
NOTES AND REVIEWS

DISARMED BY DRAMA METHODOLOGY

Based on practical experience working as a museum educator at the Hallwyl Museum I will in the following show how the use of drama methodology can lower the threshold for visitor engagement, and how it can be used in taking on difficult subjects. I will treat the Hallwyl Museum's use of the method, give advice on what to take into consideration when building a script, and discuss advantages found in practicing this method.

Since our method has not been developed on the basis of academic research, but rather trial and error, I will not refer to academic research in this presentation, even though today much is written on the subject. I believe that similarities and dissimilarities with findings in current research is best dealt with by the reader.

The Hallwyl Museum – A Background

The Hallwyl Museum is located in Stockholm, Sweden, near the city centre at 4 Hamngatan. The house, once built as a private home for Walther and Wilhelmina von Hallwyl (1839–1921, 1844–1930), was donated to the Swedish state in 1920 to open as a museum. The donation took force in 1930 when both donors had passed away. Designed by the architect Isak Gustaf Clason (1856–1930) and completed in 1898, the building, with its 42 rooms, approximately 2,200 m², was equipped with the very latest in modern technology, such as central heating, electric lighting, running hot and cold water, telephones and electric elevators.

At the same time decorated in a conservative and historicising manor, it catches an interesting shift in time. The building was to serve three main functions: house a Stockholm based office for the family business Ljusne-Woxna AB (exporting lumber and woodworks), offer representational possibilities, and function as a background for Wilhelmina von Hallwyl's collections of historical objects.

In the late 19th century a certain interest in history and times past grew strong in the shadow of industrialisation. Collecting antiques and folklore objects became fashionable, and many museums were founded during this period. Wilhelmina von Hallwyl was a passionate collector, typically collecting arms and armour, silver, 16th and 17th century Dutch and Flemish oil paintings, Asian ceramics, European porcelain, antique textiles and furniture, but also items from emerging areas of interest such as Chinese and Korean bronzes. As with many collectors of her day Wilhelmina donated her home and collections, creating a museum. All objects in the house were included in the donation: collected antiques and private items, even household objects from the servants quarters, leaving the home intact and seemingly uncensored. Everything was thoroughly documented in the museum catalogue, printed in 110 copies and distributed around the world, a project that was initiated and supervised by Wilhelmina herself. She was assisted by a group of students from Stockholm University,¹ whom

she called the catalogue folk. Wilhelmina did not live to see the work completed, but having hired a staff, formulated the statutes of the museum, named a board and created a foundation, she had ensured that it would be carried out according to her wishes. It took a little over 50 years to complete the project, which was a radical one, since it included everything from paintings by Lucas Cranach the Elder, to pots and pans, mended underwear and containers for toilet paper. Wilhelmina motivated the inclusion of all objects, and the thorough cataloguing, with that the museum was not intended for her own time, but a far distant future when it might serve an educational purpose (The Hallwyl Collection 1926).

Drama methodology has grown to be a dominant feature in the Hallwyl Museum's branding over the past 19 years. The development of the method coincided with a shift in focus in the museum's narrative from art history, crafts and the biography of the creator Wilhelmina von Hallwyl towards a more ethnological approach, taking on a wider perspective in giving voice to the time period through different angles. At present the museum treats the heritage left by Wilhelmina von Hallwyl as a platform from which we can explore aspects of life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a period that saw many changes in society, the repercussions of which can be seen in our way of life today. The first step in that direction was approaching everyday life in the house through drama methodology, touching on the stories of the servants and of the academics working with the collections, with a focus on the hierarchies within the household and the radical project of turning a home into a museum.

Introducing Drama Methodology

The drama tours of the Hallwyl Museum are based on thorough research of the Museum's archive material, and items such as family letters, menus, interviews with serv-

ants, and the catalogue. The facts are then portioned out in scenes and rooms throughout the palace. As with our traditional tours, the drama tours move around the building, changing scenery and requiring bodily involvement from the audience, creating an unusual and interactive form of theatre.

