most easily translated into performance, it could be argued that it is the ‘anti-social object’ that would benefit most from theatrical interpretation.

A much-needed future direction for object-rich museum theatre is greater partnerships with schools, universities and community groups. Independent director Peter Wilkins developed the ‘Come Alive’ Museum Theatre festival in partnership with the National Museum of Australia, Canberra. This program supports drama students from schools around Canberra to visit the museum and develop a performance based on an object or story in the collection. The finished products are performed as part of the festival at the museum each year. This concept could be stretched further through interdisciplinary and interdepartmental relationships in Australian Universities where students from drama departments combine their expertise with those studying in the History or Science faculties to research, develop and perform a piece of object-rich museum theatre.

In this thesis I have demonstrated that objects add value and depth to museum theatre, but also that the marginalisation of the object is often the incidental by-product of movements towards egalitarian community engagement. The case studies of this thesis demonstrate that objects and inclusivity need not be incompatible, but can be employed through museum theatre in a symbiotic relationship. This is best summarised by Weil who, in his writings on the changing face of cultural institutions,
stated that ‘We must better understand that the museum is a place for both objects and ideas’.554

554 Weil, Rethinking the Museum and Other Meditations, 50.
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**Interviews***

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<th>Date and Year Interviewed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tessa Bridal</td>
<td>Director of Interpretation, Children’s Museum of Indianapolis</td>
<td>2/9/2009</td>
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<td>Daina Harvey</td>
<td>Senior Programs and Events Coordinator, National Museum of Australia</td>
<td>29/5/2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>Patrick Watt</td>
<td>Education and Public Programs Manager, National Sports Museum</td>
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<td>Bernard Caleo</td>
<td>Public Programs Officer, Melbourne Museum</td>
<td>11/11/2010</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nigel Sutton</td>
<td>Freelance Performer</td>
<td>4/1/2011</td>
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<td>Chris Cade</td>
<td>Freelance Performer</td>
<td>1/10/2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>Penelope Bartlau</td>
<td>Director, Barking Spider Visual Theatre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Andrew Gray</td>
<td>Manager of Interpretation, National War Memorial, Canberra</td>
<td>29/5/2008</td>
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*The positions stated are those in which my informants were employed in at the time of the interview. Many have since moved into different roles and institutions.*
Author/s:
CLYNE, JOANNA

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