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Dramaturgy Beyond the Classroom: Making Use of Local Museum Resources

When I was an undergraduate at the University of Notre Dame, I was frequently brought to the Snite Museum of Art to discuss the relationship between French literature and paintings from a variety of historical periods. As a dramaturg in Chicago, one of my tasks was to develop partnerships between my theatre company and other cultural institutions. In attempting to bring this ethos of collaboration and informal learning to my current teaching of Dramaturgy and Theatre History at Michigan State University, I was initially stymied by lack of access to a historical art collection on campus. The new Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, which focuses on rotating exhibitions of contemporary art, has effectively replaced the Kresge Collection, which housed historical holdings. The MSU Museum is a natural history and cultural anthropology museum.

Fortunately, the Office of Faculty and Organizational Development offered a two-day “Collections Connections” workshop facilitated by the MSU Museum Education Team. The workshop featured discussion of concepts such as object study and informal learning. Participants were invited to explore the MSU museum collection both in terms of exhibits on display and at the Cultural Collections storage and education facility. I was able to schedule a visit to the Cultural Collections in my graduate course. The mask collection and the folk costume collection were of particular interest to MFA Costume Design students. Visits to the Cultural Collections are limited to ten students at a time, so my undergraduate courses are too large to take advantage of this opportunity.

Given that the museum resources on campus do not have an obvious relation to theatre or history, I knew I would have to be creative. How might the material objects in the MSU Museum and the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum offer productive opportunities for enhancing my theatre history and dramaturgy courses? My strategy was simple: browse the museums and create assignments based on

the exhibits. For Theatre History I, I developed a worksheet designed to facilitate reflection on how the MSU Museum's collections in natural history and cultural anthropology relate to scholarly debates on theatre historiography, in particular the origins of theatre. For Theatre History II, an exhibit at the Broad Museum (*Postscript: Writing After Conceptual Art*) provided the basis for a take-home final exam that allowed students to synthesize ideas about modern and post-modern performance.

In Spring 2015, I taught a topics course on China, Theatre and Intercultural Encounter in an effort to take part in broader university initiatives related to the "Year of China" at Michigan State. Both the Broad Museum and the MSU Museum hosted exhibits related to the Year of China. At the Broad Museum, "Future Returns: Contemporary Art from China" featured painting, sculpture, video, and installation art that allowed for an introduction to cultural issues facing China in the twenty-first century. Since this exhibit would close in March, we visited the Broad early in the semester. The MSU Museum presented an exhibit entitled "Seeing China: Photographic Views and Viewpoints" that featured the work of non-Chinese photographers in dialogue with early-twentieth century stereographs taken in China. Our visit to the MSU Museum occurred later in the semester and allowed for more in-depth discussion of what "intercultural" means.

For the LMDA Sourcebook, I offer the following assignments and context as I presented them to students:

- 1) THR 431 MSU Museum Visit Worksheet, Fall 2015 (Revised after initial use in Fall 2013)
- 2) THR 432 "Postscript" Exhibit questions for Take-Home Final
- 3) THR 332 Response Essay Assignment for Unit including "Future Returns"
- 4) THR 332 Information Sheet with questions for MSU Museum Visit

Using Natural History to Engage with Theatre History: Theatre 431 Visit to MSU Museum, 9/15/15

Names of Group Members: _____

The origins of theatre tend to be traced to Ancient Greece, or (by some scholars) to the Abydos Passion Play in Egypt. The collections of the MSU Museum, especially the Hall of Evolution, Habitat Hall, and the Hall of Animal Diversity, encourage us to consider history in the *longue durée* (i.e., over a broad scope of time). How might questions raised by natural history and museum exhibition practices enhance our study of theatre history?

Hall of Evolution (Basement)

- Discuss: What might pre-historic theatre look like? What is the relationship between theatre and evolution?
- Based on Mark Damen's discussion of paleontology in relation to theatre history, do you see evidence of "lumpers" or "splitters" in this exhibit?
- The Hall of Evolution includes fossils arranged in chronological order from the Cambrian period to the Pleistocene Era. Think about periodization in theatre history; how would you arrange the history of theatre into historical periods? What would you call the time during which Shakespeare wrote plays? How about Ibsen and Chekhov? List your theatrical periods here:

Hall of World Cultures (Basement)

- How does theatre relate to culture? Find at least one object that could be used for a theatrical performance. What does that object tell us about the culture that created it?
- The Hall of World Cultures exhibit is organized according to four broad themes ("Culture is..."). List those four themes. Discuss how this thematic organization affects your experience of the exhibit.

Hall of Animal Diversity (Top Floor)

- How would you describe diversity in forms and genres of theatre?

Habitat Hall (Top Floor)

- What is the natural habitat for theatre? (Indoors? Outdoors? Typically an urban environment?) Do digital media threaten the “natural habitat” of live theatre? If theatre is endangered, what are the predators threatening theatre? Does theatre have many natural habitats? List the optimal natural habitat and/or “predators” here:

Collections Connections (Main Floor)

- Pull out some drawers and see what is in them. Many of the drawers will have objects related to ritual (see “Death and Life in Egypt,” for example). Have you saved symbolic objects of rituals from your own life? If you were to collect artifacts for a museum of theatre history, what would you collect?

THR 432: Final Exam: A Visit to the Broad Museum

The current exhibit at the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum provides an opportunity for reflecting on themes in 19th and 20th Century theatre history that we have studied this semester. Visit the Broad and view the exhibit “Postscript: Writing After Conceptual Art.” [Described here:

<https://broadmuseum.msu.edu/exhibitions/postscript-writing-after-conceptual-art>]

Part I: Avant-garde movements

Consider the pieces on Symbolist poetry: visual representations of Mallarmé (upstairs and to the right, inner gallery) and the filmed readings of Baudelaire’s poem “To the Reader.”