Equally important to the disposition is the choice of characters to carry the scenes. What the characters embody has to be in line with what they would naturally give voice to depending on their position in the household and the social norms of the period portrayed. In choosing which historical persons to portray in a scene we also need to balance them as a group. It is important to the dramaturgy, and in creating a story that carries itself forward, that the characters can be juxtaposed in views or direction. Not taking this into consideration might result in a script where lines and facts are stacked on one another, rather than giving the impression of a casual conversation that accidentally takes place in front of the audience. In forming the lines the character needs to be given a reason to mention facts, or to answer their counterpart, built into the dramaturgy in order to create credible scenes, and to avoid the misstep of creating a traditional guided tour told by fictional characters instead of a drama tour.

We have found that it is necessary for the audience to play a part as well, so that the characters can address them. This choice limits the story further, since the characters' idea of to whom they are speaking will limit the possible perspective. The same story would not be shared with the kitchen maid as with an academic working with the catalogue. Giving the audience a role is important not only to the dramaturgy, but also for visitor engagement. It gives the characters a reason to tell the audience their story, but, in directly addressing them with questions or humorous comments, it also eases the atmosphere in the group and encourages the audience to engage with the story. We

recommend forming a sort of contract with the visitor about what is to take place prior to the tour. This could be as simple as allowing them to buy a ticket, or make a reservation. If the visitor is not expecting the drama tour method, visits are seldom successful.

During the development of new scripts, as well as when training members of staff for a role in our drama tours, we use a professional stage director as a consultant. The Hallwyl Museum hires historians, art historians, ethnologists and the like as drama guides – never professional actors. In portraying a period, knowledge of the era is crucial to the performance. It is likely that the audience will interact, and the drama guide then needs to be able to step out of the script and ad lib in a credible way. With the help of our director the personnel is educated in the art of acting, bringing with them their understanding of the museum's content. We believe that this is the method that best meets our educational mission, guaranteeing quality in facts and unspoken content in the tours. In addition it creates a low-key drama in which the house and the period play the main parts.

Examples of Tours and Storylines

Today drama methodology is used to target multiple groups amongst our visitors and to discuss more complex subjects. We offer drama tours both as public tours, especially during the Christmas season, midterm school holidays and weekends, as private group tours, and in our school program with various subjects depending on the intended audience. Before engaging in a discussion of the advantages of the method I will first present a few examples of typical tours at the museum, starting with our classical tours and ending with one of our more recent productions. Christmas at the Palace will serve as an example of how the choice of characters portrayed affects the perspective. The Runaway Snail shows how a script written for a young audience differs from

the first example, and *The Body's Deepest Secrets* exemplifies our most recent use of the method touching on more complex subjects.

Christmas at the Palace

Christmas at the Palace was our first production and deals with the holiday traditions in the household touching on the von Hallwyls' Christmas celebration, the servants' preparations and how they are invited to participate in the celebration, paired with the story of how the home is being documented by academics, including details of the celebration. The year is 1909, when Wilhelmina restarted the catalogue project due to the discovery of a systematic error, and the family business, called Ljusne Woxna AB, experienced difficulties with the emerging struggle of the working class. The underlying focus is on the hierarchy of the household, which is portrayed through the ways in which the characters adapt their behaviour depending on the status of their counterpart and through how comfortably they move through the different rooms in the palace. This is an example of how an abstract phenomenon that is difficult to present in detail in a simple description can instead be demonstrated and intuitively understood.

The story is carried by Anna, who works as a maid in the household (or at times Eskil, a footman), and an amanuensis working with the collections. In order to give a wider perspective to the story the two have different ideas of to whom they are speaking when addressing the audience. The spectators are first seated in the palace kitchen, given a brief introduction to the house, before the tour begins. The guide (dressed in our normal uniform) gives a parcel to a person in the audience. As the guide leaves the cook enters, and she assumes the audience is there to deliver the special Swiss Christmas cake. This is what she communicates to Anna as she enters the scene. Anna

is ordered to take the parcel to the servery, and the cook invites her to bring the audience with her as they are curious about the house. This would have been inappropriate, but they allow themselves to bend the rules in the spirit of Christmas. As the amanuensis enters the kitchen, looking for Anna, he or she draws the conclusion that the audience is in fact academics there to assist with the cataloguing. As the amanuensis is much too stressed to take note of Anna's and the cook's objections, Anna tries to avoid the problem by simply getting the audience out of the way, with the intention of explaining later. Anna and the amanuensis are then drawn into a somewhat confused struggle for the audience's attention that carries them through the building, as time passes unnaturally quickly (in order to portray the full celebration), and Anna's desperation increases. Throughout the tour the two encounter additional characters from the household: the lady's maid, and Wilhelmina's companion Miss Uhse, played by the same drama guide who played the cook. Walther and Wilhelmina are not portrayed in this drama, but their presence can sometimes be hinted at and works as a way of moving the story forward, since Anna cannot be caught bending the rules and has to make the group scarce.

