Put some life in your history progam!
Be A Character!

Living History is a type of interpretation or performance that generally allows the audience to experience the historical event or person from a First Person perspective - as if they were actually there. This is the key difference between talking ABOUT an historical figure or event and LIVING it. It's all about Point Of View!

HOW INTERPRETATION AFFECTS OUR PERCEPTIONS

When dealing with a history topic - whether it be a specific person (Paul Revere), a time period (1775), or a specific historical item/topic (Revere's Ride) - those perceptions can change dramatically when seen through the eyes of a person who "was there". In the above example, the audience will be uniquely affected when he discusses the topic of the "ride" with Paul Revere or with Michael O'Reilley, an everyman character who portrays a farmer who heard Revere's call. And, as with any story, Revere's perceptions of the ride are different than O'Reilley's. If the audience is in a setting that encourages them to BE in 1775 through period settings and interaction with the characters, there will be a profound impact on their perceptions of the topic (the ride), the time period (1775) and the person (Revere/O'Reilly).

A woman attending a town meeting at a living history program set in 1775 and discussing the possibility of war will feel very differently about her own life (as well as that past life) when she finds out she will not be allowed to speak at this meeting. It is one thing to know that women were not allowed to speak at a public meeting; it is another thing to be at a meeting and NOT be allowed to speak. The past becomes the present!

These are the goals of creating a Living History program in any form.

STARTING THE RESEARCH:

Select your character: Is your character a real person or an "Everyman" character who might have lived in the place or time you want to talk about? If your character is a real person you will be confined to the facts you know about that person and the time period.

Research
Resources for finding your story: family histories, community histories (buildings, businesses), graveyards, photographs, artifacts, oral histories, newspapers (advertisements, front pages, news, obituaries, social pages, diaries, atlases, census data, church records, historical markers, etc.)
Resource types: Primary Sources (reports from people who were there), Secondary Sources ("after

the fact" reports).

Writing

When working with a real person, you need to stick to the facts of your character and the time period. You can also create a fictional character and place them in a real situation. Write your story accordingly. Keep in mind the following points:

a. how do you make clear to the audience that what you are presenting is Non-Fiction or Based on Fact/a True Story?

b. Point Of View: what is each character's view of the central problem? This is especially important in "walk-arounds" where the characters may never actually meet with each other but are discussing the problem with the audience in various locations.

Miscellaneous Information That Is Helpful To Your Story In Both Writing And Research

Information about everyday life will be helpful to your story and to the actor who will eventually be telling the story (what types of clothes were worn?, what types of utensils were in the kitchen?, What types of tools were available?)

Language should be considered and used appropriately (avoid words that might have been used but sound too current to our ears like "OK" which is really very old, but attracts a lot of attention because it "sounds wrong" in the mouth of someone from the past.).

Create a Time Line or Almanac of Dates - This will help you learn what your character can or cannot know.

WRITING ACTIVITIES:

Basic storytelling components:
1) Transfer of imagery (oral language and images) and context (the story)
2) Context (the physical and social setting in which the story is told)
3) The story so the audience and the storyteller view this as an "actual event"
4) Tell stories based on historical events/people/places. Research: get the true story first. Write the story: try to center the story around one specific event/person/place in a specific point in time; keep the background information short
5) All stories not only need a beginning, middle and end; but for performance they need conflict (drama). The "interruption" is often the beginning of conflict: i.e.: when an everyday activity is stopped by an unexpected event ("A funny thing happened on the way to the forum...")

CREATING A PROGRAM - *The research is done - "Let's put on a show!"*

Performances Types
1) Living History (audience steps back in time; character goes forward in time; walk-abouts)
2) Scripted Performances (including plays, musical programs, monologues, etc.)
3) First-person Character Programs (scripted or unscripted using only one character - NOT a play)

4) Storytelling programs

5) Question and answer periods: How will these be handled - "in character" or in the present as a "real person", after the performance, etc.?

6) What year is this? Has the character come into the future? If so, how did he get there? Does he know about his past? Does he know he's in the future? OR has the audience gone back in time? How?

Other Performance Technicalities:

    1) A director will help keep you on track and watch for historical inaccuracies.

    2) Props - does your character need to use any particular props to tell the story? If so, try to use reproductions wherever possible so as not to endanger a valuable artifact. Always consider how close the audience will be to the item to help determine how authentic the prop needs to be.

    3) Sets - will your performance be on a stage or in some other location that requires a set design?

    4) Costumes - use the most authentic costume possible but remember this is a PERFORMANCE not an EXHIBIT of an artifact. Things to consider regarding the creation of your costume:

        a) The costume must LOOK like the correct garment for the period. Pay most attention to what the audience can see.

        b) How close will the audience be to the character - if you are surrounded by your audience, you need to spend more time with authentic details (i.e.: were zippers already in use during this period or do you need to use buttons; what type of stitching would be used on your garment)

        c) Will you be performing outdoors or indoors; summer or winter? Make sure your clothing does not become a hindrance in its setting. If you are performing in the summer outside or in a building that is not air-conditioned, don't make your costume out of wool.

        d) Special problems of outdoor performances - how will you handle inclement weather? Will there be an alternative indoor site available for the performance or will it be cancelled?

    5) Language - how do we know what they sounded like? Reading primary source materials (letters and diaries especially) can give an idea of how people used the language during the time. Stay away from slang.

    6) Time Lines/Almanac of Dates - what can your character know about?

    7) Full-fledged Living History projects need to be concerned with ALL aspects of a person's life including: where did they live? How did they talk? How did they dress? What was happening in their house, city, state, country, world on THAT day? What did they eat and how was it prepared? What was the etiquette of the period?

    8) Handling generic non-period questions (such as "Where's the closest telephone?"): Should there be another person, not in character, in charge of such items? If not, the actor needs to put the question into his own frame of reference before he can answer the question. ("Did you come by plane?" said to someone from the 1800s might elicit a response about a woodworking tool).

PRESENTING THE STORY

Choose stories that are appropriate for your audience and the location.
Telling for the Audience at Hand:

      1. Vary your words to suit the audience

      2. Vary your timing to suit the audience. Storytelling sin: Telling the story on automatic pilot.

      3. Use space appropriately for the size of the audience. Pull up a chair and join the audience if they are small. Adjust space if the audience grows as your performance continues. Use the stage space appropriately especially for a large group.

      4. Make eye contact

      5. Broaden your repertoire. Be sure you have a few stories as backup if the make-up of the audience changes

TYPES OF PRESENTATIONS

Decide what type of presentation you would like to do (or are able to do in the performance space you will be working in):   Memorize vs. reading vs. extemporaneous - chose the type that best suits your participants.

Decide how you will position yourself in relation to the audience: Stage vs. No stage; Standing vs. sitting; Movement; using visual aids/props

GO FOR IT!

If you or your group would like more help in developing your programs, contact me at [Eden Valley Enterprises](#).

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