

Representation of the past in public spheres – Experiencing the past: the reconstruction and recreation of history at Colonial Williamsburg

Review by Deb Fuller



Martine Teunissen, self-published, 2016

<http://www.beleefhetverleden.nl/product/boek-representation-of-the-past-in-public-spheres/>

<http://www.beleefhetverleden.nl/product/pdf-format-book-representation-of-the-past-in-public-spheres/>

Representation of the past in public spheres – Experiencing the past: the reconstruction and recreation of history at Colonial Williamsburg was originally Martine Teunissen's master's thesis that she started as an intern at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, USA and finalized at the University of Leiden, The Netherlands. Teunissen looked at how history is recreated specifically at open air museums, the evolution of Colonial Williamsburg as a historic site, and then focused on the development and launch of Colonial Williamsburg's *Revolutionary City* interpretive program. Students and practitioners of museum theater and/or public interpretation as well as people who are interested in developing living history programs will find this thesis highly informative and educational. Teunissen does an excellent job of showing how a large open air museum develops its interpretive or educational goals and how those goals are shaped by social and political times, historic researchers, site directors, and major funding sources. Teunissen's experiences at Colonial Williamsburg inspired her to start her own museum theater company in her home country of The Netherlands, Experience the Past, <http://experiencethepast.org/>.

The first three chapters are an overview of how the public and academic historians view history and summary on the development of open air museums. Much has been written on these subjects already but Teunissen does an excellent summary of the literature, prevailing theories, and current issues especially in the field of living history. The one area that her literature review is lacking is on the subject of museum theater. Since this is a very new field and was even newer at the time she wrote her thesis, presumably not much information was available to her. Teunissen makes note that Americans initially rejected traditions but then started to want those traditions after the Civil War from 1870 onwards "as a mechanism for social and political unification". This segues into the second half of her book, which focuses on Colonial Williamsburg and how its reconstruction has been used to influence America's perception of its past as well as educate the public in general.

Teunissen describes how as Colonial Williamsburg grew in popularity, its historical narrative grew as well. From the influences of the Cold War in the 1950s to including interpretation on African Americans in the 1960s, Colonial Williamsburg was influenced by the times. Colonial Williamsburg created their first interpretive framework in the 1970s, though it was criticized for focusing too much on “edutainment” and not enough on social history. In the 1990s, a new plan was created and implemented. Named *Becoming American: Our Struggle to be both Free and Equal*, it shifted the focus from being the birthplace of American democracy to a snapshot of Colonial Virginia and how people transformed from colonists to Americans. Teunissen needed to connect evolution of Colonial Williamsburg’s interpretive strategy with the literature review presented in the earlier chapters on the development of the American open air museum to tie the two halves of the book together.

The last chapter of the book concentrates on The Revolutionary City program. Launched in 2006, The Revolutionary City was a 2-day interactive experience consisting of 14 scenes spanning a multi-year timeframe from 1774-1781. Each scene highlighted a social and/or political issue of the time told through a main character and supporting characters that created a collage of people in Colonial Williamsburg from gentry to enslaved African Americans. Teunissen conducted audience research on the program through qualitative interviews with eleven families that saw the program. She noted that while her sample size was small, audiences were positive about the program and were engaged in the performances. She compares the results of her interviews to the quantitative visitor satisfaction surveys of 2006 and shows that since the launch of The Revolutionary City program, more visitors were highly satisfied with their visit than previous years.

While Teunissen’s presentation and analysis of The Revolutionary City program development and launch is very detailed, it is also dated. Colonial Williamsburg modified the program and then discontinued it in 2016. I would like to see some information about why the program was modified and later discontinued to get a whole picture of a museum theater program’s lifecycle. Was economics a factor, given the extensive training of the actor/interpreters or had audience expectations changed necessitating another restructuring of their interpretive strategy? The Native American perspective was also missing from the original storyline and it would be interesting to know why that was or if it was later added.

Also, as a museum theater person and now one with 10 years of experience, I would like to see her reflect on The Revolutionary City program from a professional standpoint. Museum theater is also more established than it was when she wrote her thesis. Providing an expanded literature review to include research on museum theater and tying it in to The Revolutionary City case study would be very useful information.

Overall, this is a very comprehensive resource for museum theater history and program development. I worry that readers will get too bogged down in its “academicness”. Fortunately, each section stands on its own and can be read separately. Those who are just interested in the development of The Revolutionary City and applications of museum theater can easily read those chapters without having to read through the literature review of the early chapters. Likewise, people who are new to living history and museum theater would be well-served by reading the first few chapters as an introduction to the field and its development.