

interpreter

Living History: Its Many Forms

As manager of character interpretation, Arthur (Barney) Barnes defines different approaches to living history and how they are used at Colonial Williamsburg.

What's in a name? Living history, animation, reenactment, character interpretation, first-person interpretation, and theatrical living history are or have been done by actors, street actors, animators, reenactors, first-person interpreters, character interpreters, and even "cultural imposters," to borrow a phrase from Jim Deetz, former director of Plimoth Plantation. Do all these terms refer to the same process, the same interpretive sensibility, the same basic technique?

The facile response frequently offered to such a question is "Yes and no." My usual reaction to such an answer is "Oh boy! Another person who is not willing to take a stand."

Now, however, I am answering the question, and the answer *is* "Yes and no." It's a complex question, and the response must balance a number of variables objectively.

Living history is obviously a nonspecific term, sufficiently broad (or vague) in its connotations to encompass a wide variety of interpretive philosophies and techniques. The multiplicity of terms that refer to styles of living history interpretation are in some sense a reflection of the variety of motives that impel individuals and/or institutions to employ them. These can cover the entire spectrum: an individual's fascination with, and desire to escape into, an apparently simpler, nobler, more personally meaningful time; society's urge to commemorate a significant person or event in its past; an educator's desire to convey an understanding of the quality and variety of life in some historical community.

Although underlying motivations may vary

considerably, there are a couple of obvious common threads here. The first is simply the desire to re-create the past or at least a small portion of it. The second is the conviction that history becomes more interesting, more meaningful, somehow more nearly real when it is conveyed in a vivid, tangible, accessible form. How many of you as interpreters have shared with me the longing on occasion to travel in time, to get back to some point in the past and experience it for yourself, to understand how it really was? We all believe that direct, personal experience is the best teacher and that on-the-spot observation fills in the myriad details, the subtle shadings of meaning, the nuances that complete the historical picture and our understanding and appreciation of it.

(continued, page 2)

Character Interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg

The editors of *The Interpreter* have graciously, even bravely, granted me additional space to say something about the 1985 character interpretation program. I assure you that the fact that I am on the editorial board in no way unduly influenced the decision.

The program will be obviously different from those of previous years in its structure and the manner in which it functions. These changes reflect others, involving the purpose and objectives of the program, that may not be so readily apparent but are equally important, and these are the ones I want to discuss briefly.

(continued, page 2)

Living History, *continued*

I believe that it is this common conviction that has provided the impetus for the museum world in general, and Colonial Williamsburg in particular, to experiment with living history in its diverse forms. We are, in a real sense, trying to provide the visitor with the opportunity to be a time-traveler.

Colonial Williamsburg's gargantuan size and scope, the diversity of its programs and their specific interpretive objectives, and the considerable degree of departmental autonomy in the development of interpretive techniques combine to create niches within which several types of living-history formats thrive. Militia musters are one form of reenactment, as are special commemorative events such as the Queen's Birthday celebration or the reading of the Declaration of Independence. Dramatic or theatrical living history presentations are seldom susceptible to easy categorization. They often include elements of commemorative events and/or reenactments. They employ a type of character or first-person interpretation (sometimes in combination with third-person presentations) and are almost always scripted. Most of CCP's evening and special daytime programs, including the eighteenth-century plays and special interest tours like "The Other Half" or "According to the Ladies," would be included under this heading. Craft interpretation can also be viewed as another species of living history because the processes and techniques of craft production are practiced. Craftsmen use third-person methods, however, in their discussions with visitors.

First-person interpretation and character interpretation are two facets of what would probably be most immediately recognizable to our visitors as "living history." Both attempt to create an illusion for the visitor of his having encountered an individual from the eighteenth century; both treat the past as if it were the present. These somewhat superficial similarities aside, however, the differences between the two, in interpretive intent and style, are substantial.