Consider Nick Thurston’s triptych based on Samuel Beckett’s novel *Watt*.

*Write a brief response in which you discuss what these visual artworks taught you about Symbolism and Beckett OR Create your own visual artwork and/or a short performance in which you teach me something similar about Symbolism and/or Beckett.

Part II: Conceptual Art and Performance Art

Read Sol LeWitt’s “Sentences on Conceptual Art.” <http://www.altx.com/vizarts/conceptual.html>

Screen “Baldessari Sings LeWitt” (excerpt): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udljwzJcTiU>

At the Broad, screen João Onofre’s “Catriona Shaw Sings Baldessari Sings Lewitt.”

*Write a brief response in which you discuss the point of singing a manifesto OR prepare a short performance in which you sing LeWitt’s manifesto (or a manifesto by another artist like Tristan Tzara or Antonin Artaud) to a different tune. Be prepared to discuss your choices.

Part III: Historiography

Consider the pieces immediately to your right at the top of the stairs, especially the Montevideo telephone book of the disappeared and the Bayeux Tapestry recreated with computer code.

Also consider Dexter Sinister, *Identity* (in the basement): Screen this 20-minute three-panel video installation that explores branding and art museums in three major cities (New York, Paris, and London).

The full script, with annotations, is available online here:

<http://www.dextersinister.org/MEDIA/PDF/%22Identity%22.pdf>

*Write a brief response (1-2 pages) in which you discuss how these pieces engage with history and technology. For Dexter Sinister, what is the effect of moving backward through history? OR Create a performance that responds to the ideas raised by these works. You might perform your Memoir Project backwards or analyze Art Museum branding in the city you chose for your City Project.

THR 332: Response Essay 1 and Broad Museum Visit

For your essay (or performance), you should respond to the texts we have studied so far by making connections among them. You may draw on some or all of the following: Patrice Pavis, the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony, Ai Weiwei, and the exhibits at the Broad Museum. How do the exhibits at the Broad differ from the Olympics Opening Ceremony in their presentation of an image of China? To what extent is *#aiww: The Arrest of Ai Weiwei* an example of intercultural theatre? How does the visual and performance art at the Broad compare to the art of Ai Weiwei, and/or to the Olympics Opening Ceremony?

If you choose to do a performance, please do not imitate He Yunchang's work. I do not want to have to rush anyone to the hospital. [None of the students chose to do a performance for this assignment.]

We will visit the Broad on Wednesday. There are quite a few video exhibits, so you should plan to be there for at least an hour. I will arrive by 10:30, and will try to catch up with all of you to discuss the pieces on-site.

Here's a list of names of artists in *Future Returns*, in case that is helpful:

Artists and filmmakers featured in the exhibition include: Chen Weiqun, Dong Jun, Geng Yi, He Yunchang, Jiang Ji An, Jin Yangping, Jizi, Li Junhu, Lin Xin, Liu Lining, Meng Baishen, Miao Xiaochun, Pei Li, Qu Yan, Sui Jianguo, Su Xiping, Tian Bo, Wang Chuan, Wang Huangsheng, Wang Yang, Xia Xiaowan, Xu Bing, Zhang Yanfeng, Zhou Gang, and Zhou Qinshan.

Link to *Future Returns* description on Broad Museum website:

<https://broadmuseum.msu.edu/exhibitions/future-returns-contemporary-art-china>

MSU Museum Visit: THR 332

April 27, 2015

Please meet at the MSU Museum (across the street from the library, near Beaumont Tower) at 10:20 AM. We will meet in the main lobby (upstairs) and will begin our visit by considering the exhibit "Seeing China: Photographic Views and Viewpoints."

Here is a list of artists whose work appears in that exhibit:

Laurie Lambrecht: photographs of trees evoking traditional Chinese art

Brad Temkin: Great Wall of China and pollution

Fredrik March: "To Those Who Come After"--Gangzhou in transition

Steven Benson: "The Cost of Power in China: The Three Gorges Dam and the Yangtze River Valley."

Philipp Scholtz Ritterman: "Emperor's River" (capitalism and communism as strange bedfellows)

Luis Delgado: Cuentos Chinos Attributed to Dr. Achoo

Some questions for reflection:

- How do these photographs (and their curation in combination with stereographs) reflect similar themes to the Broad Museum's "Future Returns" exhibit?
- How do these images relate to themes of past and present, or to China-U.S. relations as developed in plays we have read such as *Some Asians* and *Chinglish*?
- In what ways is this exhibit intercultural?
- What other issues are raised that we have considered in class thus far?

After viewing this exhibit, go downstairs to the Hall of World Cultures.

- How is the experience of the Hall of World Cultures different if you enter after walking through the Hall of Evolution vs. entering from the lobby?
- The exhibit offers four narrative keywords for exploring culture (Diverse, Symbolic, Adaptive, and Dynamic). In what ways do these terms relate to our discussions of Intercultural, Intracultural, and Transcultural Theatre?
- What objects in the exhibit could be used for performance?
- The curators also offer the following four definitions of culture. Culture is: a way of life; a group of people; learned and shared; found in every object. How does this organizational structure relate to our study of China, Theatre, and Intercultural Encounters? (Consider, for instance, the Beijing Olympics Opening Ceremony.)

Once you have visited these two exhibits, you are free to explore the rest of the MSU Museum. Be prepared to discuss your experience in class on Wednesday, with a focus on the questions above. You are also welcome to use these discussion questions to write your final reflection paper.