Anna/Eskil and the cook cover the servants' perspective and the holiday preparations. The amanuensis explains the museum project, the modernity seen in the house, and covers potential questions about objects in the collections. He or she also puts the traditions into perspective, making comparisons to history, as well as to other households. The lady's maid, whom we know to have been a strict person, as a character gives voice to discipline and religious traditions. The companion carries the upper class perspective. She covers the new year celebration, and complains about the disturbance in the family company due to the workers' strike.



Photo 1. The characters Eskil and Anna are often portrayed in our tours. © National Historical Museums, Sweden. Photo by Erik Lernestål.

This production, which is our most extensive, amounts to approximately 100 scheduled tours, and in addition it is also open for booking requests. It requires a team of 16 drama guides, three per tour. The repetitions stretch over an intense period of three weeks prior to the Christmas season. A lot of energy is put into ensuring that everyone can play their part regardless of which colleague is scheduled as a co-actor, since this will vary.

The Runaway Snail – A Tour for Children and Families

The Runaway Snail is based on a true story from 1917. One of Wilhelmina's grandchildren, Margit von Geijer (1907–2002), had a snail as a pet, which escaped in the palace during a visit, and the entire household was

engaged in finding it. In the drama tour interpretation, which is written for families with children aged 5–9, and primary school classes, the audience is given the role of Margit's cousins, also visiting their grandparents. They arrive just as Margit and her brother have gone out to a nearby park, and Anna (the maid) discovers that the snail she was tasked with watching has escaped. The children now need to assist Anna in the search, encountering numerous characters in the household as well as different milieus. As in *Christmas at the Palace*, social hierarchy is in focus as a sub-text.

Since this drama tour is written for young children, the script has an adapted format. The scenes are shorter in comparison to scripts written for adult audiences, as are the lines, giving the tour a higher tempo. The children are asked more questions about themselves to make them open up and relate to what is happening in the scenes. The performance is also shorter, approximately 40 minutes, compared with 50–60 minutes. In our tours for children there is no built in confusion regarding their role, rather, a single perspective is chosen. They are often given the part of relatives. Being part of the family gives a warm welcome and makes meeting Walther and Wilhelmina a natural occurrence, something we have noticed the children usually expect when visiting the museum in this form. In other, more interactive productions, they play the role of kitchen maid/boy (colleagues engaged in dinner preparations), which creates a sense of equality and the feeling that their contribution is needed. Regardless of which role is chosen, we have found that the energy in the tour is helped if the children are given a task, or a mission they can assist in solving. To be comfortable they need to know why they are there, and form an idea of the continuation of the story.

The Body's Deepest Secrets

The *Body's Deepest Secrets* tour is one of our most popular tours in the school program for high school and college students, but has also been given as a scheduled tour on occasion, open to the public. It is based on literature from the 1880s debating the role of bourgeoisie women in Sweden and the consequences of keeping young women unaware of the sexual aspects of life, in comparison to what is known of the marital life of Wilhelmina von Hallwyl's three daughters. In the narrative we have mixed the traditional tour with readings of texts and dramatised tableaux in the same type of milieu as in the novels, creating a kind of cross-fertilisation for the imagination.

The tour starts with an orientation in time, how the literary landscape worked as a platform to debate politics and society in a time when only parts of the population had the right to vote (the working class and women were excluded), and a presentation of the selected novels and authors. Entering the ballroom a description of a festivity taking place in a similar location through a male gaze is read. As the students have allowed themselves to open their imagination and picture the text's description, the story shifts focus, moving into the ladies' drawing room, where they can sense that things stir beneath the glamorous surface. To emphasise how matters of a very private nature were not to be uttered in formal social gatherings the group has to go upstairs, to the private bedroom quarters, before addressing the matter in question: arranged marriages, honour culture, and how young women felt trapped in a system they could only fully see once married. In the bedroom texts are read from two different novels, one portraying a young bride's pride in being chosen and her lack of knowledge of what is expected of her in her new role, the other portraying a young bride who awakens after her wedding night, fully grasping the situation, feeling betrayed by

her relatives and trapped in her new role. The guide discusses the economic aspects of sexual morality in the era with the students, explains how censoring the existence of sexuality was possible, and describes how women were unable to divorce without losing both their role, their economic support, their friends and their families. In the next room infidelity, ideas of sexual responsibility and frigidity are discussed. At this point the young students, confronted with the harsh reality girls their own age faced 100 years ago, often start to distance themselves. This is when drama methodology is introduced. In a dramatised tableau the students meet two friends debating infidelity and a wife's responsibilities in a way that creates a strong contrast to current values in Sweden, so strong that the students often find it comical. This scene totally changes the atmosphere in the groups. The students often give humorous comments to one another and spontaneously discuss what they have seen. They are again open to the new facts presented by the guide and to discuss similarities and dissimilarities between the values communicated through the tableau and within today's society. The tour continues with a tableau portraying an argument between a married couple, in which the young wife tries to break free, but is presented with the obstacles she would face if she did so. In the final room we discuss how literature can be used as a source of ethnologic research and how it is important to be aware of the nature of a text. Connections to the few sources that address the tour's theme in the archive are given. Even in such a well-documented household as Hallwyl Museum there will still be gaps due to the strong taboos of the era regarding the sexual side of life. However, there is some material. One of Wilhelmina's daughters, Ellen Roosval (1867–1952) went through a divorce in 1907 against her family's wishes and advice. She was cut out of their circles, and the parents communicated their position to visi-

tors by cutting her face out of photographic portraits. Letters commenting on this event link to the content of the novels and create a basis for discussion.

The tour exemplifies how more complex subjects can be dealt with through the use of drama methodology. The main focus is on honour culture and how sexual morality is shaped by socioeconomic aspects. It aspires to create a debate on society and normativity as collective creations and demonstrates that they can change over time as the audience compares the circumstances of the characters to their own. These are abstract and complex matters that are hard to describe without creating an emotional distance. By engaging the imagination of the audience we give them the feeling of coming closer to the people in history, tackling similar difficulties to those we as a society face today, and possibly face on a personal level. Subjects of this nature could make the audience want to distance themselves, to not become too involved, but the twists and turns of the dramaturgy keep the audience engaged, as I will explain in the next section.

Advantages Found in the Use of Drama Methodology

Comparing a traditional guided tour to a tour using drama methodology, there are certain differences in audience engagement that are worth mentioning. In a traditional tour, the parameters are set from start to finish. The audience knows the educator's storytelling as a genre, and the subject of the tour. Surely the narrative and the milieu will offer some surprises, but generally speaking progress through the tour will be even. In a drama tour the parameters are not as known. The audience would not know if or when a character will enter, or what route to expect. A special attention awakens that is maintained, due to the element of the unexpected, but also by dividing the audience's attention between a group of educators, who carry the story as a whole. The tour

does not depend on the individual narrative skill of the museum educator, but is a collective performance. (This has shown to be an advantage for groups where there are difficulties with concentration.)

Experience shows that humour can make people lower their guard and become more receptive to facts, but also that they can more easily relate to emotions. The atmosphere is relaxed, which contributes to increased involvement and promotes learning. This can be demonstrated through the example of *The Body's Deepest Secrets*, mentioned above, in which the novels and the harsh reality they portray often shock young people, and at a certain point they shut down. We have seen that the strategic placing of a tableau at that point will again open up the discussion. The educator then steps down from a position of authority, no

longer telling a story, but showing it, inviting the audience's own interpretation. In our experience the method thus allows us to deal with more complex subjects not despite its playfulness, but because of it.

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Notes

1 At the time Stockholm University was known as Stockholm College.

References

The Hallwyl Collection. 1926. Förord. – *Hallwylska samlingen: beskrifvande förteckning grupperna XXXIV och XXXV*. Stockholm: Centraltryckeriet, 34–35. <https://archive.org/details/HallwylskaSamlingen34-35/mode/2up> (accessed March 15, 2021).