First-person interpretation, as it has been experimented with here at the Foundation, is usually situational in orientation and limited in duration. That is, typically the interpreter has chosen to adopt a first-person interpretive mode to convey information in context about a specific situation—for example, a retail sales transaction or an aspect of work. Once that

point is made, the interpreter reverts back to the third-person mode. Character interpretation, on the other hand, goes beyond the situational to re-create the life experience, in all of its infinite complexity, of an eighteenth-century individual.

This goal is obviously the ideal toward which one strives rather than a practical statement of what one is expected to achieve. Success lies in how close the character interpreter comes to attaining the unattainable. To this end he must immerse himself in the period; he must understand the society and its values so thoroughly that he can adopt them, naturally and without apparent effort, as his own. He must study every facet of his character's being, delving into its intangible qualities—the character's thoughts, beliefs, hopes, and fears—as well as the tangible ones such as his educational background, marital status, and occupation. In a real sense, he is attempting to do in an historical context what was always described to me as the ideal in the study of foreign languages—you succeed only when you begin to think as well as speak in the language you are studying. And once a character interpreter has attained this level of expertise, he becomes what I call a "living artifact." This may sound strange, but I will clarify it shortly elsewhere in this issue.

To summarize the impact of various living history forms in museums, we could say that, when combined with third-person and other interpretive modes, living history can portray a broad range of human activities and beliefs from another time in ways that the visitor can understand and enjoy.

Character Interpretation, *continued*

The logical place to begin is with the intent or general purpose of the program. Why do we need it? What is it intended to do? The answer lies in something I referred to toward the end of the previous article. I called the character interpreters "living artifacts," and that is exactly what we are trying to create. Each of you has developed considerable skill in analyzing physical artifacts and processes as part of your interpretive efforts. These physical components are the springboards you use to describe aspects of eighteenth-century life; they speak most directly, although not solely, to the

(continued, page 3)

Character Interpretation, *continued*

material culture of the period. They also provide the opportunity to move logically from the objects themselves to economic (Who made them? How did they get here?) and social (Who owned them and why?) issues. The farther you move from the specific (the object itself) to the general (the socioeconomic implications of its presence in Williamsburg) the more skillful you must be in bringing the visitors to whom you are interpreting along with you.

Character interpreters, as "living artifacts," should help you make the transition more easily and directly. They are sentient, mobile, articulate artifacts who can participate in their own analysis. They can speak directly to the subjective, intangible, qualitative issues that are such an important part of the eighteenth-century experience. They can talk about how they feel about something, or what they hope will happen to them or to their families in the future. When you are discussing family life, therefore, you can question Benjamin Powell about his relationship with Annabelle or Nancy or Hannah, or you can ask James Hubard how and why he is going about raising his children the way he is. Or if you are talking about the community and how it functioned, you will have concrete examples to point to, because the characters have built in those essential linkages that define community.

This common ground—the network of relationships that bind together the community—is myriad and diverse. Joseph Kidd, the upholsterer, has as his clients many of the town's most prominent citizens, including the governor, Mr. Randolph, and Mr. Wythe; he also operates a boardinghouse where Samuel Greenhow currently resides. Benjamin Powell, the builder, constructed the steeple on Bruton Parish Church, where the Reverend Samuel Henley will soon hold forth as acting rector; Powell is on the vestry with Mr. Randolph, Mr. Wythe, and Mr. Everard, to name a few, and Robert Greenhow serves as clerk of the vestry. The Reverend Mr. Henley teaches at the College of William and Mary; James Hubard is an alumnus and former usher of the College; and both are fairly recent arrivals in the colony, Henley for the first time, Hubard returning home after spending a year at the Inns of Court honing his legal skills.

As residents of the community, they confront similar problems. The need for a night watch to protect against fire and burglary (un-

dermining smokehouses seems to have been in vogue with the criminal element) affects them all directly. So does the establishment of a public hospital in Williamsburg, although their individual reactions to it may differ. It is unquestionably the "enlightened" thing to do, since the care of the mentally ill will be dealt with scientifically; yet each individual must come to grips with the fact that disturbed, potentially violent people will be brought from all over the colony to live in their midst—next door, in the case of Mr. Kidd, who has rented the old Custis property from Colonel Washington and established his boardinghouse there. Mr. Kidd's reaction might be quite different from Mr. Powell's, because Powell not only lives at the other end of town, he also stands to benefit handsomely from the contract to construct the hospital.

These issues and concerns are appropriate to Williamsburg in the eighteenth century, yet they should have an immediacy for our visitors because they must face similar situations in their own lives every day.

I have been able to touch on but a very few of the subjects that characters are prepared to deal with, and on even fewer of the connections among them that bind the whole into a community. I do hope, however, that I have given you some idea of what the characters are expected to accomplish, and how they might be useful to you in achieving your own interpretive objectives. I urge you to use them to your advantage. If you are uncertain how to approach them, please review the tape on interactions that Bill Weldon has available or contact me directly. I will be happy to help in any way I can.

—Barney Barnes

Wallace Gallery Open House

All employees and their families are invited to attend a special Open House at the Wallace Gallery on Sunday, June 2, from 12 NOON until 6:00 P.M. You will have an excellent opportunity to explore and enjoy this handsome, important addition to the museum world that complements our Historic Area so well. The Wallace Gallery will be open to the public on June 10.

Time Machines

by Jay Anderson

A book review by William E. White
"People today are not content to know just the bones of history; they want to sense its flesh and blood. Living history is the only mode of historical interpretation, research, and celebration that involves all the senses. As such, it forces us to experience the past as fully as possible."

We at Colonial Williamsburg are not surprised by that statement. Jay Anderson, author of *Time Machines: The World of Living History*, published in Nashville by the American Association for State and Local History, 1984, refers to living history as "time travel" and credits Colonial Williamsburg as one of the pioneers. His theme is that by using the dwellings, clothing, tools, skills, and methods of the past, we can come to a better understanding of our predecessors and the events that involved them. Of course we cannot completely transport ourselves into the past. Our only alternative is the illusion that is created by the medium of living history.

Anderson describes living history as a widespread movement, and he divides it into three approaches. The first of these is the museum, which assists the general public in their time travel. He begins with a discussion of the development of living history techniques and

their implementation in museums and follows with some perspectives on how various museums have dealt with the medium. Secondly, research is enhanced by the use of living history. The re-creation of historical situations or conditions, with an analytical approach, can bring new understandings and insights to researchers. Finally, Anderson deals with the "weekend" interpreter of history; the "reenactor" who, throughout the Civil War Centennial and the American Revolutionary Bicentennial, took living history to the level of a participatory sport. History has ceased to be the purview of the academic and museum professional. Anyone with the desire to learn and experience the past can do so through the host of organizations and societies that proliferate.

Time Machines is a testimonial to living history. It is not analytical. Anderson does not attempt to compare and contrast this medium with other historical interpretive techniques. He does not look for the pitfalls or make judgments on what types of living history programs are valuable and viable. The assumption that runs throughout is of living history as the panacea. Taken within that context, it is an excellent work with which every "time traveler" should be familiar.

Special Programs and Events

- June 14: *Flag Day Review* at 5:15 P.M.
June 20: *Dedication of the George Wythe Stamp* at 11:00 A.M.
July 4: *Independence Day Program* at 10:00 A.M.
Tattoo and Fireworks at 8:30 P.M.
A Royal Entertainment in the Palace Gardens at 7:00 P.M.
August 31
and
September 1: *Public Times and Fair*

The Interpreter is a bimonthly publication of the Department of Interpretive Education.

Editor: Barbara Beaman

Assistant Editor and Feature Writer: Lou Powers

Production: Mary Jamerson and Nancy Milton

Editorial Board: Bill Tramosch, Arthur Barnes,

John Caramia, George Collins, Liza Gusler,

Dennis O'Toole, and Jane Strauss

© 1985 by The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation
